

## Oral History: Claude Sitton Interviewed by Sarah Buynovsky

**Buynovsky:** This is an interview with Claude Sitton on Saturday, April 24, 2004. It is taking place at the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University during the symposium: Civil Rights and the Press. I'm Sara Buynovsky. Mr. Sitton, what was your job when you first became aware of the civil rights story?

**Sitton:** I worked for International News Service and then United Press in Nashville, Tennessee; Atlanta and then on to New York. And then I spent, two years in Accra, Ghana, before Ghana got its independence as the first black nation south of Sahara to achieve freedom. I was there as the United States information officer and then after Ghana became independent. I was also press attache for the United States embassy – two years there, and then I came back and worked for nine months in New York on the city copy desk.

And then the Times asked me to go to Atlanta as the Times Southern correspondent. And I was there from 1958 into, well, about October 1964 when I left and went back to New York as national editor of the Times. I was there for four years directing the civil rights coverage and also other national news coverage of public affairs nature. And at the end of 1968, excuse me, July of 1968, I went to Raleigh, North Carolina, as the editorial director and vice president of the News Observer and the Raleigh Times, in Raleigh. And I spent twenty-two years there, retired in 1990. Then for three years, I taught a seminar at Emory University in Atlanta on press coverage of the civil rights movement.

**Buynovsky:** Wonderful, thank you. When you were first sent to Atlanta was, the civil rights story, were you aware of it? Was it sort of omnipresent for people talking about it at that point, or was it just another story you were getting sent down there for?

**Sitton:** Oh, very much so – because, well, I was assigned to the South as a Southern correspondent. And I covered other areas. I covered politics, government, business, all these other things. But primarily, as the story developed, it was mostly civil rights, and the first big civil rights story that I covered was what we call, you know those familiar with the movement, Second Little Rock. I was there in 1958 and 1959 when all the schools were closed in Little Rock by the governor's action. And I remember my first trip to Little Rock. I went there and stayed for six weeks without a day off. In fact, my wife flew over from Atlanta to spend a weekend with me while I was there.

**Buynovsky:** Will you take me back to the Second Little Rock as you described it and describe the scene for me, the mood, how you felt as a journalist, the things you saw around you.

**Sitton:** Well, at that time, the civil rights movement was really more in the courts than anywhere else but, among the others who got involved were people like Wiley Branton, who was the local black attorney representing those who were seeking desegregation of the Little Rock school. And Thurgood Marshall. Thurgood Marshall participated along with Wiley Branton in an appeal of one of the decisions to the, I would call it, a Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals in Cincinnati, and I had an opportunity to meet him. I've spent an afternoon with Wiley and later Justice Marshall, discussing things. And I recall Thurgood Marshall telling me, we had just seen the beginnings of the direct action movement. For example, what happened in Montgomery there, with the Montgomery bus boycott, and Thurgood said, jokingly, he said, "You know, Claude, what's happening here is more and more negative as we're beginning to act like more and more white folks."

**Buynovsky:** When you think back to the civil rights era and your role as a journalist there, what are some of your strongest memories?

**Sitton:** I don't know where to start. Let's see. Well, of course, Little Rock, and then later the desegregation of the schools in New Orleans – even the desegregation in Atlanta where I was based where nothing happened. The establishment there had locked up that this is the way it's going to be, and there was no violence and a couple of arrests and that was about it. But also the inspiration that I saw that worked among rural blacks, such as a Steptoe of Liberty, Mississippi, who led the voter registration drive there. The county at that time had 3,500 blacks at voting age, and only one of them stepped over himself to register and even he had never dared to try to vote. But, Steptoe along with students from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), which was called "Snick" by the supporters, started a voter registration drive. They were riding around the county at night in pick-up trucks with the lights turned off, you know, going from house to house urging blacks to go down to the courthouse and register, which took a great deal of bravery because you know one of the drivers of these pick-up trucks was shot down and killed in cold blood in front of the cotton gin in downtown Liberty. And the white man who did the killing was a state legislator who was never brought to court to answer for his actions, and that man lived right across the road from Steptoe. Steptoe who plowed a little hard-scrabble farm there and took his earnings and sent his children to college and some of them came back and later were officials of the county – publicly elected. So that shows you right there some of the impact of both the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

**Buynovsky:** Obviously the journalists covered all these different aspects of the civil rights era, you must have seen a lot of things, and I know as reporters we try

to take photographs in our minds, so to speak, of particular scenes. Could you just describe for me some of the snapshots, some of the most effective memories and sights that are sort of burned in your memory?

**Sitton:** Well, I remember going to McComb, Mississippi, to watch an effort by the Congress of Racial Equality called CORE. They sent students in there on a, I believe it was a Greyhound, to check on the desegregation of the bus station in McComb. And another reporter and I were sitting there in the bus station – it was a combination bus station and café – drinking coffee when the Freedom Riders arrived on this bus from Southwest Louisiana State University. And the lead Freedom Rider came through the door, he looked like he might be the center on the basketball team. I guess he was about six and a half or seven feet tall, and as he walked through the screen door there in this little café that was also the bus station, a roughneck from the oil fields took a swing at him and his fist busted him. And the Freedom Rider hopped almost over a glass ticket booth there, landed on the counter, ran down the counter, and when he ran on the counter he jumped over to a table and hop-scotched up the tops of the tables and went through the screen door without even opening it. And, there was a slight little riot, and then the bus pulled away with the Freedom Riders still on it. And later, the next morning as a matter of fact the McComb Enterprise Journal, the local newspaper, said that two FBI agents had sat in the bus station drinking coffee while a riot took place. Well, actually, the FBI was sitting down the street in a car. But we were mistaken civil rights writers for FBI people, and the situation had got so tense that finally I sort of stepped out of my way as a reporter and called Marvin Rich of the CORE, at their New York headquarters and told him that it was so dangerous, that he better not send anymore Freedom Riders in here because they'd be killed. To give you some understanding of how dangerous it was, local merchants were telling vendors who came through town to sell various things, not to come into town – to stop at a motel on the outskirts, and then the merchant would come out and meet them and bring them into town because it was too dangerous for even a strange white, much less a strange black, to show his face in downtown McComb, Mississippi. In fact McComb got the, was so dangerous that John Doar, who was the assistant United States attorney general, came in there one night, undercover, and met with one of the civil rights leaders and left before dawn because it was too dangerous for him to be seen there.

**Buynovsky:** How difficult was it for you to cover these stories as far as were there logistical problems? And coming from your personal background, how difficult was it for you to cover these stories? Did you come with preconceived notions? How hard was it to set those aside?

**Sitton:** Well, you know I had considerable experience as a reporter, as newspaper editor and writer before I came to the South. I knew the rules, and I tried to stick by them. I was not a member of the movement. I was, let's say, an observer, you know, a very interested observer, but I was not a member of the movement. I never presented myself as such. Anyway, we got a lot of help from

members of the movement. If they were to stage a demonstration, usually they called, but it was difficult. It was difficult because both people in the movement, and people on the other side, were trying to manipulate the press. For a number of reasons, both sides, for many exceptions as far as white officials were concerned, both sides were seen as in the right. But with the movement, there was a lot of competition among the six national civil rights organizations – contributions, competition for contributions, and running a civil rights campaign is like running a political campaign. You need money, you need money for travel, you need money for office expenses, for telephones, for barn money to get your supporters out of jail. And the civil rights movements competed, and they wanted, they wanted coverage, they wanted “free media,” as we call it today.

**Buynovsky:** Was there any sort of rules set up for you, from your bosses perhaps, did they communicate with you how they wanted the story covered? Or was there any sort of angling between you and management as far as how the story should be covered?

**Sitton:** None whatsoever with The New York Times. They said, “Here are the resources you need. Go get the story.” And my only complaint about my supervision was the lack of suggestions as to what the readers of The New York Times might be interested in. They really left it to me. I have no complaints whatsoever, they never told me how or frequently what to cover. They’d say, “You go to the South, the most important story of that day, you should be on the scene” – whether it takes rental cars, chartered planes, or what have you.” And I chartered a few planes. In fact, when I was covering the desegregation of the University of Mississippi in Oxford, Mississippi, I had – because I had back-stop, other reporters who came into help me from New York. I had, as I recall, five rental cars checked out, and I had a small plane on standby at the Oxford airport because that story was breaking both in Jackson, Mississippi, and in Oxford. And I had to move quickly between the two places on the same day, frequently, to you know, get to the scene and get the story. You had to be there, you had to see it because if you didn’t, then you had to rely on what others told you, by members of the movement, or by officials. And you know this, they shape what they were telling you to their own interest.

**Buynovsky:** You’ve reported, obviously, on a number of different stories. How does the civil rights era and the related stories of that period that you covered, how does that rank among the other stories that you’ve covered?

**Sitton:** Oh that ranked Number One. I had what I considered to be the best newspaper job in the world, because the South was where the action was, and I was a reporter for the premiere paper in the United States, The New York Times.

**Buynovsky:** And as far as the establishment of press rules, how the press behaved during that period of time, what kind of a legacy does that leave for a young journalist today, or the business itself today?

**Sitton:** Well, one of the most important things is for young journalists to know and to act on the knowledge that if they don't understand the story, they can't explain it to anyone else. You've got to understand, you got to watch for changes in the central truths of the story and the context of which events are happening, and in the direction of the change and why the change is coming about. If you don't have that, all you've got is another "who shot John" story from down at the local cop shop.

**Buynovsky:** Can you describe for me the role of the black press during that civil rights era? Did you get to witness any particular issues with them, or how they behaved, or how difficult their job was as opposed to maybe a white journalist?

**Sitton:** Well, the job was difficult for them, and frequently the cause of the difficulties they encountered as blacks, was very hard for them to be on the scene. It was hard for them to talk to the officials involved, but you had to consider the views of the black press which differed from that of the white press. We were trying to give a balanced view of what was happening. The black press was a press of advocacy, they were advocating, through their coverage, they were advocating the cause of civil rights, understandably so. But, that – that was a major difference.

**Buynovsky:** We talked about safety issues, some of the issues of feeling that fear in covering a particular story. But can you talk to me about any technical issues you had? I knew TV had a number of technical issues with cameras and being in riots and that sort of thing. But as a newspaper reporter, did you have any issues in filing your stories?

**Sitton:** I filed totally by telephone. We did not have cell phones in that day. You know you couldn't go back to the motel room and plug a computer into a telephone line and transmit it over line. I dictated to a dictating room at The New York Times that had six trained people in taking dictation, and news would get through their typewriters very fast. They used stencils, they'd cut stencils, sometimes a paragraph at a time, and then copy boys would snatch the stencils out of their typewriters, rush to a machine, and graph 20 copies of the story, which were circulated among the various editors, and that's the way that operated. And it worked pretty well. You had to learn how to dictate, and sometimes you had to dictate. I recall at the Ole Miss desegregation, University of Mississippi, I had put in two telephones in my room, one I used for talking to New York on, and the other I used for incoming local calls. And I had just finished dictating a story on the actual desegregation at the university to New York, when I got word that James Meredith, the black student who desegregated the university, had been put on campus. So I was taking in information on one telephone, I was dictating, what's called a lead, a new lead, the top of the story, to The New York Times, in New York for the first edition. So, you know, sometimes the pressures were pretty stiff. But yeah, television had a real

problem because, I know in Little Rock the television reporters had to pull out of the story at three o'clock in the afternoon, outside of Memphis, to make a feed to New York to CBS or NBC or what have you. It was very difficult, but as the technology developed, it became easier. The cameras became smaller, which was a big help because those cameras they were using there in Little Rock, in 1957, were awful, awfully heavy. And the cameramen who handled them were very brave folks, because that was a ready target for a rock, or a club, or what have you.

**Buynovsky:** How would you rank the quality of coverage, television, newspaper, any sort of account that you had read or saw or listened to?

**Sitton:** Well, I thought the television coverage of that day of the civil rights era was very good, very good. As a matter of fact, what happened was, television really became the premiere medium for transmission of spot news, news that developed quickly – today, now, get it out. Whereas newspapers, more and more had to switch to what we call situational reporting where you're telling what the situation is today, how it got that way, and what the outlook for the future was. So in other words, far more analysis, analytical type reporting.

**Buynovsky:** What do you think the country learned from the press coverage of the civil rights era?

**Sitton:** Well I think the country got a first-hand impression of the terrible injustices and indignities that were visited upon blacks, and also Hispanics, and Indians – Native Americans – those were sometimes called then. This led to corrective action because the movement really didn't bring about all the changes that we saw, the movement alerted Americans to the need for these changes which was pointed out very early on in the movement by a historian named Oscar Handlin, in his primary book called "Fire-bell in the Night." Because he said the movement alerted Americans, and Americans responded through the Congress, through the courts, and through the presidency to take the necessary corrective action. And you know, it was a transformation in a social, political, economic sense. We still have, a long way to go, but the situation in the South and in the nation – it's not just the South, because the segregation in the North was more subtle, but nevertheless real. And the situation today is so much better, it's almost unbelievable – the fact that back in those days, the South into which I was born, blacks had to drink from water fountains labeled "colored." They couldn't vote – some were frequently punished for even trying. Simple little things like, you go into a store to buy clothes, and you couldn't even try on the clothes if you were black before you purchased them, as is considered common place today. But the changes in the admission of bringing blacks into the political affairs of this country has been so important, so important.

**Buynovsky:** Was there any concern either for yourself or from your management that the fact that you were from the South, you grew up in this

environment, perhaps there was a concern that it's difficult sometimes to step out of reality, and look in as a journalist and say everything that I had sort of grown up with and was surrounded by as a child, all of these changes are coming in now – was that difficult for you as someone who's a native of the South?

**Sitton:** No, not really because I know I was brought up in a family that thought that blacks were too often mistreated. I don't mean they were ardent, ardent desegregationists or whatever. I mean in those days, segregation was sort of a way of life that you didn't think about, you know. You knew these things were wrong, but after all I had – you know as a reporter, before joining the Times, I had observed the civil rights struggle, parts of it. Also, I spent two years in Africa where Ghana was getting its independence. There was the end of colonialism still driven to some extent by the end of World War II, and there was some principle of self-determination. All of these things had affected me, but as far as The New York Times was concerned, the managing editor at that day and then the executive editor of The New York Times was Turner Catledge, who was from Philadelphia, Mississippi. My predecessor Southern correspondent was John Popham who was originally from Virginia. John Herbers, who worked with me in the South, was from Florida, so there was nothing new about Southerners as civil rights reporters.

**Buynovsky:** I'm going to say a number of phrases, and you just tell me what you, what your first gut reaction is, what your visceral response is to those phrases. Freedom Riders.

**Sitton:** You know, it kept the attention of the world focused on the movement, an important period.

**Buynovsky:** Talk to me about lunch counter sit-ins. Did you happen to cover any, any pop to mind?

**Sitton:** I covered them all, and, well, I say all, I shouldn't say that because actually the first sit-in was conducted by the Congress of Racial Equality in 1946, in Chicago by a group of black and white veterans. We shouldn't forget the fact that whites played a role in the civil rights movement. Of course whites were out there on the picket, I mean blacks were on the picket line, in the majority, but there were some whites even there. But from the stand point of education, contributions, things of that kind, whites played a major role.

**Buynovsky:** How about Little Rock?

**Sitton:** Well, Little Rock, that was a struggle, still mostly in the courts between a state governor and the federal courts, and he just didn't want to care. Orval Faubus – the governor at that day, did not want to carry out the desegregation rulings. Although, it's quite odd because Faubus came from the Ozark Mountains. Actually, he thought that the first time he'd ever seen a black was

when he was about 20 years old. So he didn't seem to have any innate racism, but there was this business, he was not going to carry out the court's orders.

**Buynovsky:** How about the Ole Miss riots?

**Sitton:** Rough. They took one reporter fellow from the press, got him behind a tree and executed him, shot him in the back of the head while he was reading on the ground. There were any number of federal marshals who were wounded there by actions of the riot. The rioters were led by a former army general, a U. S. army general named Walker, Edwin Walker, from Texas as I recall. And it was a terrible, terrible situation. It almost won the university, which we covered, and now as far as I know, it's a pretty good school with a desegregated student body.

**Buynovsky:** That kind of leads me to another question that I hadn't planned on – but the fact that a journalist was shot in the back of the head, how was the press perceived by the segregationists and desegregationists?

**Sitton:** Well the segregationists perceived the journalists as the enemy. To a certain extent, the enemy. Of course blacks were the final enemy, but we were co-conspirators with the blacks, and we were not liked by most of them. And there's another lesson – a funny thing about this for young reporters going into the field, don't over-generalize. Because while the majority of Southern whites were opposed to racial change, maybe some Southern whites were not, and we thought it was the thing to do.

**Buynovsky:** I believe that you covered Medgar Evers, that story. Can you describe for me your coverage of that? Describe for someone who wouldn't know exactly what that entailed and the story itself.

**Sitton:** Well, Medgar Evers was a brave, very brave man. He was a veteran of World War II. He came home and he was the field secretary for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in Mississippi, and he moved across that state day and night knowing that any time a bullet might find him. And one did from ambush there at his home. As he drove up to his home and got out of his car, he was shot from ambush and died. And his last words as he was dying was, "Set me free, set me free." And he was a great inspiration to those who knew him then in Mississippi and nationally as a result of his martyrdom.

**Buynovsky:** Sir, is there anything else you care to add about your coverage, your experiences as a journalist during that time?

**Sitton:** No, just that I was very fortunate to get the job and have that opportunity for those six and a half years, and I thought I had the best newspaper job in the world.



**Buynovsky:** Thank you so much, it was a pleasure to meet you.

**Sitton:** Thank you.