

## Oral History: Ray Jenkins Interviewed by Barbara Fought

**Fought:** How about just giving me your name, just so we'll test out how it works?

**Jenkins:** Ok, my name is Ray Jenkins.

**Fought:** I don't know – and I'm embarrassed to admit – about the stories of Phenix City, in which you won the Pulitzer.

**Jenkins:** Right. Actually, the Pulitzer was won by the paper. It was the public service award, but I was the reporter who covered it. So, just to sort of set the record straight.

The Phenix City story was basically an old-fashioned police story. I was a young reporter working for the Columbus Ledger, which was my first job just a couple of years out of journalism school. And the so-called Phenix City beat was really the dog beat of the paper. It was the one that got pushed off onto the newest reporters on the staff – Phenix City, being a smaller community just across the river from Columbus and Alabama. And Phenix City had been taken over by a kind of mafia element, corrupt politicians and racketeers. And the newspaper crusaded against this sort of thing – very typical of border cities in many states. And the upshot was that one of the local residents of Phenix City, a lawyer there, ran for attorney general of Alabama on a platform that, "I will clean up Phenix City." And to the surprise of everyone, he won. And in a very short time, he was assassinated on a public street in Phenix City. And that, in a nut shell, was the Phenix City story which I covered for a year.

**Fought:** What made it an interesting story for a reporter?

**Jenkins:** Well, of course it had all of the elements of – as I said before, basically it was an old-fashioned police story, just a "whodunit." It took a year before they were able to indict someone. And the people who were indicted were the prosecuting attorney of the city, the sheriff of the county, and the attorney general of the state. Only one of the three was convicted, and both Columbus and Phenix City were in proximity to a very large military base called Fort Benning. So that made it kind of well known world wide that thousands, if not millions, of young GIs who had passed through Fort Benning through the years. So it was a recognizable dateline, and Phenix City thrived on providing the things that young reporters, I mean young soldiers, wanted – which was gambling, alcohol, women, and so on. So it was a rather sensational story.

**Fought:** I couldn't imagine covering something with those positions being indicted. Was there a time in your career where you chose to cover civil rights?

**Jenkins:** I think so. Actually the Brown v. Board of Education came. It coincided with the Phenix City story, and that took all of my attention. Obviously I was not oblivious to what was happening. The decision of Brown v. Board of Education came down just before the assassination of this attorney general that I mentioned. And my initial reaction to it was that this is interesting, but they can't be serious about really expecting the deep South to integrate its schools, and I didn't give it much thought. Now after the Phenix City story was all wrapped up, and I then turned to other things, it took a only a little while to realize that civil rights was going to be the dominant story of the next few years – if not my entire newspaper career, which is exactly what happened. And I began to move into that area a little bit.

You have to understand that newspapers in that day and time, and the particular community where I was, Columbus, Georgia, was about the demographics – two-thirds white and one-third black. I would guess, I never saw any figures on it, but I would guess that our circulation was 95-98 percent white. The black community was almost completely ignored, so the first thing that I did was to begin to try to cover interesting stories within the black community.

As it happened, the Tuskegee Institute, the great Negro educational – I say Negro because that's the term we used in those days – educational institution was in our circulation area. And so I began to spend more time over there, develop contacts there, not covering merely the civil rights activity on the campus. And there was a good bit of it there because they were independent. A professor at Tuskegee Institute was not in danger of losing his job the way that a black person would if he'd been, say, working at a saw mill or something like that. So I developed contacts over there, and this story will be a little illustrative. I learned that there was a man on the Tuskegee campus named William Levi Dawson. And he was a musical scholar and he had been, for many years, the director of the Tuskegee glee club which was – they toured all of Europe and what have you. And it was a well-known, world-wide, it had world-wide fame. And also I learned that this William Levi Dawson had composed a symphony which he called "The American Negro Symphony," and it was being performed at Carnegie Hall, with Leopold Stokowski as the conductor. This was around the mid-50s, mid to late 50s. And this struck me as a pretty good story. So I went to Tuskegee and interviewed William L. Dawson and took his picture and came back and we put it on the front page. It came out on the front page of the Columbus Ledger, and in the first edition. And a couple hours later, the final edition came out, and there was no story on the front page nor anywhere else in the paper. So I rather sheepishly went to the city editor and asked him what had happened. And he rather sheepishly said that the publisher's wife had called and said that she didn't want anymore pictures of niggers on the front page of her newspaper, and get it out! So they did. That was the type of thing that we were up against. In that day and time, the local publishers were indeed that. The owners and publishers of papers tended to live in the community as opposed to having all our chain ownership as we do today. And it was an object lesson that

young reporters had got to be very careful how they chose their publishers. Getting around the publishers was our biggest obstacle in those days because they very much reflected the community prejudices, and were particularly close to the business community. So, it was an early lesson in real journalism.

**Fought:** What were the techniques you had to devise to get around those publishers?

**Jenkins:** Well, eventually we got around them because reporters like Claude Sifton of the New York Times and Jack Nelson of the Los Angeles Times were coming into our communities and publishing stories that were not appearing in our own newspapers. And we simply would then go to our publishers and say, "Look, this is making us look like fools here. On the front page of the New York Times is a story about Columbus, Georgia, or Montgomery, Alabama, and we haven't even had it in our own newspaper." And I think in that way, they were sort of shamed into doing it.

The other large development was that chain ownership changed the character of the position of the publisher. Instead of being this local person who had grown up in the community, perhaps inherited the paper from his own father, and being very much a part of the community going to the same churches and country clubs and so on that everyone else did, this person was supplanted by someone who still carried the title of publisher, but in fact was a general manager who may have been sent from central headquarters in Rochester, New York, rather than growing up in the community. And their interest was to put out a good newspaper and make as much money as they could – not to put out one that reflected the prejudices of the community.

**Fought:** That's a good argument. (chuckles)

**Jenkins:** Well, you can make that – now this is a bit of a long drawn out story, but I'll tell it anyways. I am often asked, "You've worked under both local ownership and chain ownership – which do you prefer?" And I tell this story.

That when I got to Montgomery, Alabama, that was my second job as city editor. I gathered, this must have been about 1959, and I gathered my little staff. It wouldn't have been more than eight or ten reporters together and was just sort of going down a checklist of who covered what. And I asked the question, "Who covers the schools?" And there was a kind of a silence in the in the room, and finally someone spoke up and says, "Well, we don't cover the schools." And I said, "You don't cover the school board?" He says, "No. Mr. Hudson, who is the publisher, is a member of the school board, and he has told us that if the school board makes any news that he would bring it to us." (chuckles) So I thought to myself, my gosh, what have I gotten myself into here? I've taken a job and, that they wouldn't even let me cover the institution that touches the largest number of

lives in the community. But fortunately that was the only big sacred cow, and I decided I had to live with it for awhile.

I had to live with it for awhile, but the other thing was that I noticed that we had all the space we needed to publish news in that newspaper. The publisher had already made his money, and he wasn't trying to milk the newspaper for every last dime. Space was not at all a problem – that is always a major problem with editors, “I don't have enough space.” Well, it was no problem for us. Well, within about two or three years, the paper sold to a chain, a group, a very good group. And the old publisher was out, and a new publisher was sent in from central headquarters. And the very first thing that I did was to call the school superintendent and to tell him that we were having a reporter at his next meeting, and he knew the game was over and he willingly acceded to this. Within a very short time, I discovered that this news-advertising ratio had shrunk dramatically, because the best way in the world to improve your profits on a newspaper is to adjust the news-advertising ratio down. Whereas it had been something like 50/50, it was now like 65/35.

So the moral of the story is that if you work for a local publisher, you have all the space you need – it's just that they don't let you cover the news to fill it. And if you work for a chain group, you can cover whatever you want to, but you don't have the space to get it in the newspaper.

**Fought:** Montgomery, what were the biggest challenges?

**Jenkins:** Well, of course Montgomery was almost the epicenter of the civil rights movement. Martin Luther King was still there when I got there in '59, and he was there for a couple of years. So I covered him for two years, and then got to know him reasonably well.

George Wallace was just coming on the scene. Judge Frank Johnson, the great federal district judge, was sitting in Montgomery. And here were, you know, there were three of the top news makers of the time. So, it was very exciting, very interesting. I might tell one little personal story about King.

When I got there, I discovered that no one at the newspaper had any contact at all with Martin Luther King. The editor of the newspaper, a man named Grover Hall, who was a well known editor at the time, had never even met him, even though the church was only a couple of blocks up the street from the newspaper office, and King was a world-wide figure by this time. And here was, you know, the major newsmaker of the city, and the editor of the paper had never met him. Well, I mean just for very practical reasons, I made it a point to get to know him quickly and to establish a routine, regular contact. And so we got to be fairly friendly, although it was a professional relationship. And I remember this episode when he was leaving, it would have to have been around the spring of 1961, I believe it was. And I went up to his church. He had a little small office in the

basement of his church. I explained "I want to get a briefing on what your immediate plans are so that we could plan our coverage." But it was in fact a kind of a farewell meeting, and so I told him a story that came out of my own family Bible records. And there was an episode in the year 1853, where there were five deaths in rapid succession recorded, and handwritten recorded in the Bible. And at the end of it, it said the above five were poisoned by a slave. Well, this is a startling story. It shocked me when I first read it, and it sort of startled and shocked him. And he thought about that and shook his head and he says, "But yet, here are you and I – the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners – can sit here and have a respectful and civil conversation," he says, "Doesn't that give you some hope for the future?" I said, "Well, yes, it does, but you do have to remember that we can only hold this conversation here in your office. We couldn't have lunch together downtown – we'd be arrested if we did, if we attempted to. Even though you only live a short distance from me, I couldn't come to your home for dinner, or you couldn't come to mine without creating a disturbance. And so in that sense, what you're praying for is as much for my freedom as it is for yours." And he said, of course he knew that, he used that line, that he'd often used injustice anywhere, is injustice for all or whatever. So then we shook hands, and I was about to leave, and he said in almost a perfunctory way, "If there's anything I can do for you, just let me know." And I said, "Well, now that you say that, I've listened to a lot of your speeches over the last two, three years," these mass meetings that he went to and spoke at, and I said, "If that line that you just used about the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners, if you would drop that into one of your speeches one day, I'd appreciate it." And he said he would. So we left, and after that I never really saw him again except in kind of formal settings.

But then of course in 1963, which was two years later, the March on Washington, I was there to cover it. By that time, I was devoting a very substantial amount of my time to civil rights coverage. And King, of course, was the main speaker of the day, and he was supposed to speak at two, I believe. But the program inevitably got behind schedule, and by four o'clock, he still hadn't spoken. So I had a long way to travel to get back home, so I said well I've seen him many times I'll just listen to it on the radio while I'm driving. And I must've been somewhere about just outside Richmond when he finally came on and making the "I have a dream speech." And in it, he had that line about the sons of slaves and the sons of former slave owners, and here he was, he kept his promise, and I wasn't even there to hear it (laughs, coughs). Excuse me, I'm just getting over the flu. Ok, I guess you can cut – (tape stops).

(tape starts) I'm glad I didn't have this coughing attack this morning, because I was afraid I would.

**Fought:** What was your thoughts sitting in your car hearing –

**Jenkins:** Well, I just sort of grinned with irony, that here he kept his promise, and I wasn't there to hear it (chuckles).

**Fought:** Or that he'd remember...

**Jenkins:** Actually I think he may have used it in other speeches as well. So by that time, it had come into his speaking vocabulary, so to speak.

**Fought:** What was he like?

**Jenkins:** Well, the thing that I would say, at least in my dealings with him, he seemed to be, to my mind, excessively serious and solemn. There was never much banter and sense of humor. I think he probably was different around his own friends. Among the top leaders of the civil rights movement in Alabama at that time was Ralph Abernathy and Fred Shuttlesworth. Now Fred Shuttlesworth was my favorite, he had a great sense of humor, and I enjoyed my relationship with him more than I did with the other two. Although I begin, I hasten to say that it was a sort of a formal relationship between reporter and the people he was covering.

**Fought:** Who do you admire most, or publicly admire most?

**Jenkins:** Well, oddly enough, that would be a couple in Alabama who were white – Virginia and Clifford Derr. They were the foremost white people in Alabama who supported the civil rights movement, and it took enormous courage for them to do that. Their lives were constantly threatened, but they persevered and ended their, of course, they're both dead now, they came to the end of their lives with great dignity and enormous respect. That's one of the great ironies that when Virginia Derr finally died about three or four years ago, her obituary probably got more coverage, respectful, adoring coverage in the Montgomery advertising than George Wallace's did. So certainly they are among the people that I admired most. Then, I've admired people whose names you don't even, you don't remember, nor do even I remember – people who were willing to put their lives and livelihood on the line for things they believed in.

**Fought:** You've had so much experience. Is there something specific in your life, character, that you want to pass down to your grandchildren, or others, what you've learned from covering these stories?

**Jenkins:** Oh golly, that's something I've never given any thought to. All I did, I always perceived it as just covering the news story, that that was a sign that there was just, by accident of time and circumstance, that I happened to get to cover that.

**Fought:** Has it made a difference in who you are?

**Jenkins:** Oh yeah, that certainly makes you think. I mean, I went through the entirely segregated school system from kindergarten through graduation at the state university, and during that entire time, it never occurred to me in a million years that a black might want to go to this college. It was just something that, that we, no one thought about. I think there's a line in Goethe, "We are all so inclined to accept that which is common place," and that's what we all did.

**Fought:** Is there something you're most proud of?

**Jenkins:** Well, oddly enough, it wouldn't have anything to do with the civil rights coverage. It was covering stories that other people had not, were not covering. My idea of what a journalist should be doing is to do exactly that, cover stories that nobody else is covering. The thing that I dislike most is these huge events, like political conventions, where you want fourteen-hundred reporters covering it.

And I just use one example of the type of story that I found very rewarding. It wasn't anything particularly spectacular about it, but I read a short item over the AP wire about a small town in Alabama, it must've been around 1970, where two textile mills had closed within a very short time, and it put 62 percent of the entire community out of work. And it seemed to me, reading that very short story, that there must be a great deal more to this story than the AP was reporting. So I arranged to go over, and I spent a couple of days in the community talking to everybody from the people who operated the looms in the mills, right up to the mill owners, and wrote up a long story about the impact of two mills closing in this town. And I was, at that point, I was writing for the New York Times, and they put it on the front page. And that story wouldn't have existed if I hadn't gone over there and done it, and that was the type of thing, not that specific story, but that type of story was the thing that I found most rewarding.

**Fought:** Is there anything I haven't asked that you want to talk about?

**Jenkins:** I can't think of anything. I have reflected a number of times at this conference the irony that at least half the people who are on these platforms are Southern-born white males who went to segregated schools. And the reason for that is obvious – we were the ones who could, the jobs were reserved for us, not for anyone else. And in general, I think that we rose to the task of the coverage, what people like Claude Sitton, and Jake Nelson, and John Herbers did – the importance of their work is just incalculable.

**Fought:** And the importance of yours too.

**Jenkins:** Oh no, not like theirs (chuckles).

**Fought:** Maybe not like theirs. Thank you, thank you so much.