

KENNEDY, Jonas T.
INTERVIEWEE

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Interview # 265

Interviewed: March 30, 1986
Transcribed: July 21, 2021
MP3 File format of cassette recording
Length: 00:29:03

Abstract: In his interview with Michael Cooke, Jonas T. Kennedy discusses his experience with the Progressive Democratic Party in South Carolina. Mr. Kennedy details the process and difficulties black people would face in registering and voting during the 1940s and 1950s. Mr. Kennedy also discusses the difficulties and expectations involved with the attempted buying of votes for certain candidates.

* This is an edited transcript. Our transcription guidelines are available upon request/on our website.

Time	Keyword
00:00:00	<p>MC: Today is March 30, 1986 and I'm conducting an interview with Jonas T. Kennedy of Bennettsville, South Carolina. Mr. Kennedy I believe is a farmer. Mr. Kennedy can you give us a brief biographical sketch of your life: birthplace, birthdate, education, and occupation especially during the time that you were a member of the Progressive Democratic Party?</p> <p>JK: I was born February 12, 1918. Finished high school, Marlboro Training School. Attended South Carolina State College achieving a BSA degree in Agriculture. I came out of school in '37 and went to teach. I taught 2 years. In '40 was working with the Soil Conservation Service in Greensburg, Georgia. When the war started in '41 to save money the government discontinued this program. I came back home and became a farmer.</p>
00:01:15	<p>MC: When did you first become interested in politics?</p> <p>JK: Well, I would say all my life. I knew the effect politics would have on a person's life and I thought that every person should be engaged in politics because this is the American way of life. But in the early days as you know we could not participate in the Democratic Primary. The general election was the only thing we could vote in and this being a southern state controlled by the Democrat party, the general election meant nothing. Therefore I didn't do much about participation until after Judge Waties gave us the chance to vote in the primary. Which was in '48 I think it was. I was registered there in 1947 at the time of election on the county level. Our precinct was West Bennettsville precinct but did not parti—vote until '48 in the primary.</p>
00:02:24	<p>MC: Did you have any problems trying to get registered?</p> <p>JK: Oh sure. I think everybody did.</p>
00:02:31	<p>MC: Was that everybody that was black?</p>

JK: Yes. Everybody that was black. You would have to read the Constitution and then you had to explain the Constitution. As you know, it takes a pretty smart lawyer to understand the Constitution. I think the way I got by without any trouble...I came in there and I kind of used my grandfather's name, which I was named after. His name was Jonas Thomas Kennedy and I said that very loud to the administrator that day. Then he gave me the Constitution to start reading. I read and the words I couldn't understand or couldn't pronounce I jumped over. I just kept reading like I knew what I was doing. Therefore I passed the second time.

00:03:19 **MC: On the second try?**

JK: Second try.

00:03:22 **MC: You failed on the first try?**

JK: Yes.

00:03:23 **MC: Ok. So you passed in '47. How many people in the county were probably registered at that time? 1947-48? Were there a lot of people? Were you one of the few or one of the many?**

JK: One of a few. I'm sure there couldn't have been over...I'd say 8 or 10 people registered in the rest of that whole precinct at that time.

00:03:47 **MC: So that was a real achievement.**

JK: A real achievement. It was such a problem to be turned down and that discouraged people from going. Therefore didn't have too much participation in people trying to register with all them knowing it was a losing game.

00:04:10 **MC: What about encouragement to try anyway? Was there any organized effort on the part of blacks to try to prepare blacks for that confrontation with the white register?**

JK: Well not too much at that time. There's such few people interested it's just a matter of you taking it on yourself after you've made up your mind that you're going to become registered. You take it on yourself. I think it's mostly an individual thing because as a group the blacks were just afraid. Sometimes you would talk to your friends about registering and that was a good way to lose friendship.

00:04:53 **MC: Why were they afraid to vote? I mean isn't that a part of the rights of being an American citizen?**

JK: Well it's something that we never had done before and this was a change. The average black person said 'we've been running pretty good, why let us rock the boat?' So it was stay away, just waiting to see what happened. I remember the day I went up there, couple of guys when I came back and showed them I had my certificate it shocked them. They said 'well you just lucky, I couldn't do that' and they wouldn't try. It was over into the '60s or so they actually became interested in finally registering.

00:05:37 **MC: Were there any overt attempts to discourage blacks from registering to vote?**

JK: Oh sure! They used every trick in the book. The vote was supposed to open certain hours. You go in there and there wasn't but one registrar there. He says 'well so and so has stepped out. You'll have to wait till he comes back.' I guess the gentleman was right around the corner watching you and when he knew that you had gone or given up he'd come back and the other would leave. So it was just such a hard matter and such a worrisome task it just discourages people. I ran in there...when I registered it was in the winter time when very little waiting on my farm, therefore I could sit around and wait until they came because I had nothing to do at home.

00:06:23 **MC: Were you an independent farmer or were you a tenant farmer?**

JK: No. I always was an independent farmer. I think that gave me some advantage over other people who were working on a job or farming for someone else. I had very little...it had very little effect on me. In particular my type of business, I was growing livestock with chickens and turkeys, which was sold outside of the county. There wasn't any pressure they could actually put on me.

00:06:57 **MC: Sold to what sources?**

JK: Well we sold our turkeys to regular turkey farms over in Richmond, North Carolina that was about 40 miles away. I had a very good relationship over there. I grew a good product which you have to do. I always got the top prices.

00:07:16 **MC: So that gave you some leverage over many other people who might try to pressure you into conforming to the norm of the area.**

JK: Correct. It did. I did me quite a lot of leverage because they couldn't put their hands on me. And then—

00:07:34 **MC: Banks. What about the banks?**

JK: Well the banks are fair. I got my first loan from the bank. The local PCA which was Productive Credit Association which was set up by the federal government to loan money to farmers. Well I never could get it from them, but by having a tenderhearted banker I was able to get a start.

00:08:00 **MC: Why couldn't you get any support from the federal government?**

JK: Well, this was controlled by an elderly gentleman who was deeply seated in his segregation ways and it was just a way of keeping blacks out. That still goes on today. We have FHA here in Marlboro County. They loan thousands and thousands of dollars to white farmers who have very little or no security and yet a black farmer would have a very hard time getting it even to this day.

00:08:33 **MC: So that you were very fortunate in that case of finding a white banker who would take a chance.**

JK: Right. I never—

00:08:43 **MC: Did he have any reason to have any hope that this was a good investment for him?**

JK: Oh sure. They've always made money because I've always paid my loans back on time. I'm, I would consider, one of their better customers. Small of course but one of their better customers. You know the rule of the game is making money so as long as I would pay them, and I did pay them, they were happy to have me as a customer.

00:09:13 **MC: Even though that you weren't white you were black and blacks were thought not to be as good or wasn't a good idea maybe to have blacks being in a situation where they might be prosperous and independent.**

JK: Well that *could* have entered the picture. I think that entered the picture more now than it did at that time because I started off very small and probably the banker never thought I would grow into the size of business I am now. Maybe it was just a good 'well I want to help a poor black out'.—

MC: Good Samaritan.

JK: Yes. So maybe that was the reason but the small amount of money he let me have, he let me have it on just an open note with no security. I think it was my beginning, as I said, creating success.

00:10:13 **MC: When did you become a member of the Progressive Democratic Party?**

JK: I would say somewhere in the '48 or '49. I wasn't too active in it because the state meetings were usually held several miles or 50 to 100 miles or farther from her, usually in Columbia or Manning South Carolina. Being a farmer and having to work hard all day long and sometimes at night, I couldn't attend the meetings as often as some of the other men who were off at 5 o'clock and could go and be there every time. Most of the meetings were held at night. Forgive me, I don't know whether it was fair or whether there was more convenient for the members to be at a meeting at night. Maybe they were all working like me. I didn't take *too* much of an active part because I—it was a step for me. It was a definite step for me but yes. I just didn't see—I wanted to be part of the Democratic Party itself not the Progressive Democratic Party. They were a sideline to the Democratic Party. I thought it could be effective. That blacks should be drawn into the local Democratic club.

00:11:41 **MC: Let me ask you, when the pool of founders in the local Progressive Democratic Party—**

JK: Mr. Harold Blackman.

MC: Harold Blackman.

JK: It was another gentleman, he's dead now, Mr. Manning. Yes. Mr. Harold Blackman and Mr. Manning.

MC: What was his first name? Manning.

JK: I can't think of his name. He's been dead for 7 years, but I can't think of his name. He lived on King Street, West Bennettsville. He was very active. He and Mr. Blackmon, I would say is the Fathers of the Progressive Democrat at that time.

00:12:20 **MC: What was the occupations of these two founders of the Party in this area?**

JK: Mr. Blackmon was a carpenter and Mr. Manning was a painter.

00:12:35 **MC: Why did you become a member of the Progressive Democratic Party?**

JK: Well, I thought I should. I'd owe it to myself and my community to do something to better Negro life in our community [MC coughs] and this was the only chance I could learn anything about avoiding social faux pas, the whites or Democratic club, you just not allowed to attend.

00:13:10 **MC: So this is your way to become comfortable with the political process. You mentioned earlier, and it was an interesting point, that you were never comfortable with the idea of being a mainstay within the Progressive Democratic Party because you really had a preference to be part of the regular Democratic Party. What did the regular Democratic Party in your mind stand for?**

JK: Well, that's the decision I made. I mean the local precinct...I remember in attending the first local precinct after [MC coughs] we were integrated, I can remember one man getting up reading a slate of names to be a delegation to a county Democratic meeting. One white man and no Negroes were included and they did that. One made the nomination, one seconded and in less than 3 minutes time we were out. The meeting over with and the delegation elected to the county convention which we few blacks who were there had no input. But we did learn, from that experience, the next time to avoid that. The next couple years campaign.

00:14:31 **MC: What happened in the next few years after that happened?**

JK: Well at the next meeting, we had organized ourselves and we didn't let the whites just take over like they had done before. We became a part of it and we made some nomination ourselves. I think that we wasn't equally represented because most of West Bennettsville was white but we did get a few delegates to the county level.

00:15:01 **MC: What was some of the activities that the local party was involved in, in the '40s and '50s?**

JK: The local Democrat Party...it was just a matter of going to the county convention and then having the election. The second Tuesday in June.

00:15:27 **MC: How often were these conventions held? These county conventions?**

JK: Every 2 years.

00:15:30 **MC: Every 2 years. That corresponded with the election years. So every year there was an election there were meetings.**

JK: There were meetings only on those times.

00:15:41 **MC: What were some of the goals set forth by the Party as to the way to improve black posture in the local arena?**

JK: The only thing we need to do or did do was just encourage people to register. After—

00:16:03 **MC: Did you do that in an organized way or was it just simply informal? Was there actually a campaign directed toward that end?**

JK: Well it was a campaign carried mostly through black churches. I mean during when the votes were open so many days at the first of January [unclear] we went out to local churches at least once a month.

00:16:26 **MC: What was the impact of the Progressive Democratic Party on the white political establishment during the '40s and '50s?**

JK: I really can't answer that. I think...I don't think it had too much, this is my personal view, too much impact on. Like I said before this was just a sideline on the regular Democratic Party. So I don't think it had too much impact.

00:16:54 **MC: What about white candidates trying to woo black support?**

JK: Oh sure. They'd woo their support by passing a little money around and those kind of things but that's all they did. They—

MC: Was that a real problem? The bagman phenomenon, was that a real problem?

JK: To me, I think it was. It was one of the reasons why, I guess, I didn't become more involved with the Progressive Democratic Party because of the way that the money was passed around. It was just against my judgement to accept money or sell my vote. Quite a bit of this went on. In fact there were quite a few Negroes who were in it were in it for what they could get out of it from these people handing down money.

00:17:48 **MC: Was that just simply at the local offices or was this at state level or county level?**

JK: No. This was state, county, and local.

00:17:57 **MC: What about even at the national level? What about the Congressional level?**

JK: I don't know about that because—

00:18:03 **MC: But at the state level or the county level and the local level that was a problem? You can make a statement there. Did anybody try to buy your vote or your influence over other people?**

JK: Sure several times. I've been offered money for—

00:18:23 **MC: Where these white candidates directly or indirectly?**

JK: Well on a local level it was directly from the white candidates but on the state level it usually came through some of the members of the Progressive Democratic Party.

00:18:40 **MC: Would you want to mention some of the people who were trying to influence your vote or your support?**

JK: Well I guess I shouldn't get personal.

00:18:53 **MC: If these people are deceased then really doesn't matter.**

JK: Yes. One is deceased. Well that's why it shouldn't be talking about it but I will say this and maybe some people will know what I'm talking about. This man was in Darlington, South Carolina. He was a short guy, very intelligent, ran a school over there. He was the main one that come from the state level. Just Monday night before the Tuesday election and he would come by and offer me so and so many dollars and then sometimes when he couldn't get down here he'd call me up and 'come over here I've got so many dollars for Marlboro County.' but as I've said before that wasn't my type of politics.

00:19:40 **MC: Would you want to mention his name?**

JK: Well since he's dead, I'd rather not.

00:19:47 **MC: I do know. I guess I shouldn't say if you don't want me on the tape. Would you mind if I would...**

JK: I told you there may be people wanting to say.... I said it. I gave you the name before. Personally it's up to you, what you allow it or not [unclear] if anybody would.

00:20:06 **MC: Well, I guess I'll say it. I think it was W. J. Hunter?**

JK: Right.

00:20:12 **MC: Ok. He's from Darlington?**

JK: Yes.

00:20:15 **MC: Were there others like that or was he the only one?**

JK: He was the main one. At other meetings of different people we were offered money but this is one person that I can remember clearly coming by on several occasions and say 'donating' \$150 to \$250 to Marlboro County.

00:20:34 **MC: And at the time what was your means? Can you estimate your worth as a farmer?**

JK: Well I was making it. I had my bills and everything under control.

00:20:49 **MC: So you didn't need it.**

JK: I didn't need it. No. If I had needed it I don't think I would have taken it though.

00:20:54 **MC: That's a good sign with so many of them didn't, weren't able to say 'No' to that deal. That's probably I guess one of the draw backs of the Party because that did happen. Other people have told me the same. That 'Yes, that was a negative part of the Party.' Who do you think started that, instigated this bagman phenomenon I call it.**

JK: I have no idea.

00:21:24 **MC: It seems not just simply in your county because that wouldn't be fair to say it was only in Marlboro County. It seems to me it was everywhere. I mean I've talked to people in Columbia. I've talked to people in Charleston. I've talked to people in *other* areas and it was not just simply a Marlboro phenomenon. It was a phenomenon that seemed to be felt at every locale of the state. I don't know why. Many people had not really thought that blacks should be part but once it became clear with the wearing decisions and just the way the federal government was acting it was pretty clear the minute you let...black people would have a part to play in the political arena and after that people started to say 'well'— Was that going on before? Let me ask you a question concerning the use of money. Had white candidates—maybe this is something you wouldn't be familiar with because...maybe you might. Was this a phenomenon, where white candidates would buy off people for their votes? For white votes as well as black votes? I mean is this something that this was standard political practice?**

JK: I think it was standard political practice because I used to hear before we were voting that the poor whites would take \$2 and go to the polls and vote for the fellow who gave them \$2.

00:22:56 **MC: So this is nothing new. Now it's simply the faces are black and we just do the same thing or try at least. Perhaps we're being maybe overly unfair because maybe blacks were less susceptible to bribes than whites. We have no way to test this. Because we really don't have a way to test this. Bribery and corruption may have been more apparent with the white voters.**

JK: Could have been, yes.

00:23:28 **MC: So that's one thing I want to clear up. I don't want to—**

JK: And one other thing I think we've found out before Negro voting, that the ones who curse a Negro out the loudest he's the one who will probably get elected. Because he's making the poor whites think that he'll go down on Negroes and make the poor whites look good [unclear] The old saying was he who say 'Nigger, Nigger the loudest is the candidate who got elected.'

00:23:57 **MC: Were they the same candidates who later on came in the middle of the night looking for black votes?**

JK: Same gentlemen

00:24:04 **MC: Same demagogues.**

JK: Same type. That's the same—

00:24:07 **MC: The same old demagogues the people who wanted power so much that when the political climate changed so that their—**

JK: their ideals.

MC: Their lines they changed little.

JK: That's what you call a good politician.

[Both laugh]

00:24:24 **MC: Well as a politician but I'm not too sure how good he is. What efforts if any did the Progressive Democratic Party take along the lines of trying to educate blacks about the need of voting? Were there any concerted effort on the part of the Party to educate blacks as to why it's so important to turn out to vote?**

JK: Oh sure. They did a fairly good job of that. They tried to show Negroes where it was right and part of their duty to become active in the Democratic system. Also they did all it took to get them to the polls and also get them registered but it was a slow process. It just took time because the Negro hadn't been doing this. And if you hadn't been doing something and don't see the need of it, well it takes a long, long time. In fact the next generation got to almost come along before they'd become active.

00:25:28 **MC: Were there ever any workshops to try to encourage people to vote or were there any door to door canvassing attempted?**

JK: Sure. Mr. Harold Blackmon did a lot of that.

00:25:37 **MC: So he went door to door?**

JK: Yes. He had his CBQ club and that's what they organized for to get people registered.

00:25:44 **MC: CBQ? Could you tell me what those initials stand for?**

JK: Oh that was three fellows. There was this guy named Chestnut, Blackmon, and Quick.

00:25:54 **MC: And Quick? I've heard that CBQ club but I never knew what it meant so I'm glad somebody defined it for me. [laugh]**

JK: Yes. These three men in this particular area organized the CBQ club. It just started back in the '60s and it's still in progress.

00:26:14 **MC: I see. Are you familiar with another organization called the Palmetto Voters Association?**

JK: Not really. I've heard of it.

00:26:24 **MC: You've heard of it. Was it active in this area?**

JK: No. Not to my knowledge.

00:26:29 **MC: Do you know any...the difference between the Progressive Democratic Party and the Palmetto Voters Association or if there was any difference?**

JK: I don't think there was any difference. Just another group that wanted to do the same thing maybe a little different way.

00:26:45 **MC: Was there any significance in that other way or was that insignificant?**

JK: Well it never got too popular in this area because their folk... I really don't know because—

00:26:55 **MC: Are there any people in the area that are still alive that were a part of the Palmetto Voters Association?**

JK: Not that I know of.

00:27:01 **MC: Not that you know of. Ok. What were some of the major short comings of the Progressive Democratic Party? And at the end we'll talk about the achievements.**

JK: Oh. I can't think of any shortcomings. It was a new experience for blacks. I'm sure they made quite a few mistakes but as they...you start something new, it's a matter of trial and error. Also, there was little political power clashes every now and then of which I guess you'll find in all organizations. Overall, it was a pretty fair program.

00:27:51 **MC: What about the...I guess that's basically it. Are there any other people in the area who were part of the Progressive Democratic Party that you can recall or maybe the surrounding area who were part of the Progressive Democratic Party who are still alive? And might be able to comment on its activities.**

JK: I can't think of only those two. Mr. Blackmon is the only one alive. I think all these other people who were active in the regular Democratic Party now came after I think. After the '60s I think the Progressive Democratic Party became a part of the regular Democratic Party and therefore they kind of faded out.

00:28:43 **MC: I see. When did the Progressive Democratic Party end in Bennettsville?**

JK: I would say somewhere in the late '50s about '58 or '60.

00:28:55 **MC: '58 or '60. Ok. I think we've covered most of the ground. Thank you for the interview.**

JK: Pleasure was mine.

00:29:03 **End of Interview.**