Oral History with Gene Patterson
Interviewed by Courtney Brennan

Q: I heard that you, as an outspoken editor, sometimes made a lot of enemies. Did you keep a hammer in your desk?

Patterson: Oh, sure. I never stuck a firearm in during the 1960s. But I received so many irate visitors that I thought one of them might come in armed with a sniper, a gun. So, I thought I might need some defense mechanism. So, I took a ball-peen hammer and had it in a drawer in my desk next to my typewriter. I never took it out. (Chuckles) There were a couple times.

Q: You were talking about how editors were the fourth in the pecking order. What was your place as an editor?

Patterson: Are you relating that to what I said to the assembly, that you were fourth in the pecking order?

Q: Yes, that, and other stories that we heard about.

Patterson: The point I was making today is I thought that the young people, the demonstrators, who went down the streets behind Martin King, were first. I said that I thought that the photographers and cameramen were second – they made it clearly identifiable because they had their nose right in the action. They couldn't sit a block away in a second-story window and watch. They had to be right in the middle of the fire hoses and the dogs. Third, the reporters, because they also had to be in the thick of things and take great chances. And fourth on the pecking order I put editors, because we sat in comfortable chairs in an office and we didn't know what the reporters were writing. And trying to put it into context and make sense of it, and make arguments out of it to make our opinions carry some weight with the public that was largely out of things with what we were saying. They did not like it, making us a little unpopular.

There were some people that cheered us on. And we thought that it was one of those rare times in life when you'd have a black and a white issue. There was no gray. We either had segregation, or we started breaking it down. And I thought it was time that we cease to justify, and start to rectify our past mistakes.

Q: Could you sort of rank, by importance, the events covered during the civil rights movement?

Patterson: Well, it was the top big story. So, of course, in history, they will show that in 1954 Brown vs. Board of Education decision marked the ending of separate but equal schools. The second would have been the 1964 Public Accommodations Act, which opened up all of the hotels and restaurants and restrooms and public accommodations – all, and not just some. The third I would

rank would be the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which put into federal orders to permit blacks to vote without being punished. It revolutionized the politics of the South, and brought the power to many, many black office holders in many cities, where the black politicians now wield the power.

Q: When I think about having to cover these events of the South, I would have been frightened. What kept you going? Why did you keep pushing and pushing and pushing?

Patterson: I chose to get mad instead of fearful. One of the only times that I did fear for my family, my wife, my little daughter who was in elementary school. And they took terrible telephone calls, obscene comments and threats over the phone. I did resent that, but that just made me angrier.

You're in the midst of the controversy, you're in combat, you think you're on the side that's right, and you're not going to back away. And so you excuse stuff like that. Punitive measures might counter that. And when you're angering people in the public, you're not going to be popular. You accept that willingly.

I think the other thing we heard today from the photographers and reporters, the activists, the editors, shows that the rise of the South and the welling up of decency had manifested itself in many newspapers. And somewhere the editor and the publisher might be timid, the reporters were reporting the facts. And the facts were taking place on the streets of the South, led by Martin Luther King and the other brave men, and executed by the youth of the African American race in the South at that time. It was a period of great volatility, one that we kind of take pride in having lived through. And seeing changes made to what we thought was the wrong course for this nation.

Q: It seems that a lot of the demonstrators were male.

Patterson: If you look at the street demonstrations in the South, if you look at the powerful photographs that Charles Moore made in Birmingham when the police set upon the demonstrators, about half of them seemed to be women. A woman started all of this. Rosa Parks. She wouldn't get up when the bus driver told her to move to the rear of the bus.

And I remember Howard Williams wrote a book, an oral history, of that period and of the Montgomery boycotts in which Martin Luther King came out of the Baptist church. And the blacks quit riding the bus and walked to work. And the title of Howard's book comes from a quotation a black woman gave him about having to walk to work instead of ride the bus. "My feet are sore, but my soul is rested."

Q: Did you ever think (inaudible)?

Patterson: No. No. You don't think about that. You just try to do the best you can day by day. And I wrote a column every day of the week for eight years. I regarded them as daily communications with readers of our newspaper. They deserved to know what the editor was thinking, what he was doing, what he thought about things. There was something about the paper then. And I think nowadays papers would be better if editor's reported.

Q: What kind of impact did television make?

Patterson: Television made quite a decisive impact on this era of civil rights. The printed word explained things some more, and it put things into context, and it was necessary, and it will endure. But, drama was executed by the moving pictures. And I was not aware of how much this meant to America until the Birmingham church bombings of 1963. Four little black girls were killed. I was home when one of my best friends called me and told me what had happened. So, I went to the office, got on the phone, and learned the details. Then I sent out my daily column for Monday morning. And I remember tears were in my eyes writing it. I had this little girl myself at home, and so, I just decided, this won't do. And I spoke very sternly and I made a pretty impassioned demand that we needed to change and stop this murder.

And the local CBS station asked me to read my morning column. And, the next day, I knew they had sent it to New York, and Walter Cronkite was calling me on the telephone. And he only had a fifteen-minute news program at that period. So, he called and he said, "May I play this tape on my evening news?" And I said, "Sure." I figured he'd take a few quotes. He put the entire column read by me on CBS evening news, using it multiple times. And this introduced me to what television can do. In a newspaper, if you write a powerful column and get 20 or 30 letters, you think, "Wow! I've done well." Overnight, I got a thousand communications – telegram, telephone, my desk was just covered. And I suddenly realized, this nation is deeply moved by the visions and the images they see on the television set. And it carries a dramatic impact that the printed word never can achieve. It doesn't always have the time to give the context and the content and the interpretation the newspaper can give. But the two together had made a very powerful media instrument in the 1960s.

Q: I'm going to read some phrases, and tell me what comes to mind when you hear them. First, Bull Connor.

Patterson: Cruel police and fire hoses and police dogs.

Q: James Meredith.

Patterson: Somewhat foolhardy, but an utterly brave man who laid his life on the line and risked it.

Q: Freedom Riders.

Patterson: Freedom Riders frightened me when they first came down because one of the goals of newspaper editors, I thought, of that period, was to stop the bloodshed. Stop the lynching by whites. Stop the beatings by white police of black kids. And supporting and trying to maintain rights. Law and order without justice is not much use. But law and order and justice can go together.

But sometimes in the rioting there, I feared the Freedom Riders were going to get a lot of people killed. And I didn't want to see that. And it's a wonder they didn't. When they burned the Greyhound bus in Anniston, Alabama, and beat the people up with baseball bats coming off, I said I wished they didn't do this. But they did it. They were brave enough to do it. And they executed it.

Q: March on Selma

Patterson: Absolute brutality. The policemen with helmets beating up unarmed, helpless people. It is one of the worst scenes, in my opinion, from the 20th century.

Q: Philadelphia, Mississippi.

Patterson: Philadelphia, Mississippi was horrible, beyond belief. Law enforcement officers would take three kids out, kill them, and bury them under earth and sand to try to hide what they'd done. They didn't like these Yankee agitators coming South to stir up trouble among the blacks, in their view. And so, in Philadelphia, Mississippi, the remedy to that was just to kill them. Kill all three – two whites and a black. They killed and buried them. Later dug up, and later, much later, their murderers were convicted.

Q: And Emmett Till.

Patterson: Emmett Till was a tragedy. He was a kid from the North who didn't understand the volatility of rural Mississippi. And whistled at a white woman, they thought. I've read that he had a speech impediment and that he also sometimes whistled with his stutter. I don't know. It doesn't matter. He whistled. And that was enough in the South in that period – viewed as uppity – it was abusive of the purity of white women. And so they took him out and threw him off the bridge.

Q: Martin Luther King, Jr.

Patterson: A great man. I knew him, and he – America should thank God for him. Because in a period when black impatience was running over, the leadership that had been angry and violent could have led to more terrible bloodshed in the nation. But instead, this man was guided by non-violence and,

as a preacher, could explain his reasoning. He was empowered, largely Christian, largely devout, and he used the story of Jesus to say, “Turn the other cheek. Lay our burden upon the white man’s conscience, and this decency ultimately will be the solution to our problem.” And that kind of leadership is not seen today. And his life was very brief – he became known in the late 1950s through his death in the late 60s – it moved the mountains of segregation in America. He did succeed in moving the black life on the white conscience. His courage was bleeding down the streets, to the newspaper and television scene. That changed the American uncertainty into a consensus of doing something about it.

And so the Congress, the press, the president, and the United States army set in to restore order. It finally impressed upon the white South that they had no choice. And the federal judiciary, enforcing the Supreme Court ruling, and finally it became clear to the reasonable white person that there was no alternative, except pretending. And so, the law may not change human nature, but human nature may change with the help of law. We’ve seen that happen, and I like that.

Q: Is there anything else you’d like to add?

Patterson: The only other thought I have right now is my gratefulness to Syracuse University for holding this symposium that brought together a lot of the old rascals that I used to write with, the Southern correspondents who were there and who shared what’s history now. And we need to look at the future – not behind us – but you can’t really understand the future until you know what’s happened. Young people here need to be able to hear the wonderful stories of true achievers who have taken the risks and achieved the results. And it’s just a wonderful thing for the university to do this for the young people.