

Oral History

Interview with Karl Fleming

By Leslie Jack

Jack: What was your job as a reporter when you became aware of the civil rights movement?

Karl Fleming: I was a reporter for Newsweek and based in Atlanta after 1960. Of course, I was aware of the civil rights stuff before that. I was first a reporter on the Wilson, North Carolina, Daily Times. I was there as a reporter in 1950 when Brown vs. Board of Education was filed. So rumblings of that began to leak through the South, and white people began to be very concerned about their schools being integrated. So I was aware of it then, although there was no such thing as a civil rights story at the time. Until 1955, with the (Montgomery, Ala.) bus boycott and then in 1960 with the sit-ins in Greensboro – by which time all of us that lived in the South were aware that something was beginning to go on.

Jack: Was there resistance from your management to send you to cover these stories, or were these front page stories that everyone wanted to get a scoop on?

Fleming: Well, the first paper I worked on, The Wilson Daily Times, did not recognize there was a race problem. Things were as they were and had always been since the days of slavery. The blacks were on one side of the tracks, and the whites on the other. And there was no story even when I covered the execution of a black man sent to the gas chamber for fundamentally crawling through the window of a white woman at night, with what intent was never quite known, but this guy was sent to the gas chamber by an all-white jury. But this was not particularly news. It was just something that just shocked me as a young guy just starting out. But it didn't seem to create much excitement in this town. It was just the way things were. It was accepted. It was the way it had always been.

Jack: When did you think this started becoming a story, when people started paying attention?

Fleming: One would like to give the media credit. But, in fact, the media didn't really deserve the credit because the media didn't start doing this stuff until the black demonstrators kind of forced their hand. With the sit-ins, with the riots, with voter registration efforts in the back waters of Alabama, Mississippi and places like that. When the black activists began to force the issue, then some of the media began to pay attention. Fortunately my employer, Newsweek magazine, was very keen to cover the story and had a lot of appetite for it. Most people, most media kind of ignored it until, really until Birmingham in 1963 when King chose the right enemy in Bull Connor, who brought out the dogs and the fire hoses. And this became such a spectacular event, that the attention of the

national media was brought there. And King was smart enough to know this. He had failed in the first big civil rights story I covered in Albany, Georgia, in early 1961. They had a very shrewd polite police chief – he just arrested everybody and put them in jail. There was no violence. They closed the swimming pool, the library, the other public facilities – they just put people in jail. So it didn't create much of a stir. King had picked the wrong enemy.

Next time around, which was in Birmingham, he and his organization had learned a lot. They knew that they needed the right adversary. And they picked the person – Bull Connor, the police commissioner – knowing that if they marched down into that Kelly Ingram Park that they would be confronted by dogs and fire hoses and violence. And the violence would get into the national media and therefore arouse the conscience of this country. And, of course, that's exactly what happened. Same reason he chose the Selma bridge. Because the sheriff of that county was a brutal guy by the name of Jim Clark, who had these mounted deputies and they knew what was going to happen, but that was a deliberate thing knowing that it would provoke the media attention.

Jack: Did you personally interview Dr. King? What was he like as a human being with the cause?

Fleming: Yes, several times. He was much unguarded, very open, very willing to answer one's questions. I was very impressed with him. He was always late. Always late for interviews. In fact, the media joked about this, that him and his organization were always late. If they announced a press conference at 3:30, it would definitely be at 5 p.m.

Jack: Martin Luther King – many people look at him in many aspects, but mostly a hero of his time. But looking back when you first met him, did you think he was a person who would have such a big voice in the movement?

Fleming: He had an unbelievable voice. He had the ability to arouse people's hopes – people who had no hope. That was just by the power of his presence. And his magnificent voice. He was like a choir. His voice was like a great big organ that just got right down into your guts. He was just a spellbinding speaker. King had the fire, the passion in his gut. Therefore he was able to move people, that way.

By the way, I was brought up to be a typical Southern tough guy. I grew up in an orphanage, and I had to learn very early to defend myself. To fight. So I grew up in this culture of violence, where you responded to threats by attack. And if you didn't fight, you were kind of a sissy or a coward. I didn't want to be a sissy. So I fought. But then when I saw King march out into that park in Birmingham – people knowing that he very well might be killed or savagely beaten, and at the very least was going to be put in jail, he changed my mind about what constituted personal bravery. I thought, son-of-a-bitch, that takes guts. It doesn't take a lot of guts to fight, you just get angry, have a couple of drinks and pick a fight. But I

thought that takes courage – to walk out, non-violently, facing almost certain you knew that something really bad was going to happen. So he redefined for me what my idea of what real courage was. I thought he was the bravest man I ever knew.

Jack: How did people perceive James Meredith and what he did with the schools down South?

Fleming: The first time I saw James Meredith, I thought this man's got to be crazy. In the previous two years, there had been two black people who tried to get into it (University of Mississippi or Ole Miss). They immediately slapped them in the insane asylum. The first guy they thought, any guy to try, this must be crazy. The second guy – they framed him for stealing nine sacks of chicken feed. And put him in the penitentiary for nine years.

So here was Meredith, five feet, six inches tall, 135 pounds, long eyelashes, delicate little face, tiny little voice, and I thought this guy's got to be nuts. By the way, he did it all on his own. He was going to Jackson State College. He had been in the Air Force. He decided one day, "I want to go to Ole Miss." And he went and applied. All on his own. And they accepted him, by the way. Because he had left blank the little column that said race. Then when they had found out that he was not white, they refused him. He was eccentric – nobody was going to tell him what to do. And he was going to do it all by himself. Of course when his fight took off, the NAACP entered his case. Then the federal government came in, then prosecuted the cases in the federal courts that forced the issue. He was all on his own. He was a very unusual guy.

Jack: What was one of your most frightening moments covering this time period?

Fleming: Lots of times, it was like being behind enemy lines. We knew that the cops were in the Klan. These white guys rode around in pick-up trucks with CB radios following us. We knew there was a network of informants – they knew who we were and where we were at all times. We knew that the cops could kill anybody with any means – and would care? So there was a lot of tension. One had to be very watchful about where you went, when you went, who you went with, and we traveled together a lot, because of safety reasons.

FBI agents always traveled in pairs, and we thought a pair of us would be mistaken for FBI. We dressed in Brooks Brothers suits, and we looked like FBI agents. And of course, I got accused of that one time, I never denied it. I'd say, "Well, I don't want to talk about that." We stayed in adjoining rooms, always stayed in the front part of the motel, where there was plenty of light, near the manager's office. We didn't stay in the back where somebody could come and drag us out in the middle of the night. We used pay phones. One time we were on the phone reporting back to the paper, and a voice came on the phone and

said, "You nigger-loving son-of-a-bitch." So we knew our phones were being tapped. There were places I would go into, and the phone would ring and the voice would say, "Karl, what are you doing in town?" So they knew where we were. Yeah, it was tense.

I'll give you a couple of anecdotes. One day Claude (Sitton) and I were in Mississippi, and there was a voter-registration demonstration, and I took a lot of pictures for Newsweek. You couldn't get local photographers to take pictures of this stuff. They were either segregationists or frightened of losing their jobs. We pulled up in front of this demonstration, I grabbed my camera, and Claude sensing this was going to be quite volatile, said, "Karl, leave the camera in the car." I said, "No, I've got to get some pictures." So I step out of the car, step into this mob, and first thing someone said to me was, "You nigger-loving son-of-a-bitch, I could use that camera strap to hang your ass." And then this guy says to Claude, "Our grandparents killed Indian babies to take this country, and now they're trying to make us give it to the niggers." And I said, "Claude, I think I'll put the camera back in the car." He said, "Good idea."

So that night we went to our motel out on the edge of town in adjoining rooms – about 3 a.m. came this horrible pounding on the door. And I leaped out of bed and Claude came through the adjoining door in his boxer shorts and wild red hair and yelled, "Don't open that!" I said, "Are you kidding? I'm not about to open the door." And we thought they had come to get us. So I crawled up to look out the top of this window, and it was a black woman, a very drunk woman. God knows what she was doing. This was on the end of a cotton patch, but we thought we'd had it. And one lived with the knowledge that who knew that at anytime whether you were going to be dragged off and never heard of again. Who were you going to appeal to? You couldn't call the cops. I drank a lot of Jack Daniels, I smoked three packs of Camels a day, and I drank a lot of Maalox.

Jack: Thank you for your time today.