

STACY RAGLAND
Owner
Cotton Row Club – Greenwood, MS

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Interviewer: Amy Evans
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[Begin Stacy Ragland Interview]

Amy Evans: It's Wednesday, July twenty-third, and this is Amy Evans, with Mr. Stacy Ragland in Greenwood, Mississippi at the Cotton Row Club. And Mr. Ragland, if you wouldn't mind stating your name and your age for the recorder.

Stacy Ragland: My name is Stacy Ragland, and I'm seventy-two year old.

AE: Are you from Greenwood originally?

SR: Greenwood, yeah.

AE: Okay, so I've heard that this building that the Cotton Row Club is in on Ramcat Alley—

SR: Right.

AE: That it's the second oldest building in Greenwood? Is that true? As far as you know?

SR: I imagine so. I think this thing was here— I really don't know the exact date that this place was built, but it used to be a stable.

AE: Uh-huh.

SR: A blacksmith shop.

AE: Okay.

SR: And I don't know how it ever *[laughs]* become a club like that, but I come in here in the fifties. But I went to work here in nineteen seventy. I been here thirty-three years.

AE: And you came to work here when it was already a club.

SR: Yeah.

AE: Yeah.

SR: Yeah.

AE: And you own the building now?

SR: Yeah.

AE: And how did that transpire?

SR: Well, my boss retired and sold out to me.

AE: What was his name?

SR: W.A. Smith.

AE: Okay. So how would you describe the Cotton Row Club?

SR: Well, it's more or a less a place where the cotton people, you know, come in here and have drinks some afternoon and—just sit a few hours before they go home. That's about all it is to it.

AE: Are you open all day, generally?

SR: Yeah. Well, I don't come down here now. I used to come down here at nine o'clock in the morning, but back then we had business all day long. Now, I don't have no business at all hardly until after five o'clock. Five o'clock in the evening. A lot of customers died out and everything, you know. And the younger generation don't participate in this club like it was back whenever I was here.

AE: Hmm.

SR: [Sniffs and clears throat]

AE: Well, so you think you'll stay in the business for a while more?

SR: Oh, yeah.

AE: Yeah.

SR: Well, if my health will let me, yeah.

AE: Do you have plans for the club after you get out of the business—or are not able to keep it up?

SR: Well, I don't know. I don't like *[laughs]*—

AE: [Quiet laugh]

SR: I don't know what might happen to it then. Probably end up selling it or something.

[Short pause. Knocking sound in background. Hambone, the shoeshine man, is working in the club during the interview]

AE: So the guys that come in here, and it's like—I mean, it's very homey in here. It feels like someone's basement.

SR: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

AE: And come in here and play cards and—

SR: Yeah, play cards. Pass time.

AE: Yeah. And I see Viking, you have a Viking range—

SR: Yeah.

AE: —over there.

SR: Yeah. They give me that.

AE: That's real nice.

SR: 'Cause it advertisement, see. [Unintelligible phrase]. Used to be a lot of traffic in here. But it's not like it used to be. In fact, that nine one one [September 11, 2001] had a lot to do with it. It took us a—my business has been down ever since that happened.

AE: How do you think that affected your business?

SR: Well, money wise and everything, you know. Put a crimp on money.

AE: Yeah, it seems like people would need a place to go and wash their cares away though.

SR: Oh, yeah.

AE: Yeah.

SR: But—just like I said, I don't have as many customers as I used to have because the younger generation—they do their thing, you know. And they're—this is mostly old folks.

AE: What would you think the old folks would think if some younger people started coming in here?

SR: Oh, they wouldn't care.

AE: They wouldn't?

SR: Oh, well now I—I got a *pretty* good amount of young people that come in here but, you know, during the summer months they don't do it. But when the football season and everything starts they'll come in, you know.

AE: Yeah. And I know—Mr. Persons [Dale Persons at Viking Range Corporation who is a patron of Cotton Row Club] told me that women are welcome here, but do you have many—

SR: Yeah.

AE: Do you have many women that hang out here?

SR: Well, it used to be—No, uh-huh. No women hang out here.

AE: *[Laughs]*

SR: But I don't mind 'em coming in.

AE: *[Laughs]*

SR: If they want to come in and sit down and have a drink with the men, I don't care. It don't bother me. But way back yonder, it was just strictly a stag club and a lot of wives weren't *[laughs]*—come in here to see what was going on and what the place looked like and everything so—

AE: Well, it definitely has the feel of a men's clubhouse.

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SR: Yeah.

AE: *[Laughs]*

SR: Right. Right.

AE: So do you have some, um, funny stories from your years here at the Cotton Row Club that you could share?

[Short pause]

SR: Well, I—[Short pause] I don't know how to explain that. I mean, uh, really nothing exciting or anything's ever happened. I always held down trouble and everything.

AE: Uh-huh.

[Crash sound in background from the ice machine]

SR: As long as I've been here, I think they had one fight here. A little bitty guy and a great big guy wanna—*[laughs]*. The big guy slapped the little guy or something, and of course I ushered them on outside the door when they got to it. But I think that's about the biggest problem we ever had here.

AE: Have you had many famous people walk through that door?

SR: Oh, well. A few, yeah. Yeah. A lot of ‘em were running for—you know, like Senator Lott.

[Front door opens and a man walks in]

Man: Hey!

AE: Hey!

SR: Hey, Smitty!

[Short pause as the man walks towards the back of the room]

AE: How are you?

Man: Fine, how are you?

AE: Um, well what were you doing before you—you started running this place?

SR: I was a—a roofer.

[Sound of the man who walked in talking to Hambone, the shoeshine man, in the background]

AE: A roofer?

SR: And a sheet metal worker, you know.

AE: Sheet metal?

SR: Yeah.

AE: And you like running this place?

SR: Oh, yeah. Well, you don't have to do nothing, really.

AE: *[Laughs]*

SR: *[Laughs]* Most days the same, answering the telephone.

AE: Yeah.

SR: Yeah. He does all the work. [Mr. Ragland motions to his left, where Hambone sits at the new shoeshine stand by the front door]

AE: Yeah? Mr. Hambone.

SR: Yeah.

AE: How long has he been with ya? I think he—

SR: Seventeen years I—Ain't it seventeen, Hambone?

Hambone: Yes, seventeen. Since eighty-six.

AE: All right. You have a lot of shoeshine business? [To Hambone]

Hambone: Well, it's slow now. Not like it used to be.

[Short pause]

SR: Summer months bad, anyway, 'cause lately—really—I don't book baseball or nothing, and basketball season's over, see. And football season'll start the second of next month.

AE: Um-hmm.

SR: And we'll be busy then until the pro playoffs next, and then basketball next year.

AE: Um-hmm. Do you have big parties when all that's going on?

SR: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

AE: Is that more the time when people cook around here?

SR: Yeah, in the winter time mostly.

AE: In the winter.

SR: Yeah.

AE: Do you have one person who comes here that cooks pretty regularly or he's—

SR: Well, I cook sometimes myself. I cook fish a lot.

AE: Oh, do you?

SR: You know, I do a lot of fishing and—[short pause]. Joe Ginard on the corner over here, he fishes a lot. He'll come in and ask me would I cook some fish. [Long pause] Morgan Johnson he cooks. He'll cook steaks and pork chops and things, you know.

AE: Um-hmm.

SR: He's a real good cook.

AE: Um-hmm.

[Short pause]

AE: Well. You have people that have like private parties in here ever?

SR: Private parties?

AE: Yes, sir.

SR: No. Uh-uh.

AE: No?

SR: It's too little.

AE: Yeah.

SR: No, it's just open to the public.

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AE: *[Short laugh]* How do you—how would you say Greenwood's changed, um, since you started working here?

SR: I don't know how to answer that. *[Laughs]*

AE: Hmm.

SR: But it *has* changed. Well, back in the early days you didn't have blacks in politics and everything. Now you've got 'em all—through all your supervisors and citizens council. [Short pause] [Unintelligible phrase] the city. You know, you got three or four blacks down there now.

[Short pause]

AE: Has business changed a lot with businesses leaving downtown Greenwood and now Viking being here so close and—

SR: Has what?

AE: Have you had different waves of—of business with the changes that happened in downtown Greenwood. Just when businesses came in—

SR: No. Not—no, not really. It's pretty much the same traffic all the time, see.

AE: Yeah. Regulars are regulars, huh?

SR: Yeah. We got about thirty, forty guys. Course, they ain't all here at one time.

AE: Yeah.

SR: Sometimes they are but—

AE: And have they all pretty much been coming ever since you've been working here?

SR: Oh, yeah.

AE: Yeah.

SR: Yeah. Course you get new ones too, you know. They—

AE: Yeah.

SR: They want to bet on football and everything. Different ones be bettin' through another guy or something. They'll ask, "How 'bout me bettin' with you?" And of course you add another customer on them so.

AE: Um-hmm.

[Short pause]

AE: Do you have a favorite piece of memorabilia on these walls that—that are in here?

SR: No, not really.

AE: No?

SR: [Mr. Ragland turns and points up to the centerfold that is tacked to the wall above his head] That girl up there—

AE: *[Laughs]*

SR: —been there about—I guess she's been there twenty-five, thirty years anyway.

AE: Has she? She's a fixture. What about this board that's up behind me? This baseball— [A big hand-painted scoreboard along the wall behind the couch where we are talking]

SR: Yeah, it—it was a Southern league waaaay back yonder, you know. They used to keep scores on it.

AE: Uh-huh.

SR: We had a ticket tape—tick—tape right over there behind that machine there. [Mr. Ragland points towards the back of the room where there is a snack vending machine at the bottom of the stairs.]

AE: Uh-huh.

SR: Till the federal government made you take 'em out, you know.

AE: Huh. Do you know who made this sign?

SR: No, I really don't.

AE: It's neat looking. [Short pause] Hmm. What's behind those curtains back there?

SR: Bathroom.

AE: *[Short laugh]*

SR: Uh, I got Cokes and stuff and just a little beer.

AE: Uh-huh.

SR: But that is the men's bathroom.

AE: Well, what do you got upstairs? Anything?

SR: Really nothing. It's a bathroom upstairs. People used to live up there.

AE: Oh, really?

SR: Yeah, way back when, you know.

AE: Hmm.

[“Smitty,” who came in earlier, leaves and says goodbye.]

Smitty: See you later!

SR: Okay, Smitty.

AE: Bye-bye.

Hambone: Goodbye, Mr. Smith.

Smitty: All right.

[Short pause. Sound of front door closing.]

AE: Do a lot of people just come in and bring in and drop off their shoes to shine, I guess?

SR: Huh?

AE: People come and bring in their shoes and drop ‘em off to shine?

SR: Yeah, they’ll come in and drop ‘em off here and—Hambone does a good job.

AE: Hmm. I see that. And Mr. [Dale] Persons was telling me about the new shoeshine—

SR: Yeah.

AE: —stand there. That some prisoners made it?

SR: See, that's his old one right there. [Mr. Ragland points across the room where the old pink shoeshine stand has been temporarily placed next to the Viking range]

AE: Uh-huh.

SR: Dale and them gave him that.

AE: It's nice.

SR: Yeah, that's a—that's uptown there!

AE: Yeah, it looks like a throne up there. *[Laughs]*

SR: Yeah.

AE: Huh. And, that cash register back there? Where'd that come from? [The old ornate brass register that is behind the back counter]

SR: That what?

AE: That cash register that's back there.

SR: That thing was there when I come here.

AE: Oh, yeah?

SR: Yeah.

AE: Do you use it?

SR: I *used* to use it. Way back yonder.

AE: Yeah.

SR: They said it blew a spring or something broke on it.

AE: Yeah.

SR: Got to where you couldn't hardly mash it down.

AE: Huh. It's real neat looking.

SR: We never even use it.

[Short pause]

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AE: Now, your Coca-Cola machine over there that's got—

SR: Beer in it.

AE: Beer in it? What made you decide to do that?

SR: Well, I can't answer that 'cause—a guy wanted to sell it, and I went on and bought it and put beer in it.

AE: Yeah. It's just easier, huh?

SR: Yeah.

AE: Keeps it cold.

SR: Yeah.

AE: Keeps people payin' for it.

SR: Yeah, that's—

AE: *[Laughs]*

SR: Yeah, that's right.

AE: It's a good deal.

SR: Yeah.

AE: Well. Is there anything I haven't asked you that you might think worth—might be worth adding?

SR: Well, nothing off hand. I—you know, things'll come to you later on.

AE: Yeah. [Short pause] Do you have any kids?

SR: Yeah. I have four kids.

AE: Yeah?

SR: They're all grown though.

AE: Yeah. Do they have any interest in this place, or do they come in here?

SR: No. No.

AE: No?

SR: One of the boys, he'll come up here sometimes. Stop but—stay with me thirty minutes or something, you know.

AE: Uh-huh.

SR: But he's a truck driver, and he's on the road most of the time.

AE: Hmm. [Short pause] Where'd you get all the furniture that's in here?

SR: It was here when I come here too.

AE: *[Short laugh]* Was it?

SR: Most of it. Uh, that old table there—it ain't no tellin' how old that table is [Mr. Ragland points to the center of the room where there is an old wooden poker table].

AE: That poker table? It's real neat.

SR: Yeah.

AE: Definitely looks handmade.

SR: Yeah, I had a domino table here and let this other guy use it. And they don't make 'em no more, and he give me this one here and— [Mr. Ragland points to what looks like a kitchen dinette table near the front door.].

AE: Uh-huh.

SR: And I let this other guy down here—I used to have domino table up there, and I let him borrow it. He put that one in there for me just so—you know, someplace that they can sit down and play cards or whatever.

AE: Uh-huh. Do many people play dominoes here?

SR: No. [Clears throat] Used to way back yonder they'd play—a lot.

AE: Yeah. [Short pause] Hmm.

SR: But they play dominoes around the corner here and down the street down there.

AE: What places are those? Places kind of like this?

SR: Yeah.

AE: Oh, yeah?

SR: Yeah.

AE: So there's more than one Cotton Row Club kind of place around Greenwood, huh?

SR: I don't even know the names of 'em there. They don't even have a name, I don't guess.

AE: Yeah.

SR: Yeah, there—this one club about [unintelligible phrase] down on this street not too long ago and he—they play dominoes around there.

AE: Yeah. Huh, well that's an interesting thing. You think that's just a Greenwood thing or—a Delta thing? A Mississippi thing?

SR: Well, they play poker on Wednesday night too, see.

AE: Yeah. Huh.

[Short pause]

AE: Well all right, sir. I think that covers some good ground. What do you think?

SR: Yeah.

AE: *[Laughs]*

SR: *[Laughs]*

AE: All tight then. Thank you, sir.

SR: Okay, thank you.

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[END]