

## Oral History Interview with Jack Nelson By Matt Marrone

**Marrone:** This is an interview with Jack Nelson on Saturday, April 24<sup>th</sup>, 2004. It is taking place at the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University, during the symposium: Civil Rights and the Press. And I'd like you to tell me a little bit about, when you first got started you, were talking about how you felt like you were missing out at the start of the civil rights movement.

**Jack Nelson:** Well, what happened was that when I was with the Atlanta Constitution in the 1950s and the first part of the 1960s, I was an investigative reporter and my managing editor didn't want me to cover civil rights because he was afraid it was going to interfere with my sources, particularly my sources in law enforcement because most of them of course were segregationist. And I didn't argue with that at the time. I liked to do investigative reporting, and I look back at that period with some regret because I missed out on some of the coverage of some of the early civil rights movement. I only started seriously covering it, and I did cover Little Rock, but I covered it more in 1957 during the segregation case. But, I covered it more as a police reporter covering an event happening. I didn't go into the underlying, you know racial issues or anything like that. And so, when I really began seriously covering it, it was in February of 1965 when I opened the Los Angeles Times Atlanta Bureau, and I went directly to Alabama, and I covered Martin Luther King giving the civil rights demonstrations there so that's where I got deeply involved in it, the first time.

**Marrone:** Tell me a little bit more about that, about your first involvement with the civil rights movement.

**Nelson:** Well, I covered Dr. King, and I covered of course the politics. I covered George Wallace, who was very much opposed to any sort of desegregation. I spent a lot of time covering Wallace. I covered the Ku Klux Klan. I covered the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, which was the most dangerous of all of the Klans in the 1960s. The FBI held them responsible for about 300 bodies – beatings and burnings and at least nine murders. I did a lot of exposes about the Klan. As a matter of fact, the FBI used my stories as sort of psychological warfare with the Klan. They'd take my articles and spread them among the Klans to let them know they knew what they were up to. Until later, I began to do some things that the FBI wasn't particularly pleased that I was doing, and they discontinued being my good sources, but I covered that. I covered, I wrote a book actually about a case, called "Terror in the Night: the Klan's Campaign Against the Jews." And then, I had to deal with when the Klan decided that the Jews were a big part of the problem because Jewish students came down from the north to, to protest. Mostly students who came really, I think, were Jewish. And certainly most of the lawyers who came to represent them when they were arrested and put in jail for protesting were Jewish. And in addition to that, there

was a Rabbi there from Jackson, who sympathized with the movement and some of the members of this congregation did. And so the Klan really turned on them and, and they got a couple of Klan informants to set up a couple of the Klan hit men in a death trap because of that. And that's a much longer story I can go into that if you'd like, want me to, but –

**Marrone:** I'd like to go back, I'd like to get to that later on. Right now I just want to go back to the first thing you said was going, and writing about Martin Luther King. What were some of your first memories of writing about him or some of the stories?

**Nelson:** Well, to tell you the truth, I mean covering, he was so inspirational. He was the most, he was the greatest orator I ever covered in over 50 years of reporting, and he inspired people. Now one of the things I remember so vividly is that he went to a place called Gee's, Alabama, G-E-E apostrophe S, Gee's, Alabama. At that time it, was an all black community, and it probably still is all black. But it was only about 600 people. But to get there, you had to drive over 10 miles of dusty road, in dry weather, and muddy road in wet weather, because there was no pavement or anything. And he spoke in a, in an old rickety black church that had a pot-bellied stove to heat it and a naked light bulb hanging down to light it. And old women were sitting up on straight-back, hard-wood benches all in the front row, and he's up there telling them, "I'm here to tell you that you're as good as the best man, the best white man in the county," and they're all saying, "Yeah, yeah." And you know, it's probably the first time anybody's ever told them that, that they were the best, they were as good as the best white man in the county and when he got through, it was so emotional. I don't think there was a dry eye in the house, including the reporters who was, who were, covering the story. So you know that was one of the very good memories. Another thing was, I remember very distinctly talking to some of the black residents in those counties who had fought in World War II and, and who had fought in the Korean War, and who had fought in the Vietnam War and were not able to vote. And so that's what the voting rights demonstration, of course, was all about to get these people the right to vote, and it was very emotional.

**Marrone:** Well, that leads me to the next question which is that, you know you did say that it was very emotional, it was an emotional investment for you as a reporter. Can you talk a little bit about some of that?

**Nelson:** Well, yeah you know a reporter likes to pride himself on being as objective as he can, and you know, tell them both sides of the story. Well, there's hardly two sides to a story of a man being denied the basic right to vote. I mean, where do you, where do you get the other side? Now we did cover, for example, the Klan. We did quote sometimes at some of these meetings of segregationists, sheriffs, and others but there was no real two sides to stories like that. There's no two sides to a story of a lynching, a lynching is a lynching. You know we saw cases, I mean I remember covering a case in Wilcox County,

Alabama, where the minister had been killed and a deputy sheriff was on trial for killing him. And an all-white jury was impaneled to hear this case, and of course everybody knew that the guy was going to get off although he was guilty, it was clear that he was guilty. But when the jury came out of the jury room after having deliberated for a very short time and came out and the lead guy coming out, I don't remember whether he was the foreman or not, he may have been the foreman, he winked at the defendant as he came out of the room. I mean, he knew what the verdict was going to be and it was, it was not guilty. And that was one of the things by the way that I saw early on was that it wasn't just the matter of being denied the verdict, it was that the whole criminal justice system was so loaded against the blacks that there were cases where if a white man had committed a certain crime, particularly if the black was the victim, nothing would be learned about it at all. But on the other hand, a black, even in a minor case, would get a very stiff sentence. It was just absolutely outrageous, the kind of injustice that existed in some of the courtrooms in the deep South. I mean if you saw, in those days, if you saw a black at the court room at the courthouse, the black was either a criminal defendant or was pushing a broom, because they didn't have any black elected officials, didn't have any blacks on juries, and they didn't have any blacks who voted or anything.

The '65 Voting Rights Act, I must say, changed all of that because now you had thousands of black elected officials in the South, even in the deep South, in some counties you'd have a preponderance of black officials because you have a preponderance of black population. They were able to vote now, and you'd have black sheriffs, black police chiefs, black judges, black prosecutors, certainly blacks on the juries. So, it's not that there aren't still racial problems – there are. But it is absolutely totally different, and anybody who says it's just as bad as it used to be, just don't know what they're talking about.

**Marrone:** You said that there are no two sides to a lynching. What are some of the ethical problems that came up, being a journalist?

**Nelson:** I guess sometimes you try to stop and think you know am I, am I really getting the full picture here? And like I say there was only one side to some of these stories. You couldn't say, well, what can I do to balance this story. If there wasn't an assault that you witnessed, if you saw that there was something done to provoke it, then maybe there would be another side to it, but normally there was nothing really to provoke it.

**Marrone:** My next question would be, you're talking about all the different events that were going on at the time, but what was it, with all this stuff going on, did you feel a sense of being part of something that was –

**Nelson:** Oh yeah, I don't think there's any question, but that in the very beginning, maybe you didn't feel it. But as time went on, you could see that what you were writing and what the television cameras were recording and people

were seeing, in particularly television I'd say were seen in living rooms across the country, were going to have an impact on society because there was no question about it that the 1964 Civil Rights Act was passed because the TVs showed all of the police dogs and fire hoses turned loose in Birmingham, Alabama. There was no question about it. But that the '65 Voting Rights Act was passed because Dr. King led those voting rights marches. And Sheriff Jim Clark and his posse assaulted John Lewis and civil rights leaders as they were trying to cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge. And those, those very vivid photographs. There were actually deputies, there was a sheriff's deputy, and you know the posse was on horseback and they had whips and cattle prods and they were using them on these men, women and children. So when these photographs went out, across the country and people in their living room saw them, there was a great public outrage. And you know the public got a hold of their members of Congress and said, "You must do something about this." So as a result you have the passage of the '65 Voting Rights Act. Which made, again, all the difference in the world. And of course next year, that'll be the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of that.

**Marrone:** If you can pick one moment when maybe something happened to you as a reporter or just as somebody there, where you thought, "This, this is it, this is really serious."

**Nelson:** Well, I guess you'd have to I guess, you mean it's going to have serious consequences?

**Marrone:** That this was going to be, as you said, something special.

**Nelson:** Yeah, well, I would, I would say that probably the Montgomery march, when that happened, when you had all of the public outrage and all that. I mean you knew people were going to be able to vote, they're actually going to be able to vote and that, that was going to change everything. So I'd say that probably was the moment.

**Marrone:** Tell me about some of your most memorable editors or how you mentioned earlier about the sort of camaraderie, and people working together at the same time.

**Nelson:** Right. Well, of course, when I worked for the New York Times, Gene Roberts of the New York Times is another one I worked very closely with then, and of course there's a great guy that didn't make it here because he's 81 or 82. Everybody that knows him they know him as one of the great, really great civil rights reporters of all time. This guy's name is Bill Meyer. He is now 81 or 82 years old, or something like that, and he had a stroke several years ago, so he couldn't make it here. He actually broke me in as a teenage reporter, I started off in Mississippi in 1947 right out of high school which you could do in those days. And he and I actually – at that time he was a Jackson correspondent for the New Orleans Times – and he used to cover these big conventions down in Biloxi.

Biloxi is a big tourist and convention center. And he'd be covering it for the New Orleans Times, but I was covering it for the Biloxi Hill and I knew nothing about covering stuff like that. I, actually I was very little, (laugh) I didn't know much of anything, I was just out of high school. And I'd be covering these speeches that you know these senators and congressmen were making and so forth. And I'd go to Bill Meyer and say, "Bill, what's the lead here?" and he'd tell me. So that's where I first met, got help from him, and he kind of broke me in as a reporter. And later of course he was. If you were going to Mississippi and you were covering a story, a major civil rights story, you'd be crazy if you didn't check with Bill first and ask him, "Well, what's the angle here, what's the situation? What do you see?" Because he knew it, he knew where all the bodies were buried, you know he knew every rock to turn over, and he's a great man. Wilson F. Meyer, but always known as Bill Meyer.

**Marrone:** And you said that everybody shared information and was affiliated with each other because there was a sense that this was important.

**Nelson:** Well, that's right, exactly. It's important, and it was very important for the public to get all of the facts about what was going on. I mean like I said, there's no question about it that reporters did write their own exclusive stories, they did put their own analysis in their stories, but when you have a huge demonstration, it was impossible for one reporter to cover the whole damn thing. So there was a lot of cooperation going on, even among like I say, competing newspapers. I don't know of another story of my time where reporters routinely shared information.

**Marrone:** Ok, let's move on and talk a little bit about connections at Orangeburg Massacre. Tell me a little bit about.

**Nelson:** Well, Orangeburg Massacre, what happened was that in February of 1968, which was a year that so many other things were going on, and that this one seemed to almost fly by for that reason, but also the reason that the victims in this case were all black. What happened was, in February of 1968, a group of black students were outside just on the street in front of the Orange South Carolina State campus, and they were protesting the fact that there was a bowling alley in town that was strictly segregated – all white. They wouldn't let them bowl, and so the troopers were down there to keep order and they had lethal buckshot in their shot guns and they were facing off against the students and the troopers later claim that they had been fired upon. Most of the news reports that came out of there really wrote it as an exchange of gun fire. And in fact, in fact there was no evidence that there was any gun fire from the students or that any of the students were even armed, but what happened was that they caught these students in a deadly crossfire, for five or at least eight seconds. And, I went down to the hospital later, and I talked to the hospital superintendent and he said, "I can't show you these medical records because it's violation of their privacy." And I said, "Look, I don't want to see the names on the records, all

I want to see is where these people were injured, don't show me their names." And so he did, he showed me all of the records, and I saw where they were shot, some in their feet, some in the back of the head and some of them were hit once and fell, got up, ran and got hit again, some hid behind trees, or hid behind barrels. It was panic, and there were three young really nice men, who were killed, and like I said 27 others injured.

And I later wrote this book, "The Orangeburg Massacre," with Jack Bass who had covered this story for the Charlotte Observer. Jack really has had a one-man crusade to keep that story alive because, it basically got very little attention except for in the New York Times, and it didn't even get good play by the way in the Los Angeles Times at the time it, despite the fact I had a pretty good story on this it was great inside the paper. But he and I went back and did that story and now, and did that book, and the book came out and in that case, the FBI knew these two put pressure on the publishing company. So it was a limited, limited publication when it came out. But he has managed to keep that book alive simply by, "Orangeburg Massacre" alive, simply by persistence, and he has persuaded two governors to apologize on behalf of the state. The book is still in print under Mercer University Press because of him – he filmed documentaries on the way by Northern Lights Productions, which produced "Eyes on the Prize." And he got a pardon from the governor for Cleveland Sellers, a student, a non-violent coordinator leader who was at the Orangeburg scene that night and was later arrested and prosecuted as sort of a handy scapegoat for the state. So Jack has done a remarkable job on it.

**Marrone:** I guess we'll move back in time a little bit. I would like to know how you ended up with the L.A. Times in that bureau, but also leading up to that, I think you said that, I think you covered, I think you've done a story on the Tuskegee –

**Nelson:** Well Tuskegee was a mile-square community, and the blacks began to talk about trying to get the vote and everything. It had about 57 points in it to keep all the blacks out of Tuskegee, and so I was down there covering that, and I didn't do much on that, but I did a little bit and then I went to Little Rock.

I actually went to Montgomery, Alabama. I didn't go into that here, but I went to Montgomery, Alabama, to do something on the bus boycott, and when I was there I got this call from the managing editor and he said, "Jack, Eisenhower has ordered the troops into Little Rock, get up there as soon as you can." So I jumped in my car and I drove towards Little Rock and I drove through Mississippi, through a north Mississippi town, and I went through a town and this police chief I think, he may have been a one-man force. But he had a police chief badge. He pulled me over to the side, it was late at night, he pulled me over to the side, and he said, "Boy, you came into this town going mighty fast." And I said, "Yeah." And he said, "And you went out of it mighty fast, too." And I said, "Well I'm on my way to Little Rock. Eisenhower sent his troops in there and –" And he said,

“Where you from,” and I said, “I’m from the land of constitution.” He said, “Well, I’ll tell you what you do,” he said, “you kill a nigger out there and I’ll let you go.” And I said, “OK” you know, and he let me go.

I covered it, but I covered it more like I said as a police story than anything else. I didn’t really look into all of the racial problems that led up to this or anything like that. And like I said, I finally began seriously covering it when I opened up the Atlanta Bureau in 1965. And, well, the reason I went to the Los Angeles Times was I had gone to Harvard under a fellowship and the fact is, going to Harvard under that you know, sort of broad outlook too – it made me much more sensitive to the whole issue of civil rights. And one of my classmates was a guy named Davey, for the Miami Herald. And so he went to work for the Los Angeles Times not long after he got back from his fellowship, and he got back in ’62 and he told them about me and so they hired me and, I moved, like I said in the beginning of ’65.

**Marrone:** Did you grow up in Atlanta or did –

**Nelson:** No, well, I, no I was born in Alabama, raised in Alabama, Mississippi and Georgia, and probably my roots are more firmly planted if I had to guess, if I had to put it that way it would be in Biloxi, Mississippi, because I went to high school there and had my first newspaper job there. My mother continued to live there until she died, several years ago. My sister still lives there. I have a lot of friends there, so I still go back there quite a bit.

**Marrone:** Do you have any memories, growing up, from childhood that you know, had to do with civil rights?

**Nelson:** No, I can’t, I can’t really say childhood, but I can say that I learned something, I learned something about police brutality early on and police abuse, which probably helped sensitize me to what was happening to the blacks. That was when I was fourteen years old and my father was overseas. I was arrested by, I say arrested, I was hauled in, in a way, by a detective in Biloxi who asked my mother, could he talk to me and she said “Well, certainly.” And she went on back in the house, she thought he was going to talk to me right there, actually he took me down to the police station and put me in a little interrogation room. And you know threatened me like he was going to – he was a big, big guy, you know. I mean I didn’t know what he was talking about and finally, I said, “Well wait I don’t know what you’re talking about,” and he said, “Well what did you do?” and I said, “I don’t know what you mean.” Somebody had stolen some jewelry in a house and we were, some boys, including myself had been playing and I knew nothing at all about it, but they took me and threw me in jail with a bunch of drunks and they came out after a while and got me and took me home and let me out without apologizing to me or my mother or anything else and said, “I know you didn’t do it.” But it certainly sensitized me to what, what police abuses could be.

Then right after I started out as a reporter, a very, very young guy, I remember an old, elderly black man come in the police station and the desk clerk wasn't much older than I was – 19, 18, 19 years old – said, “You get that hat off your head, nigger.” And I didn't like that, you know, I didn't like it because he talked that way to this guy and particularly because he was an elderly guy and we were taught in the South to respect your elders, so I didn't like that and I often kind of thought about that. And that detective by the way, not long after I started to work for the paper, I had a nickname of Scoop, and he was the one who nicknamed me Scoop. After about two weeks after I started working there he said, “Scoop? Don't I know you from somewhere?” and I said, “Yeah, you sure do, and I told him exactly what happened and I said, “I'll tell you this, if you ever, ever do anything like that to anybody else and I know about it, I'm going to put your name in the paper on page one if I can.” And he became a very valuable source for me, and as far as I know he didn't do anything else like that to anybody.

**Marrone:** I guess you were talking about how a lot of the writers all sort of shared the sense that this is really great. Did you come in contact with any writers or any editors who were resistant to covering this?

**Nelson:** Well, there were some reporters out there, not really, but there were a few reporters who were with local papers that covered news of the civil rights movement. And in any case, there were cases where some editors or reporters were pretty damn good – Summertime Journal, for example, they had a very good editor there. I mean all he did was, was he wrote editorials calling for law and order, but I mean calling for law and order in those days was pretty damn important. And he would have businessmen come up whispering in his ear, “We're all for you,” but they didn't say it publicly. And they had a good reporter there – I forget his name now – Terry something, I think. But he was good, he would write straightaway news stories in the Summertime Journal so you did have some who did. But a lot of those local papers you knew damn good and well that they were not sympathetic, whatever, to the civil rights movement.

**Marrone:** Did you ever include any, special, especially dangerous times when you felt really, really threatened?

**Nelson:** Well, you know, I told about the time I went to that Klan rally I felt pretty damn threatened. When I went to Crossroads, Mississippi, and they had 5,000 Klansmen in this field and they were talking about the “niggers” and “the Jews” and we were all out there and when we tried to leave, we were followed by this guy named Milton Parker who was a bouncer at a night club and had beaten up a couple of people and burned several black churches and he tried to follow us on the outskirts of town. And we went back and told the other Klansmen who you know, who had said we wouldn't have any trouble if we came to the rally, and he got about a dozen security guards and put us through, and got us out of that. So I was worried about that and there were other cases like in Tupelo (sp?) where

you know there even the women would be screaming to the kids who were, some of them no more than 13 or 14 years old, "Kill those niggers." And you'd have a civil rights demonstration, so I never really got hit like Richard did over the head or anything, but I did get something very big thrown at me, and it hit me right here where I carried my checkbook. So it really didn't cause any damage, but there were times when you knew if you weren't careful, you could get in trouble.

**Marrone:** When was this time you got hit?

**Nelson:** This was when I was at Crossroads, Mississippi, in 1960...either '66 or '67 at the Klan. Sorry, not there, but in (inaudible) in '66 I guess it was, yeah.

**Marrone:** What were the circumstances behind that?

**Nelson:** I was just walking along side the demonstrators and you know they started throwing things and the women were yelling, "Kill those niggers. Kill those niggers" to their own kids.

**Marrone:** What had happened at that Klan rally, did you do a story?

**Nelson:** Yes, wrote a big column on it for The Washington Post.

**Marrone:** But nothing ever came out of that at all?

**Nelson:** No, no.

**Marrone:** Tell me a little bit about the other book that you did, about Meridian Town.

**Nelson:** Well, yeah, that was where, that was where – I thought I got into some of that, but maybe I didn't. That was where the Klan, the white knights of the Ku Klux Klan – it was the most dangerous Klan in Mississippi at the time. The FBI held them responsible for you know, about 300 bombings, beatings, burnings, about nine deaths, and they began to focus on the Jews because they felt the Jews were a big problem. One thing – some of the Jews helped finance the civil rights movement. Jewish students had come down from the North to help protest against segregation. A lot of them were arrested and thrown in the parchment state prison, lawyers from the North came down to represent them and they were Jewish, most of them. The local Rabbi was sympathetic to the civil rights movement, some of the members of his congregation were sympathetic to it, so they got a hold of a couple of hit men. Tom Terrence, who was at that time only about 19 years old, but was considered a mad dog killer by the FBI, and one of the most dangerous men in Mississippi. And so the Klan had him as a hit man, and another guy named Benny Joe Hawkins, and had them blow up a synagogue in Jackson and blew up a Rabbi's house. Him and his wife nearly escaped, and then they blew up another synagogue in Mississippi. Then they

had a tape recorder turned in, turned over to them by an informant and the tape recording showed one Klansman telling another that they should blow up a synagogue during services and the other one said, "We can't do that – there are women and children inside." And he said, "Young Jews grow up to be Jew devils. Kill them while they're young." And so the FBI took this tape and played it for the Jewish leaders, and of course it got them very alarmed and they had been talking about how they could, how they should respond violently. Some of them talked about hiring a hit man in Chicago to come down and rub out some of the Klan hit men, and another one talked about bringing somebody over from New Orleans to break some arms and legs. But the older Jews, they cautioned, you know, they advised that they should be more cautious, and they should work with the FBI to stop the violence. Well, they got together with the FBI, and the FBI agent in charge said, "To do this, we're going to need money. We'll need to do it like we solved the killing of three civil rights workers in Philadelphia, you have to have reward money, and we'll have to pay some Klan informants to set up a couple of Klan hit men, set them up in a death trap." And so they did. They got Tom Terrence and Joe Hawkins and had them come out to a Jewish businessman's home late one night – the Jewish man and his family. And Tom Terrence got out of his car, but when he drove out there, he didn't have Joe Hawkins with him. He was suppose to have Joe Hawkins, but instead he had a pretty young school teacher named Kathy Weedsworth. And Terrence got out with a box of dynamite and started walking up the driveway of the Jewish businessman's home, and the police were back across the street. And they had the FBI back behind them observing the whole thing, and the police hollered for him to stop. And as he whirled, they started shooting at him and you know, he fled, dropped the dynamite, got back to his car, and Kathy Weedsworth leaned over to open the door to let him in and she got hit by a bullet in the spine that killed her and he jumped behind the car, drove off pursued by the police, crashed about a mile away and jumped out of his car with a machine gun, turned around and began spraying, hit one officer. Then he got hit in the leg and dropped his machine gun and tried to run between two houses, did run between two houses, tried to climb over a fence between the houses, and the fence had been electrically charged by the white property owners who were concerned by black neighbors, and it hit him. The electricity knocked him down in the bushes, and a few officers with shot guns got down there at close range and practically tore off one of his arms, but they pulled him out of the bushes and somebody put him out and said "Is the son-of-a-bitch alive?" And somebody else said "No, the son-of-a-bitch is dead." "Is he dead?" And he said, "No, the son of a bitch is alive." So another cop ran up and put a pistol to his head and the other officers pulled him away and said "No, the neighbors will hear, don't shoot him." So he survived, he survived and he was prosecuted and he went to prison. His sentence, I remember, was thirty years. While he was there, he escaped with another guy, and all he was doing was reading hate literature, all this, you know communist, talking about the communists and the Jews invading the country and taking it over and that kind of crap. But finally he escaped and the guy he escaped with, they both got away from the prison itself quite a ways and the next day this guy

got killed but he got captured and sent back to prison. After he got sent back to prison, he began to sort of have a change of heart and he started reading all this hate literature he had been reading. He began to read the Bible, and he began to say he was reformed, and people began to believe him at this point. It turned out to be he's extremely smart, one of the smartest prisoners they ever had, and they actually used him to help write the reform legislation in Mississippi while he was still in prison.

But he began to be visited by a guy who was a lawyer there, a Jewish lawyer who set him up, who helped raise money to set him up and by an FBI agent who had help set the death trap. They both began to believe he had reformed, so they went to the governor and they recommended he be released on a state release program. And he was released. He applied to Tully, to Duke, to Rutgers, to Ole Miss, and to several other universities, and he was accepted at all of them, and he decided to go to Ole Miss. He went to Ole Miss, and he studied Greek and Philosophy and he made straight A's. And he wrote a small book called "Conversion of the Klansman," and it didn't go anywhere. It's published by Double Day. And he left Mississippi because he was afraid that retribution would be taken against him, and he married into a wealthy North Carolina. I interviewed him for the book several times and he had become a minister – I'm not making this up. He became a minister, a co-pastor of an inter-racial inter-denominational church in Washington, D.C., attended by all the civil members of Congress. And, I went to hear him preach along with my wife and you know they loved the guy. And somebody asked me – in fact he tried to save my life, my soul a couple of times, it didn't work. But people ask me, you know, how do I know, you know if he's sincere or not, I said, "I don't know." But you know, the Jewish lawyer thought he was and the FBI agent thought he was. And I said, "He does seem to be extremist for Jesus now, but you know, that's a better kind of extremist."

**Marrone:** I think outside of what you wrote personally as a reporter, what was the most serious things going on at the time that affected you just as an American...

**Nelson:** Oh you mean covering civil rights?

**Marrone:** Yeah, not necessarily something you wrote about but something that really, at the time, that touched you.

**Nelson:** Well I'll tell you one thing that really touched me. There was another Klan murder, Lemuel Penn. Lemuel Penn came down from Washington, D.C., he was a colonel in the army reserves, and he was going to reserve training in Georgia, and he was returning from Port (inaudible) going back to Washington where he was a vocational, education official. He was accompanied by another guy, a major, who had also been trained down there. And a group of Klansmen were out riding around, just looking for quote, "a nigger at random to kill", and

they pull along Lemuel Penn's car and blew his head off with a shot gun. Well, the guys did get arrested by the FBI, they got arrested for murder, they were put on trial, like in "To Kill a Mockingbird." Well, this courtroom was just like "To Kill a Mockingbird." Blacks who attended the trial of these Klansmen who were on trial, had to go up very steep. There was a balcony in the courtroom, and they had to go up very steep stairs at the back of the courtroom and when they got up there to see, and the ceiling in the balcony was so low they had to stoop down when they entered it, and then sit down. And they would sit up there, and they would look at the proceedings going down in the courtroom, and the courtroom was full of Klansmen, it was teeming with Klansmen and Klan sympathizers. And an all-white jury and a segregationist judge. And of course the defense lawyers were making little racist appeal in their arguments to the jury, "Fee, fie, foe, fum. I smell the blood of an Englishman." that's what the FBI's trying to do they're trying to get the blood of the Englishman. And, when the Klan would turn and look up at the balcony, all these blacks were pure black and all you could see was the whites in their eyes. I mean it was, it was spooky. It was very much like "To Kill a Mockingbird." And when the verdict came out, or before the verdict came out, night began to fall outside, and you saw these blacks, one by one, leave. And they didn't come back because they didn't want to be on the courthouse square when the verdict came in and it was dark outside, and so when the verdict did come in, you look up there and you didn't feel the sense of guilt and shame as a white man in the South, and you didn't have any conscience because you knew what was happening, you knew they were going to come in and say, "not guilty," and they did, "not guilty." So that really had an impact on me.

**Marrone:** I guess my final question would be the role that the press played in – what do you think is the legacy and the difference that you made?

**Nelson:** Well, I think that without the press, you couldn't have had the '65 voting rights, '64 Public Accommodations Act, or the '65 Voting Rights Act. I don't think that they would have ever happened. And Dr. King knew that because Dr. King timed everything he did for the evening news. I mean particularly because, as Gene Roberts said, it was the coming of age of television news at that time, and so I think that was the legacy. There's no question about it that, that we had a lot of faults as well. We didn't do as well as we could've done, but in a sense it was one of the finest hours of American press – not just TV, I think it was the finest hour, and some of what was done during the Vietnam War as well.