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6434R – School Integration in Clarksdale, Biloxi, Jackson, and Leake County

Guest: W.J. Simmons

Morphew: Introduction...administrator of CCA and editor of The Citizen...there have been reports of school integration this fall which have been making big headlines all across the nation over the past few days...just what is the situation with integration in Mississippi?

Simmons: Dick, the situation is this, there have been 4 school districts in the state ordered to integrate by the federal court. These are in Biloxi on the Gulf Coast, in Leake County, a rural county in central Mississippi, at Clarksdale, in the Delta, and in Jackson, the state capital.

Morphew: How did these orders come about?

Simmons: They arose through the results of lawsuits brought by Negro plaintiffs on behalf of their minor children seeking enrollment in white schools. In all cases these were contested by the local school boards, and in the lawsuit in Jackson white interveners, parents intervened for their minor children, protesting that school integration would be harmful to their children in many, many ways.

Morphew: What sort of evidence was presented during this Jackson case to indicate the harmful effects of integration?

Simmons: Dick, numerous scientific witnesses testified representing a number of different scientific disciplines, and the cumulative effect of this testimony was that integration was harmful in every respect and beneficial in none. It's very interesting that the NAACP, which represented the plaintiffs in these cases, offered no evidence in

rebuttal, offered no witnesses, and actually did not contest the validity of the evidence in any manner whatsoever.

Morphew: They didn't even cross examine the witnesses

Simmons: No. The cross examination, what little took place, was of a perfunctory nature.

Morphew: With this testimony...and we've interviewed several of these witnesses on our program...being entirely in one direction, what sort of decision resulted?

Simmons: The decision of the court in the three cases in the southern district of Mississippi, namely Biloxi, Leake County, and Jackson, was that the federal judge found the overwhelming weight of the evidence indicated that integration of the races was to the detriment of the school children and the educational system. However, he gave a permanent injunction against the school boards, ordering them to bring integration or rather, to present a plan for integration, which they did.

Morphew: So, in other words, according to the opinion, the white interveners won their case but the court ruled against them...how can this be?

Simmons: You're entirely correct, Dick. That is exactly what happened, and the answer is very puzzling. As a matter of fact, it's extremely difficult to explain.

Morphew: Were these cases appealed?

Simmons: They were. They are on appeal now, and the prospect is that they will be appealed all the way to the United States Supreme Court.

Morphew: Do you hold any hope for the reversal of the integration orders?

Simmons: Given the atmosphere which has existed on and around the Supreme Court for the past decade or perhaps longer there is scant reason to hope for the moment for a favorable review. However, it's extremely important to bring the facts adduced in the testimony in these cases to the attention of the public and to the Court. And it is entirely proper, incidentally, to use the courts of the land as a forum for the expounding of one's point of view. As a matter of fact, if my memory serves me correctly, the Supreme Court so held in a case where that was directly at issue regarding the NAACP. But Dick, it is important, it is extremely important to bring these facts to the attention of the Court and to keep bringing them to the attention of the Court.

Morphew: Not only that, but 10 years ago when the SC ruled in Brown, they ruled on a set of facts which were presented to them at that time concerning the operation of schools...do these same set of facts at the present time, is there some new evidence?

Simmons: Dick, the facts are totally different. There has been new evidence of a substantial nature introduced in these cases and the federal judge who tried them so

pointed out in his decision where he wound up by saying that the facts cry out for reappraisal by the Supreme Court of its rulings in the race field.

Morphew: Both the district judges in the 5th circuit on cases of this nature have announced that their position is since the SC ruled the way it did in 1954, the SC would have to be the court to reconsider its decision and reverse or modify some of their earlier decisions, by fact and by law

Simmons: Yes, that's the position they've taken.

Morphew: So the SC did one thing and it's up to them to do something else

Simmons: Correct.

Morphew: School boards were ordered to present integration plans and they did so, calling for open enrollment of first grade pupils in the schools this fall, being held during August...some of our northern listeners might not realize this, but in the city of Jackson there are no district lines on a map, so to speak, this isn't the way pupils have been assigned in recent years...they've been assigned on basis of administrative decisions, so parents were told that when it's time to enroll first graders, you can take them to which ever public school you wish, no matter how far it is from your home...and no distinctions will be made on the basis of race

Simmons: Yes, that in essence is the plan. And in fact, when the first grade enrollment took place some Negro parents did take their children great distances to schools which were far removed from any colored neighborhoods, and this is very interesting because it illustrates a crucial point which was brought out in the trial of the case and one which has received very little attention apparently from the public. That point is this, that testimony showed conclusively, and not only the testimony of expert witnesses but testimony of the school people themselves, that the issue in this case was whether the schools were to be operated for the benefit of the children or to serve as instruments of accomplishing racial mixing. And the parent plaintiffs for the Negro children admitted under cross examination that even though the education of their children would suffer under integrated conditions they wanted it because they had been persuaded that that was what they should want.

Morphew: Negro parents of first graders seemingly have the right to decide whether their child will go to an all black or an integrated school...what is being done to give white parents such a choice?

Simmons: Certainly nothing is being done by the courts or by the government to afford white parents this choice and it points up the double standard in race relations which unfortunately has come to be public policy in this country of recent years.

Morphew: What is being done by private agencies?

Simmons: There's a great deal being done by private agencies in the way of laying plans to establish private schools for the education of children under conditions which are acceptable to their parents.

Morphew: Specific plans for private schools in Jackson have already been announced by private groups

Simmons: Yes, they have. There have been many individual groups, and as a matter of fact, the Jackson Citizens' Council has established Council School Corporation which plans to get into the private school operation in a sizeable way.

Morphew: And this will give white parents an alternative to sending their children to an integrated school?

Simmons: Yes, it will, for experience has shown in the North that where there is substantial integration white parents simply will not submit their children to these conditions and it could lead in time, if integration of the schools in Jackson or any other southern city is massive, to the destruction of the public school system. This is very unfortunate but it seems to be a price that the integrationists are quite willing to pay.

Morphew: Is there some distinction between public schools in the past and the present?

Simmons: There's a very apparent distinction which is taking place before our very eyes. The function of the schools is being changed. They are no longer being operated as public schools responsive to the wishes of the public in the community, the public actually who pays for these schools, but they're become government schools to reflect the policy of the national government and operated under the control of courts.

Morphew: Are private schools the only answer?

Simmons: I do not, Dick. I think that private schools are a temporary answer. I shouldn't say 'a temporary answer' but they are an answer to this one specific and limited problem but the real problem, the overall problem is not with the schools, it's a struggle for power and the problem will not be solved until the so-called white backlash assumes tangible enough form to bring about such a change in public policies that sanity is restored to race relations in the school systems.