

THOMPSON, Daniel W.  
INTERVIEWEE

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**Interview # 208**

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Abstract: In his interview with Michael Cooke, Daniel W. Thompson discusses his involvement with the Progressive Democratic Party. Mr. Thompson details his involvement in the start of the Party and his role as the Secretary of the Columbia South Carolina Chapter. Mr. Thompson discusses the local chapter of the Progressive Democratic Party and its impact on the Columbia South Carolina area and African American voter registration.

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

Time	Keywords
00:00:00	<p><b>MC: Today is February 3, 1986. I'm conducting an interview with Daniel W. Thompson who resides in Columbia, South Carolina. Who was a member of the Progressive Democratic Party. Mr. Thompson could you give us a brief biographical sketch of your life? Where you were born, when you were born, your education, and your occupation or occupations?</b></p> <p>DT: I was born in Richland County, 1919. I'm a graduate of Booker T. Washington High School, Howard University Columbia South Carolina. I have a special certificate in Choral Conduction from Sumter Tech. I became interested in politics while in high school. After I finished high school in 1942, John McCray, who was then editor of the Lighthouse Informer newspaper came to Columbia from Charleston and hired me as advertising manager. We had a very close working relationship from 1942 up until the present. During that particular period of time, around 1944 I believe, I was voting in Columbia but they had a purge and our names were stricken from the Democratic Primary. Which later led to the Rice-Elmore lawsuit.</p>
00:01:28	<p>During the lull in that period of time John H. McCray, the late J.C. Artemis, the late James M. Henna, the late John M. Davis, the late Reverend Levi D. Bird, attorney John Rightmouth in Charleston decided we'd taken enough of pushing around. It was time to start something going. That was when the Progressive</p>

Democratic Party actually started, about the middle '40s. Because no blacks could register George Elmore, who was a fair complexion black, we got him to register. They registered him thinking he was white. When they found out later on he was colored, then his name was purged from the books. Which later on then led to the Elmore vs. Rice case. During that time we still weren't voting but after we reached the decision then the doors opened and Progressive Democrat Party became statewide. Each county—well I wouldn't say each county but as many counties as probably wanted to have it separate, set up.

00:02:45 At that time, I was the Secretary of the Richland County Chapter. John H. McCray was the Chairman of the Richland County Chapter. As Secretary of the Party, it was my group to get ward organizers. We had around about 20 voting precincts that we worked. Everybody in those precincts, about two weeks prior to election, we would go around to see if they had transportation to get to the polls. But ahead of my story, once we got the vote then we organized and sent out teams to go around from door to door to see that you were registered. We had a person that asked you if you were registered, yes. If not when would you like to go to be registered? We ran into some where they would tell us 'well the white lady I worked with told us not to. That was a [unclear] thing or something like that.' But all in all it was a pretty good process. Each worker had a certain area then we would come back and see what progress we had made. Then about two weeks before the election we would have a meeting with the candidates. Because we had no black candidates, we were talking to the lesser evil and we would talk with that person. We had a committee that would go around and interview the candidates.

00:04:22 **MC: Why didn't you have black candidates?**

DT: Because when it first started off the blacks weren't interested in actually running.

00:04:30 **MC: Why weren't they interested?**

DT: Because it was something new. Their names had just been stricken off. They were just getting it and it just was kind of reluctant about it to start off with. That was the first one or two years. They were just going to see, I guess you would say, which way the ball would bounce. Then after we would interview these candidates, then the group would have a mass meeting, mostly at the Zion Church. Then they would endorse what candidate.

00:05:01 **MC: What was the name of that Zion Church?**

DT: Zion Baptist Church.

00:05:04 **MC: Zion Baptist Church.**

DT: 801 Washington Street in Columbia. They would endorse the candidates they were going to support. Later on that night after the meeting was over a slate would be printed. Early the next morning or late that night all the poll workers and people who were interested in the Progressive Democratic Party would get what we called a Progressive Democrat Proposed Slate.

00:05:33 **MC: How was that slate arrived at?**

DT: From the meeting you had that Monday night prior to election the next day.

00:05:39 **MC: But I mean how did they decided that this is going to be *the* slate?**

DT: It was decided this would be the slate because the group would say this. Like you have candidate 'A' would give his view point, candidate 'B' would give his view point then have to meet after they would leave, then you would decide. The voters there at the meeting would decide as to what candidate they felt would be the best for the group. Whether it was 'A' or 'B'.

00:06:09 **MC: Who were these delegates who happened to be in attendance? Were they...?**

DT: They were—most of the time they were the candidates that would be running in the election the next day.

00:06:17 **MC: No. No, I'm talking about the people who stayed behind to decide on the slate. How did you decide on these people should be qualified to make the determinations?**

DT: Because they were the ones that took part in the meetings every week that we had.

00:06:29 **MC: I see. So they were all members of the Progressive Democratic Party.**

DT: The Progressive Democrats. We had around about—

00:06:34 **MC: Was there any membership fee attached with being a member?**

DT: No membership fee but leading up to the election maybe they would ask for a donation and that different ones would go out and make contact with different friends and they would come in. We had a transportation committee and as a rule—Mr. Cheadle, who was one of the Blue Ribbon Cab drivers, was in charge of transportation. You would get your list would be turned in and you would see how many people you would need to go to the polls. Then you'd see how many cars that you would need to carry them to the polls. As a rule we would use anywhere from 10 to 15 cars and about 10 cabs. After, the day of election, these slips would be passed out by the hat for block from the warden precinct. They

would hand you this slip showing you the endorsed candidates. Then you weren't supposed to carry that slip, wasn't supposed to be visible. You would carry that slip inside and after you got inside the voting booth, you would then use it.

00:07:51 We ran into several calamities which didn't amount to too much excitement but it was something unusual when some of the candidates who thought that their name should have been on the list found their name wasn't on the list then they said that our people were closer than the 50 ft. I think at that time that the law required. Therefore that they kept a hassle up all day long. But now the candidate whose name was on that, they were perfectly satisfied because their name was on that. Then that night after the election, we had what we called a party for the workers in which we'd give them dinner. One of my chief jobs as the Secretary was the day of election to go around from poll to poll that we were working to make sure that everything was running along smoothly. If we had any problems it was my job to get the problems and turn them over to John McCray. Either if we assigned you to work at ward nine, we expect you to be at ward nine. If I go to ward nine and didn't find somebody there then it was my job to find a worker from out of the Party and put them at ward nine to see that these slips were straightened out. Then around a quarter of two it was Rev. Bird, Jesse Phillips, and my job was to carry dinner round to the poll workers. Once at the polls we weren't supposed to leave under the poll closing time. Then say probably two weeks leading up to the election that we would—throughout all the churches in Richland County, McCray would have hand bills printed. These hand bills would be distributed to the church members telling them what number to call for transportation. That way were able to keep everything running smoothly. [Papers shuffling] Then sometimes you would find out you had a little bit more people show up at the last minute.

00:10:06 DT: Now for instance here's one of the letters that was sent out May 18, 1962. "Dear Pastor Harkins. We are making every effort to get every registered nigger on board in Columbia, Richland County ready and voting in the Democratic Primary on June 12, 1962. We will provide free transportation to and from the polls to those wishing this service and instruct those who wish to serve in how to properly use the voting machine so their votes will be counted. We need workers and volunteers to help do this job. We therefore invite those registered voters from this church [unclear] and will effort ourselves to meet with us Monday night May 21, at 7p.m. downstairs in Allen Birches Bowery. We need workers in every ward and precinct where our people live. We appreciate your help. John H. McCray, Chairman Richland County Progressive Democrats. Those letters went out to every church about two weeks. Then the week before election, the Pastor would know what telephone number we would use. Because sometimes some—maybe some Negro business would tell us we could use their phone. They would call up and say I live at, give the number, and say I want to vote but I don't have transportation. We would give them a slate when the cab would go over there to get them. Give them a slate. Like I say, the slate was supposed to have been a guarded secret. Then it was about 25 or 30 people that made up that slate because

there is always agreement. Then we put on, to raise money, we had one year L.B.J. Bingo Party that was when we were supporting Lyndon Baines Johnson.

00:11:56 **MC: Can you recall one of the times when perhaps a case where you went over the—debate over the slate, who would be on there, who wouldn't be on it. How did you determine 'well we would rather have this person on it than that person'. How did you go about that make up of the slate?**

DT: Well we always say at the beginning—

00:12:17 [woman in background speaking]

DT: At the beginning of each meeting that the majority vote would prevail.

00:12:24 **MC: Majority vote?**

DT: Would prevail.

00:12:25 **MC: So it wasn't let's say some executive committee that made the decision?**

DT: No. It was a majority vote.

00:12:30 **MC: Majority vote.**

DT: You see now, it wasn't like you would take a two thirds majority. That if you had 30 people present and if 16 say yes and 14 would say no. That 16 that was the majority. That was the common consent of the group.

00:12:48 **MC: So it was a majority. You didn't need to have a two thirds.**

DT: It was majority. We didn't have two thirds majority.

00:12:52 **MC: Did the goals of the Progressive Democratic Party change over time? Now, you mentioned—you talked about voter registration. Were there other goals in addition to voter registration that were stressed?**

DT: Well we wanted to see better employment, better street conditions. Some areas in Columbia in the city that needed better street lighting. So we got that. We did end up by being effective, getting better jobs. Some jobs that had been promised.

00:13:27 **MC: Are you talking about state or city jobs?**

DT: well....

00:13:32 **MC: You said jobs that had been promised.**

DT: Well I guess you would say it could be both. Because you were a part of this thing. It was hard to distinguish the difference between the local Richland County Progressive Democrats and the state Progressive Democrats. Because John H. McCray was Chairman of the state Progressive Democrat Party, he was also Chairman of Richland County.

00:13:56 **MC: You were Secretary of?**

DT: Richland County.

00:13:58 **MC: You were chairman of the local not of the state?**

DT: No, I was Secretary of the local, Richland County. Now in Columbia we did get the street lights. We got better job conditions when they found out we had the strength. It was a bargaining power that after we were able to get large numbers out to vote, then when these candidates would come and talk with you then they would promise you what they would do to help you if they got elected. A lot of—just about all of them lived up to their word because they wanted elected back to office. Then I would say in about '67, the idea of the slate became obsolete and resentful. After we had been entered in and the novelty wore off if you handed a person a slate, the average one would resent it. They would tell you 'I don't need you to tell me how to vote. I know.'

00:15:08 **MC: Perhaps—maybe let's address that. So by a certain time people had become so familiar with the candidates and the issues that somebody saying 'well this is the slate' handing them this is the slate of people you should vote for.**

DT: Some of them would cuss you out.

00:15:24 **MC: Because by that time the political education of black people had progressed to a point where that was obsolete. No longer needed.**

DT: Had changed. Obsolete. No need to be told. See the first one of two years, you didn't know just what was what because you'd take—I had been exposed to quite a few of the candidates and McCray had been exposed to them, and George Elmore but you see the rank and file hadn't. They would ask you, 'who do you think would be our best candidate?' and that's when the idea came up. Because it was something new they didn't want to go ahead and vote for a man who behind four or five years ago had been one of the Negro's biggest enemies. They figured that oh when you come to have a meeting and sit out and thrash it out then the pros and cons would be discussed and they would know. Then after that when they got educated to where they would know the candidates themselves, then they resented our idea of somebody passing out a ticket.

00:16:31 **MC: Ok. Are you familiar with another black organization called the Palmetto Voters Association?**

DT: Slightly. I remember it started over I believe in France, but I'm not familiar with that.

00:16:43 **MC: You're not very familiar with that. Ok. Well I won't ask you that question. Let me ask you in closing, what were some of the major achievements and perhaps some of the shortcomings of the Progressive Democratic Party?**

DT: I would say one of the main achievements we had was able to get the black voters organized to come out to vote. When you first started it was—they seemed to have been kind of scared. They were reluctant.

00:17:21 **MC: Did they have good reason to be scared and reluctant?**

DT: Well...it was just what they would expect. In those days you had the Ku Klux Klan and some of them were afraid of the Ku Klux Klan. Not that they had made any particular threats. But now it's like one night we had a meeting over to Zion Church and it was stated that the Ku Klux was going to come over there but they didn't show. This was that particular time a bench fell down and everybody—Mr. Henna said well now if you want to go, go. It's at that time a bench collapsed and that caused a lot of laughter but we were never—we'd never heard of any actual intimidations in Columbia.

00:18:10 **MC: I see. Well what were some of the shortcomings of the Progressive Democratic Party? Were there any schisms between members? Serious type of spats that might have been motivated by personality rather than issues. Were there differences over the issues from time to time?**

DT: No. Let me see...

00:18:36 **MC: Perhaps in your local organization that probably wasn't the case. You probably had—you might have had a consensus. Was that—you said you generally agreed upon the slate and majority rule prevailed. Perhaps there was a great deal of consensus.**

DT: I don't remember any particular divisions or anything. There was one harmonious family that would work together. After we got to—when the Progressive Democrat faded out and you just had the state Democrat Party that was just the end of it.

00:19:11 **MC: So after, I guess around the late 1960s I guess it just kind of—did the Progressive Democratic Party kind of fade out? Because now blacks were**

**now running for office and blacks were politically educated. They knew the candidates as well as you could have informed them of.**

DT: The first time we had candidates running we had about seven or eleven candidates running for the House all at one time. When they got educated. I know there was nothing to intimidate us like we had in some sections.

00:19:52 **MC: Well I believe we have covered most of the questions. You've been very helpful. I thank you for your cooperation.**

00:19:59 **End of Interview**