

ERNEST Mc KISSICK

and

MAGNOLIA THOMPSON Mc KISSICK

Interviewed by:

Louis D. Silveri

August 2, 1977

SOUTHERN HIGHLANDS RESEARCH CENTER

The University of North Carolina at Asheville

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INTERVIEW WITH

Mr. and Mrs. Ernest McKissick
(Magnolia Thompson McKissick)

August 2, 1977, Asheville, North Carolina

Interviewed by: Dr. Louis D. Silveri

Dr. Silveri: I think, in our conversation on the phone, you said you were born in Asheville in 1900?

Mr. McKissick: I came here along in 1901, maybe 1902. I'm not positive. When I came to Asheville I was a small boy.

Dr. Silveri: So, you weren't born here?

Mr. McKissick: I wasn't born here.

Dr. Silveri: Where were you born?

Mr. McKissick: In Kelton, South Carolina.

Dr. Silveri: Kelton?

Mr. McKissick: When I came here my parents were already here, and brother and sister. They left me down in the country to nurse my sister's baby while my sisters worked in the field. Then I came to Asheville. They put a tag on me and put me on the train that brought me to Asheville; so you know I must have been about seven or eight years old. I've been here ever since.

Dr. Silveri: Why did you come to Asheville?

Mr. McKissick: Oh, we came here to make it our home and to stay here permanently.

Dr. Silveri: Why did your parents come to Asheville? What attracted them here?

Mr. McKissick: Well, they came because the conditions down there weren't as good as they thought they were; they thought it would be better somewhere else. So they came here to make a living. It was better than being down there in the country.

Dr. Silveri: Did your father have a job or anything up here?

Mr. McKissick: Well, my father, fortunately, was a Missionary Baptist minister, and it seems somehow or other he, I think he left home and didn't come back. My mother said he left her within twenty-four and a half hours after my birth. We went to Spartanburg, then we left Spartanburg and came on to Asheville.

Dr. Silveri: I see. So your first recollections were as a boy of about seven years old?

Mr. McKissick: That's right.

Dr. Silveri: Where did you take up residence?

Mr. McKissick: Well, when we came to Asheville, we lived on Turner Street; that's in west end.

Dr. Silveri: West end?

Mr. McKissick: With Mrs. Vance's family; old family in Asheville. The Vances. V-a-n-c-e.

Dr. Silveri: In those years Asheville was very small. I think the population was probably fifteen thousand or around that.

Mr. McKissick: Yes, around that, at that time.

Dr. Silveri: Very small city.

Mr. McKissick: That was the old days of the horse and wagon, and the buggy. That's when they drove wagons from the country with oxen. The farmers would come to Valley Street to drive behind the distillery and

get all of the sour mash and take it back to the farm and feed it to their hogs.

Dr. Silveri: Oh!

Mr. McKissick: Yeah, you could smell that! That was on Valley Street where I lived, Black's Distillery.

Dr. Silveri: Interesting. Where did you go to school?

Mr. McKissick: Well, when I first came to Asheville, I went to old Hill Street School, in the first grade. We lived in west end, and we moved two or three places down there on Hill Street. Then back over on Davidson Street, Valley Street, and Eagle Street. We lived several places, and during that time I went up to Catholic Hill School to the second grade, second B. That's as far as I went here in Asheville.

Fortunately, I was associated with some good Christian people, people that really thought, I guess they saw something in me and they wanted to take me in. Dr. J.W. Walker, I worked and stayed with him, and Professor Trent, Dr. Jones, and other influential Christian men and women who were in the city. But my mainstay and my idol was Dr. Walker, because he put me on my feet and started me out. I worked for him driving a horse and buggy. He would go and make visits; I would stay out and hold the horse. My horse's name was George; a pretty buggy and black horse.

Dr. Walker said, "Well, Ernest, I'll tell you." I said, "What?" He said, "I want you to work in the drugstore, the Y.M.I. drugstore; that would be better for you." So he got me a job in the drugstore. I stayed there for years, but I worked from one place to the other: the hotels, bellhopping, then back to the Y.M.I., Young Men's Institute.

They had about four, three dormitory rooms. I lived up there for a while. Then I stayed with Mrs. Hill on Eagle Street for a while. My people were then over in Tennessee, but they came back. I stayed with different people while they were away. Fortunately for me, Dr. Walker told me: "The Club of India of Hopkins Chapel AMEZ Church is having a contest to raise money. Several people are running in it. The one who raises the highest amount of money will receive a gold watch. You might get that watch." Well, my friends helped me. I remember Miss Willie Cline was running, but she turned the money over to me. I raised about, I think, fifty dollars. Mr. McCoy raised over fifty. He had a little more than I did; he won the prize. He got the watch. This was held in the YMI building for the AMEZ Church which I belonged to.

Hopkins Chapel had burned down. During that time we were having services in the YMI. The Rev. S.G.W. Spurgeon was our pastor. Dr. Walker and some others had a caucus; went back in the office somewhere and came back. He said: "Since you didn't win it, tell you what we are going to do. We have decided to give you, each one of us, ten dollars apiece. We are going to raise some more money for you. You work this summer and save all you can, and we are going to send you to Livingstone College. That's what we want to do." I told him, "All right."

Well, I did exactly what they asked me to do and got ready to go to school in the fall of 1913. Yes, '13, and I went to Livingstone College. I had given my sponsors all my money, and they had already sent it down there. It was there waiting for me to get a receipt and get my room. I went to Livingstone College and finished grammar. Then the War

broke out, the first World War. That's my picture up there. I went to the service in the second draft in May, in April, I think, the 29th, 1918.

Dr. Silveri: Did you volunteer?

Mr. McKissick: No, we had the draft during that time. Everybody was drafted. Eighteen to what? Thirty or forty, and from that on. Further on they would get me. They got me in that eighteen to twenty-odd line. I went to Camp Jackson first, then north. From there to Camp Dix, to Camp Merritt, then overseas. I was put in the 349th Field Artillery, Battery F, 92nd Division.

Now there's one thing about this that people didn't know we were doing. This battery of artillery is the first in the history of the United States that Negroes manned. Three hundred forty ninth, 350th was Field Artillery, French seventy five millimeter guns, and they had the hundred and fifty-five howitzer. That's the big artillery shell about that large. We used that. That was our heavy artillery. That's 351st. We served in that and we went on to the front. We stayed on the front until about six, let me see exactly now, October. We were there in October and got situated. We stayed on the front, I think, six months over there. Then we'd go from Issoudun for rest camp (Camp Issoudun) then back to the front, and rest camp, then back to the front. I was very fortunate I didn't get hurt, but I escaped. Oh, I guess God or Providence saved me about four or five times.

One incident I want to tell you about. Now this is not a lie. This is the truth! We were going to the front. They said: 'McKissick, (I came to the rest camp) get ready to go up to the front; [you've]

got to relieve those boys up there." I was in the specialists. That is semaphore wig wags, telephone, fine data, and all that stuff. My group did all that work. The officer over us said, "I want you all to load the caisson with ammunition and go up with it and give relief so the boys can come back here to rest." Well, that did it! That night along about evening when we got up there we were taking the ammunition out and putting it in place for the boys to fire, when the Germans commenced shooting at us. BOOM! That was one! So somebody said, "Man, that ole boy's going to raise sand tonight!" And later on, BOOM! That was another shell. The Germans are very funny, peculiar. (Boom! Another shell.) You shoot one shell at him, and he's going to shoot fifty back at you! Now that's a fact!

That's what they did. That went on. Finally we got to Xon (pronounced zon). That's in French, X-o-n. That's the hill. That's right on top of the mountain. There were trenches all up there. Infantry, 366, 368, and 6 and 7 were all around, all stationed over there near Metz. We finally got up to the front. We made it; put the lines in for the boys to shoot. Some of the infantrymen said, "Man, don't shoot! Please for God's sake! If you do, if you shoot one shell, they are going to shoot a hundred and fifty at us tonight!" Well, we did it anyway. We hated to do it.

That night coming down from Xon, coming down the hill, that's when I thought, oh, I thought they were going to kill five of us: the lieutenant and four or five other men that were with us. As we were coming down they were shooting shells at us but missed us! The shrapnel was falling all around us, but fortunately we weren't hit. Just the matter

that Providence, the Good Lord, wasn't ready for us! They came so near hitting us. I told the Good Lord, I just stopped and prayed on my knees, "Lord if You let me get home safe, I'll live and work for You as long as I live! And He saved us! Then I ran down the hill!

The Germans had shot up all our lines. Next morning we had to go back to repair them. I was going along the side of the camouflage fence and a plane came over. I mistook it and thought it was our plane by the noise. You see, we could distinguish the planes by the way they sounded: American planes or German planes or French planes. But I mistook ours, and man, the shells came a zipping! ZIP! ZIP! ZIP! ZIP! ZIP! ZIP! I fell on the ground and rolled under the camouflage. That was two times right in succession that I was in the jaws of death! I recuperated and went back. Told the lieutenant and sergeant about it. They said: "All right, we'll have to let the line go. We can't repair it. Boys will just have to do without it until we can get up there!"

We got down, finally, to a culvert under the road, and we stayed there until morning. Morning came and we went out and found food in the kitchen, got something to eat. After we got our food we went back to the front. Well, what we'll do, let's see what we can do around here with the other fellows after we see if we can help any of them out. They had been gassed and shot up, and killed. One shell hit in front of a dugout and killed four men, and we thought how fortunate we were. One of them was an old friend of mine that I met in camp, and another friend of mine was gassed.

We went back to rest camp and stayed there until time for us to come back to the United States. We had to march twenty-five miles

from Pont-à-Mousson to Mousson to get a freight train to come home to America. When we came back, we landed in New York and stayed there and had our pictures made and everything: got a welcome back home. Then we were sent to Camp (What's the camp in Virginia?) Camp Lee. It must have been Camp Lee.

Dr. Silveri: You must have taken pictures while you were there?

Mr. McKissick: No, sorry. Then I was mustered out at Camp Lee and came back home. I had already asked my wife, before I left, if she would marry me when I came back. She said, "Yes!" We had met at Livingstone College in Salisbury, North Carolina.

Dr. Silveri: Were you married before you went in the--

Mr. McKissick: No, no, we weren't married. I asked her if she would marry me when I got back, and she said yes. So I came back and took the college course. We have four children: Floyd Bixler McKissick (He's the one that's building Soul City; I'll tell you all about that,); Geraldine McKissick; Frances McKissick, and Jean McKissick. (That's our baby; she has a brand-new home that she just built down the street. She's been teaching in Washington for several years.) We bought a home and a little car and, thank God, we are doing just fine to live at our age. The Good Master has been good to us. We appreciate life and all that has been happening to us.

Dr. Silveri: Let me ask you some questions.

Mr. McKissick: Yes, sir. Go right on.

Dr. Silveri: That experience in World War I, that unit you were in, 349th?

Mr. McKissick: Three Hundred and Forty Ninth Field Artillery.

Dr. Silveri: I see, you said it was a black--

Mr. McKissick: A black outfit. Yes, sir.

Dr. Silveri: Completely? Or did they have white officers?

Mr. McKissick: We had white officers.

Dr. Silveri: That was the general case, probably.

Mr. McKissick: Yes, Company may have had one or two officers, but all of them were white officers.

Dr. Silveri: Did you feel any resentment about that?

Mr. McKissick: No, because at that time, it was just prejudice typical of the South. We knew where we were, and that was the way of life. They knew that was prejudice, and of course some were meaner than others. Lord help me, when I went to camp! They were examining us to find out our IQ and one sergeant said, "How far did you go in school?" I told him, "I went to first year normal." And he got furious. I said, "That's all right; I have. I went to first year normal."

They used an examination, and the poor fellow was sorry. They asked me who wrote The Scarlet Letter. I told them, and answered other questions and put the blocks and things together. That's the reason I was put in artillery; because of the training that I'd had. I had been to school. Otherwise, you couldn't make it in artillery because you really have to know your stuff.

Dr. Silveri: Were there many, when you went, when you were drafted from Asheville, were there many other blacks that went with you at that time?

Mr. McKissick: Yes, about--when we left here. How many coaches were there of them, Honey, that left here that day? You were at the station.

