Oral History
Interview with Ernest Withers
By Marshand Boone

Marshand Boone: This is Marshand Boone, I'm speaking with Ernest Withers, a photographer, about his involvement with the civil rights movement. It started with the Brown v. the Board of Education decision in 1954, going up through the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Mr. Withers, what was your first job covering the civil rights struggle in this country?

Ernest Withers: Well it's hard to say, the first job I became a photographer in 1946 when I came out of the military. The black press, as I said, would not be receiving wide service. So if people of a black newspaper wanted their picture story, or anything connected with the civil rights movement, they would have to have a photographer that would be there to do the pictures. At the event I was there because the (Chicago) Defender had sent me there and I was always subsidized by having the right to let the other people have pictures after they had gotten theirs. It was all journal publications. So it goes from 1946 until now.

Boone: So basically starting from 1946, you've had to cover a multitude of stories. Could you give us some of the highlights, the big stories you covered?

Withers: Well when, when you think of the '54 decision you think of an outburst of anger between black and whites in the South. I lived in what is known as a tri-state area in Memphis, Arkansas and Mississippi. They were really the tough, middle-ground states, going further down in Louisiana, but I worked mostly in Tennessee, Arkansas, and Mississippi. I worked the Emmett Till trial later in Mississippi. I worked the school integration at Arkansas, school integration at Clinton, Tennessee; school integration at Little Rock Central High; and so many other events I worked. I worked the event of Matt Parker – a young, black guy dragged into jail in Poplarville, Mississippi. And I was down there the very next morning and was in that town so early and the man wanted to know where I was from. My flight was from Baltimore, or from Washington, D.C. He said for me to talk when he asked questions and he opened his mouth way open (yells), I opened my mouth (open mouth, sort of choking noise), and I couldn't, I couldn't, I was so afraid, so frightened until I couldn't even get a word out. But that was part of the stammering and training that you know got me convinced that I could do pictures, stories of civil rights events.

Boone: Speaking of Matt Parker, that's a case that a lot of people do not know about, the fact that he was dragged from the jail, had allegedly raped a white woman. When you're entering a situation like that, knowing the facts of the case, knowing that he had been in a place of relative safety, and had been allowed to be taken from the prison, did you feel any fear?

Withers: Fear because you knew you were intruding, but I didn't do any dialogue or conversation with anybody, even the victim, the perpetrator. I was just sad doing the pictures while the journalist, there was a writer with me, talking. And I had been trained early as a policeman, and as a policeman I learned that you always get along better if you avoid unnecessary conversation, so I had no problem. I mean I had fear, but I had a sense of self-confidence and a tactic that you would always have in life, that you know how to act anywhere you go, to keep yourself, if you can keep your head on all about you. It's the same philosophy that really makes one act and live safely, so I had no problem.

I was somewhat emotionally empowered, but I did not let my emotions override my duty to shoot the necessary pictures, to provide the necessary, 'is it true, does it hurt, what good does it do' of all the people that were involved, there's always the top three, top four, top five, persons that were the kingpin of the story. So, the environment of the story all was a matter of picture, use a picture, means a thousand words sometimes.

Boone: During that turbulent time and possessing the talent that you have, did you ever consider maybe trying to find a job at a northern paper or going out west or to California, somewhere else?

Withers: Oh, well, I went to Chicago when I first come out of the army, I thought of going to a professional school of photography. I went to Chicago, which is the gateway to the northern part of the United States from Memphis. Most come out of Mississippi and my area, came, and Memphis and then to Chicago, so I went to Chicago and I saw a man who I had been a kid under in our church and he was a very melodious man. And I asked him, "Mr. Little, what do you think about me coming to Chicago, to the school of photography," and he very melodiously said, "Well, there is, I tell you, Chicago is as near paradise as a black man can get," you know and all of that. But somehow my craft had improved itself so much until my brother and I just operated our studio in north Memphis and our business began to grow and I – the different newspapers began to call us after we had assignments as far as Chicago Defender, the Tri-State Defender, and after they had used our pictures, you know you go shoot 10, 20, 30 pictures which was a big number compared to today. You go somewhere today with a small 35 millimeter film you, you have, I can do 150 shots right out of my pocket, but at that time we had to have 45 film. We had to have loading bags so it was less the type of expended moments that you have now with you know, even like I said the people today came, and we're speaking in 2004, people go up to the drugstore and buy a camera and take pictures. But in those days you could buy a camera, but you couldn't buy no camera and film and load it for no 15, 12 dollars. You had to have the old camera, and buy your film and go to the drugstore and get it processed, and it took a week to get your film processed. But then, black and white process, we processed our film in our own studio. We labeled it, identified it, and put it in the mail for 16, 30 cents at the very most, in the airmail special and sent it to wherever it was going. Where today it's just overnight package, (chuckle) which is 35, 40 dollars on Federal Express or United Postal, today.

Boone: Lets talk about Martin Luther King, Jr. Just in seeing your photographs, I noticed that he's one of the most prominent people that you probably photographed in that that period. And it also seems that some of the photographs are of an intimate nature, and not just the photos of him in public or him at the pulpit, but him in private, reading a book or something.

Withers: Well as I look back on it, I look at Memphis, and icons in Memphis and I look at Martin Luther King's death, good focus on Memphis. I was in Kenya in the '80s and I set out for Memphis, and I was, "I don't care about Memphis" and I said, "Memphis, Martin Luther King was assassinated, and it drew attention." Martin Luther King. I've photographed Martin Luther King, BB King, and Elvis Presley. It's my reason for being delivered to Germany to put on the exhibit. The man said, "We want you to come to Berlin with your exhibit." "Why?" "Because you shot the three kings: Martin King, BB King, and Elvis Presley." So I mean in prominence of people I've shot, even now I find that when people look through my collection they see Jesse Jackson, and they "aaah-ah" (shocked sound). Well I can mail a lot of pictures at a real good news stores, but they don't know anything about them, and so they don't attach the Martin King, Jesse Jackson or other prominent people, Al Green, Isaac Hayes, people do not – people are attracted by imagery and popularity that they see no one here about any television. So it's been, that's you know deceptive of your journalistic photograph has these images in it. And it has impacted valuable – I've made pictures of all occasions and all the images in life, properties and hazards of people that led the civil rights movement or came to Memphis to record facts, records, I record the number. I watched Al Green grow from a little itty bitty fellow to the great Al Green that he is.

Boone: And as far as King is concerned though, what type of person was he in private? Did you get to see the private side of Marin Luther King Jr.?

Withers: When I would see Martin Luther King, I was three, near four years older than Martin Luther King. I was not a friend of Martin Luther King, but I was a comrade in common because I was a Baptist and he was a Baptist, and I went to the National Baptist Sunday school in BTU, to which he was vice-president, and it met every year. I went to the Baptist Convention of which he would commit every year and he was there. I was at Montgomery when Martin King first rode the major bus. I was there when the Supreme Court decision first come to Montgomery the night in December, and that was the first night that I had seen Martin Luther King to even know him. And I knew him all the way to his death. You know, by being at the Baptist Convention in more than 10 cities in the United States, from Buffalo, New York, to Chicago, to Kansas City, to Denver, to St. Louis, to a number of cities to Montgomery, to Memphis, to outside of Memphis when we went to Fayette County – so I have known him. And I knew him, I was and watched the scene and a couple hours later they put it in the car of an undertaker group, and drove it to the airport and shipped it back to Atlanta in a special chartered airplane that had been chartered by Robert Kennedy. But this arrangement had been made by Reverend Abernathy who had emerged to the top of SCLC overnight.

Boone: Where did your love for photography stem from?

Withers: Well it extends from my being a young boy in the 8th grade, my sister bought her boyfriend a Brownie camera for his birthday. And he said, "I don't want this." So when he said that I said, "Let me have it" to my sister, "let me use it." Didn't give it to me, but to be obliging to him, she let me use the camera to go to school and I went to, carried the camera to school with me every day. And the first, second day that I went to school the world heavyweight champion, Joe Lewis's wife, Margaret Lewis, came to our school who, and was in the auditorium and I in the 8th grade class in the back of the auditorium got up out of the back and walked up there to the front where there were yearbook photographers. And other photographers was taking pictures and I started taking pictures, the kids laughed me out of the auditorium almost (chuckles). I acted like I was a photographer, but I got good pictures. Then from that day forward, I was always looked upon as a photographer.

But I was not trained, I didn't have the official, the training of being a photographer until I went into the military and the organization called for a photographer. I was a company commander skeet driver, he was from South Carolina, and I asked him for the permission to go to the army school of photography because he, man he was a great football player from Florida, big Jim Wheels. He took him out of the school of photography to make him a first sergeant then I went in to replace him and became a trained photographer trained in North Carolina, went from there, on out west into Pearl Harbor, and then down to Saipen and spent 15 months in Saipen. That was the closest drugstore in any common market, and all the soldiers on Saipen other than those that got their picture made by a man that was in the Air Force that came to our organization, battalion and we built a little building with a dark room in it and, black and white in a segregated army came down to the studio where I was and had their picture made. We could not order film supplies from no where. We had to get it from men at the airport, in the photographic department, and we got six cans of beer a week, just kind of relax. And that the government, there was no written article, but they were just giving us a recreational weekend, Saturday and Sunday we were somewhat off on Saipen. And we was given six cans of beer, and everybody in the organization got an average of 5 or 6 cans, and those fellows that didn't drink, we would barter them for their beer and take the beer and give it to the men in the Air Force on Saipen and trade it for film and solution and paper to print pictures, and was taking pictures of the soldiers by coconut trees, island in the background, or what have you. So it was just an experience that grew from day to day by being in the army. And after 15 months on Saipen, I was a real photographer knowing how to make pictures to satisfy people, you know.

Boone: I think you also spoke about covering the Emmett Till trial. What really sticks out in your mind about that case, back in 1955?

Withers: Well Emmett Till was a young 15-year-old boy that went to Money*,* Mississippi, to visit his mother's uncle, Uncle Moses Wright. Was a perky young kid and the young white lady was attractive that ran the general store, grocery store in Money, Mississippi, a little one-horse town, it was – no, I guess Money*,* Mississippi, was a town that didn't house in the whole part of the county where it was in Tallahassee County. There was probably less than a thousand, less than twelve hundred people that lived in that vicinity. But when he came down there and started flirting with this white lady and her husband was out working all day, and when he came back to the store he, she told him that this little menace of a black kid that was there at Uncle Moses' house from Chicago had come in (whistle sound) wolf-whistling at her. The deputy was his brother-in-law, Lloyd Bryant was her husband, he called his brother-in-law and they got together that night and said "We're going to go over there and give him a good whoopin'." But when they went to Uncle Moses Wright's house and got him, had a handgun with bullets, and they put him on the back of the truck, took him to a barn, and beat him to death. There were some black people that heard the screaming and hollering as he was being beaten and when Mr. Milam came out to get water at the pump, they saw him and they went back and they peeped in the barn and saw him in there, of course, they were not, they were both forward for the trial, but not alive to testify. When Milam and Bryant were later charged for the murder of Emmett Till, but they beat him and they wrapped him with a gin fan, and threw him in the Tallahassee River. And his body emerged between one and two weeks, and in Chicago the temperaments was, because of the progressive party in Chicago, and his mother's uncle was asked after they got the body out of the river and sent it to Wynona, Mississippi, the black funeral director shipped it to Chicago and he persuaded her to let the public announce, the radio, paper, and everything that his body would be shown and how bad it looked. And so the city of Chicago was just enraged over the fact that he had been murdered and he looked, from a kid, a fifteen-year-old kid to a real gaudy, dead man and then of course the newspapers, the Chicago Tribune and other white papers got on and got into the national news circuit and the governor of Mississippi decided to court a prosecutor that arrested these men and order to court for trial. And the trial, they were put on trial at Tallahassee County, at Summit, Mississippi, was some 8 to 10 miles from Money, Mississippi, where he was living and was murdered. After the week's trial Milam and Bryant were proven to the jury of, an all white jury, of not guilty. It was turned, and let free and it was all over. But then Milam and Bryant gave the volunteer story to Look Magazine written by William Bradford Huey, a great writer who had worked all the way from the Scottsborough boys from Scottsborough, Alabama. He was noted for doing stories, and as a result of him being down there and they did the story of them, after they had been proven not guilty, but their confession of what they had done and it became a real boiling story for Mississippi but they were never brought back to trial.

Boone: Crowd control at the Emmett Till trial, you were also at Little Rock and saw, how do you handle the large crowds, you being a black reporter in the 1950s covering the civil rights stories? How did you handle those large hostile crowds, large hostile Southern white crowds?

Withers: As a photographer, you're not a policeman, so you just tactfully move in and around and photograph what is happening and the emotions of people. The loud howlers, the roars, the rallies and all of that, so we just photographed them an average of 20 pictures a day, develop them, and as I said, gave first choice to the Chicago, to the Tri-State Defender. The other pictures were shipped to different newspapers with the explanation of what they were, and then of course the public relations man, was connected with the union that went around the country telling people of the tragedy that Emmett Till had been murdered and they got me to narrate a book with a guy named Raymond Tisbee, and they sold this little pamphlet for a dollar. And he made a lot of money, they put ads in papers all over the country and I used to get a few of the ads and I got knowledge of them made into Memphis at this post office box and it was in my name. I went to the post office box and picked up the letters with the dollar in them, and I went to the printer who was a fellow named Hobert who had a print shop in the black community at Lauderdale and Vance. And I was filling orders and made money myself.

Boone: Were there ever people who threatened you or said you shouldn't take my picture, or harmed you in some way?

Withers: Well yeah, all the time. Particularly when you went into white towns in Mississippi, you always had that threat on the part of people who was at the Emmett Till trial, "Man, you better not take my picture, I'll, nigger!" I said, "I'm sorry sir I wasn't making your picture, I'm down here making pictures of important people" just kind of a gas statement, and it was acceptable. So I didn't have any problems with them and the more, of course, I start making pictures, because I know that that reason was not going to last. So I didn't get involved, but we did pictures outside of the crowd trying to get in the courtroom and all of that and we were searched by the sheriff of Tallahassee County on the Monday morning that the court opened, there were four members of the black press, and myself, and a lady from the St. Louis paper, and a photographer, I think his name was Franky. But the old sheriff got up and said, "We got 23 seats over here for you white boys, we got four seats over here for you colored boys, we don't mix 'em down here, we ain't gonna mix 'em, and we don't intend to." So that was the order of the day by the sheriff, which was the sheriff of Tallahassee County.

Boone: Did you ever encounter Bull Conner, the commissioner of Birmingham

Withers: The other man that's here, from Alabama, Charles Moore. Charles Moore being white, it was just a little, slight privilege to white photographers that black photographers didn't get that privilege to be that close to anything that was going on. Like Charles Moore, all the time, I had some great pictures in the courtroom in Memphis, of the city and it's because I had been a policeman and the judge in the court in Memphis knew me and gave me privilege to come in and take a lot of pictures. But that was an unusual case and it's strictly unusual in history, but you always had to be tactful and not aggressive and not, you know, eulogize people and not make them angry. You just have to be calm, settled and get a few pictures. Pictures tell the story and that's what we were about.

Boone: We've spoken a lot about race relations in the 1950s and 1960s and how bad they were. Would you say there has been a great deal of change, like Mississippi is the state that's talked about most?

Withers:
differences of black, there was a group of black people that were only known as the black bourgeois, which was the upper class black people. And naturally white people, poor or wealthy, always isolated themselves and considered themselves better than the ranking high black person. Segregation is you know, it's been a matter, it was always played up at that time, it wasn't any television at

time.

Boone: But change, has there been much change, I'm sure you've seen things over the course.

Withers: There's been change, because from the beginning, till even till now there's a better relationship with people by ethnic. Here we are today, I have a young lady that escorts me, if she was back in the time down in Mississippi or Tennessee, she wouldn't dare be allowed to follow us (chuckles) So, you know, even her parents that came out of a different set of younger people that didn't, in a lot of cases, didn't teach hate like they did in the old times, they just taught separation. My father's great-great grandfather, Salus Withers that was born in Marshall County, Mississippi, was a young ambitious, young man. And when Grant came through with the southern army into Vicksburg in slavery time, his grandfather, Salus Withers went off with the army. Down into Mississippi to take Vicksburg, come back and when the army receded back out of Mississippi, he went back to the slave house. His relatives told him not to go up there where the white people would see him, but he went up there anyway and they loaned him to other white families and they took him off to drive him to Memphis and they lynched him. They never saw his grandfather anymore because he was beaten to death, and they found bits of his clothing through a place known as Pigeon in Kansas City and a minister was knocked off the platform and, and died, and they charged a couple, they charged six ministers from each side of the argumentation at the National Baptist Convention, and I was there. And I saw Reverend Wright when he was pushed off the platform, and when I come out and started up the hill toward the hotel. Who'd I meet but Martin King, and he wanted to know what happened, so I felt it was my privilege to give Martin Luther King the facts of what I had seen in the death of Reverend Wright. So I've known him, and I was no buddy, no minister, so we didn't have that intellectual association. I didn't go out with, I didn't have any privacy with him, but I had everyday presence with him when he was in the news. And he knew me as I'd pass. He lay in heaven, he'll know who I am, so that's photographer Ernest Withers.

Boone: You spoke today about seeing Dr. King after he had died. What was it like, that moment when you realized that he had been killed, was it a kind of shock or –

Withers: Well the day that Martin King, on the 3rd of April, he came to Memphis, I'd been the main news photographer. I was with the delegation that met him at the airport in Memphis, and he came the long walk from gate 34 straight up the hall and I photographed all of that. I hadn't photographed Martin King way before that because he came to Memphis, and the transition of the Memphis government when the early Siegel and Hooks campaign went on in Memphis, and I had known him for 10, 12 years so, I was an identifiable person. My having been a policeman in the downtown area in the R.S. Lewis funeral home was the funeral home that had picked his body up from the autopsy place at St. Joseph's Hospital. And I had access to that funeral home because I knew it, because we'd sat in there many nights being a policeman. It was an hour walking patrol, so it was quiet. The SCLC group of people was going next door, connecting to the funeral home, picking the shipping case to send his body back to Atlanta. I just took it on my own and went to the morgue and walked in and there he was. So and I were in this room together, I alive, and he dead. I saw his skull lying on the side of the embalming table I picked it up and put it back in his head, brushed his skin of his face, and his hair and placed it back, with the feeling that I was going to take a picture but something hit me that said it wasn't necessary to take the picture, so I walked out and left him. Which was a wise, wisdom moment that a number of special people thought very well of me for not having done something. The final hour that I had with Martin King and that was, he was shot about 6 o'clock in the evening so that was about 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, about 12:30, 1 o'clock in the morning that I saw him and the next morning at seven, when they put the body out for the public to see his body before it was shipped back to Atlanta at this funeral home, which was unusual, but it was not unusual because it was Martin King, a celebrity, and they didn't make a big public announcement. The people had congregated around the funeral home because they knew where he was, and they came before they shipped the body back to Atlanta. Reverend Abernathy and all of them came over to look at him. And the people from the community, there were big housing projects across the street, and they came

Roof Bottom, which was a pattern of property between Memphis and Marshall County, Mississippi.

That was the theory of the time, and it's different now. We as people in America get along – well, you can always have a difference of people now, not just by race but just by differences that you don't have and that you did have in those days but you don't have now, but you do have. My father used to tell us as, I was in more of an upper class black family, not to say that we were so wealthy or anything, but we lived in a better part of the street, and my father always told us that we might be better than these boys and we living in better circumstances. But if they could do things better than we could they were somewhat better, but not that they did not teach hate. As a result of it, we did not have the problems that people have because of the differences that people taught that children black and white. When I moved into the neighborhood where I live, some 54 years ago, there were white citizens that lived out there that didn't have that didn't have no respect for me as a father of children that was old enough to play. But you don't have that now, you have interracial, interracial reaction, interracial association. You just, we live in a different America, even in the South now, than when we lived at that time.

Boone: For our final question, just overall, how would you describe the quality of the coverage during the civil rights movement? Was it quality coverage, and did it really help bring about a change in our country?

Withers: Well, we had about ten black newspapers in Los Angeles, and Chicago, the Pittsburgh Courier, in St. Louis and Cleveland, and a number of other different papers in different cities that was the origin of black people. And naturally they, they had some sparse remarks that were missing about certain things, and white people at that time, you know even now, even now in 19, in 2004 you have an influx of Mexican and other ethnics that live in America, from China, Japan, what have you. And in almost any city, you have a special newspaper that is published to their text and their knowledge and their association. So you had less of that in those days, but more of that today. It was a difference, you know, you go to, right here in this city, I'm not – to go by the drug store, or a busy traffic corner and to downtown, you will see three or four different newspaper boxes where people buy papers. You will never buy no paper out of the Mexican paper, you don't buy the papers out of the Latin American. You might not see a black publication there, but you can buy your black publication from the black media, or from, you know, black hangouts or what have you, that sell them. So it's just, there's a difference in race, but people today are more informative, they're more separate in their '-tisms' of separa-tism. But even that, they're not separated by anger and hostility that they were in yester-years.

Boone: Thank you.