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Interviewees: Charles McLaurin

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Location: Indianola, Mississippi

Interviewer: Emilye Crosby

Videographer: John Bishop

Length: 1 file; approximately 4 hours, 38 minutes

START OF RECORDING

Female 1: From the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.

Emilye Crosby: All right, we're rolling. This is Emilye Crosby with Mr. Charles McLaurin on December 5, 2015, in a day-care facility in Indianola, Mississippi. This is part of the Civil Rights History Project cosponsored by the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture. Mr. McLaurin, thank you for talking with us this morning. We appreciate it. Can you--.

Charles Mclaurin: Thank you for asking me.

EC: Can you tell us when and where you were born, and about your family?

CM: Yes, I was born in Jackson, Mississippi, in 1939. My father, John, and my mother, Connie, was, I guess, happy for me to show up on Christmas Day. [Laughter] That was December the 25th, 1939. Of course, that was time of war in the nation, but we--my mother nor my father finished high school. They worked as domestics. My father landed a job with the

Coca-Cola Company. I think that was probably the best job that he had during his life. He had worked at the sawmill, working in one of the sawmills in Jackson, Mississippi. In those days, sawmills were very important businesses. My mother worked, domestic in the homes of white people, and as a cook at local restaurants in and around Jackson. My brother, A.C., and my sister, Ella, were the oldest. I'm the oldest of the family. In fact, I'm the first member of my immediate family to go to college.

My grandmother--I lived with my grandmother for a while. She was a schoolteacher. Got her education over at Tuskegee. She would take me to school. As a little fella, she would take me to school with her, before I actually got into the public schools in Jackson. I went to Smith Robertson, the first organized black public school in this state. I got started out early with trying to learn how to be what she wanted me to be. My grandmother had one son, and my mother. She always wanted my--her son to go to school. She bought him a lot of books and things. So, as I'm growing up, she's passing these books and things on to me. Books about Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois. Of course, in this time, I'm not really into these books, but since he didn't use them--my uncle didn't use them, she just made them available to me. Would often tell me about Mr. Washington and De Bois. And the peanut man.

EC: Carver?

CM: Dr. Carver. Yeah, these were her heroes.

EC: Yeah. Do you think that influenced you?

CM: Then, not as much as later. The--I thought--I think what I really liked most was Frederick Douglass. [Laughter] She had a book about Frederick Douglass, and she talked about this guy all the time. It kind of stuck with me a little bit, because I admired the picture of him in the book, and admired the way he wore his hair, and that he had the beard, and that he was

articulate, and that he had [5:00] mostly educated himself. I think that's what stuck with me most, that here was a guy who was a slave, and didn't get a formal education. But along the way, he's getting educated. Then he winds up a statesman. He winds up speaking to the president and really pushing the role of black people in America.

EC: Yeah, what are some of the important experiences you had growing up, things that stand out to you?

CM: Well, there were numerous things that happened to me. I think the--one of the most--the most--experiences that really stuck to me, that played a role later in my life was my grandmother taught school at a little community outside of Jackson called Star, Mississippi. She taught school in a little, in a church, a little church. She would take me to school with her. We had to get up in the morning and take the local city bus into Jackson, and to the train station where all buses and trains got--buses came together there. We would get off the, off of the--. Well, the local city bus, and walk about three or four blocks to the Trailways Bus Station. And, of course, this is during the period of segregation. We would go to our side, to the black side, get our tickets and everything. We'd go to school, and then, in the afternoon, we would repeat that. The Trailways bus would bring us to the bus station, and then we'd walk the few blocks over to the train station where we'd get the city bus, local bus.

On this particular day, my grandmother had to use the restroom. This was at the train station now, in Jackson. The restroom for the coloreds were full up, and there was a line waiting to go into the--and during these days, there was--it was always surprising to me that the bus station and the train station stayed full of black folk, you know? At this point, I don't understand why all of these black folks are there waiting on the trains, and they've got boxes and suitcases and things like that.

My grandmother's got to go to the restroom, and she took me by the hand. We walked across the corridor between the white and the black sides of the train station. My grandmother was tall, about five-ten, five-eleven, wavy black hair, and blue eyes. She was light colored. So, anyway, we go over to the white side of the restroom with my grandmother. Just as we walk inside the door, my grandmother said, "You stand here, I'll be right back. I'm going to the restroom. You stay right here." In those days, when your parent told you to stay someplace or do some things, you did that, okay?

Now, I'm standing here, and this big, tall white man walks over to me and says, "Nigger, what you doing peeping at white women in the restroom?" Now, the restroom was as far as, at least, I guess, twenty feet from me, from where I was. This big--I'm looking at him, being a little fella, and he's big and tall. And he said, "Nigger, did you hear me? Why are you peeping at white women in the restroom?" I'm--I don't know what to say. I'm in shock here, you understand? I'm wondering what is the matter with this person, and what is it he--what is he talking about?

So, by that time, he's standing there talking. A crowd is starting to gather. White people in the--in that section of the station started to gathering. They were all looking at me. My grandmother came back, and as she walked up, [10:00] she says, "What's the matter?" This man says, "This little nigger boy has been peeping in the restroom at white women." My grandmother said, "You're a liar. I just came out of the restroom, and this is my boy." Took me by the hand and led me out.

Now he's in shock, because he's wondering why this white woman is saying this. He thought she was white, you know? [Laughter] So, we leave the bus station. On our way home, my grandmother is talking to me about--now, about segregation and all that. I'm not really

understanding all of this. I do know that when we get on the bus, we've got to go to the back. Then, when we go any place, we've got to go to the back, or we were in a special section, separate from where white people was. I just didn't think much about that. Seemed like the ordinary thing to do. That was the way things were.

So now she's talking to me on--about racial segregation and about white people over here, and to stay away from white people, and don't talk to white people. So--.

EC: Do you know what kind of--how--what did you--how did you make sense of that as a young--.

CM: I didn't. I just was going to do like she told me, stay away from them and don't talk to them. Stay away from white men, especially. And never be seen talking or acting friendly toward white women. So, when--I mean, it's no problem. But anyway, so, the next day or two, when we would come to the bus station, and then catching the train, and anything, we wouldn't--I would just stay away from them.

I was not around white people. I lived in the black community, and we had Farish Street in Jackson where we had all the kinds of things--restaurants and clothing and juke joints, and everything in our community--little stores in the community where we lived, that blacks ran and everything. So it--I'm not now--I'm not exposed to the white world, really, except when I step outside of that community. So, nothing happening here now.

That was one lesson that came back to me as I was writing my story now. Another incident happened. I was about--I must have been about twelve years of age. I'm in school. I want to Lanier High School in Jackson, and Mary C. Jones Elementary School, and, of course, Smith Robertson. I didn't go to that school but a very short time, because my mother and father

separated, and then I went to live with my grandmother. My other sisters and brothers stayed with my mama.

But anyhow, now I'm in--at Lanier. In the afternoon, I had got a little job at a little store near where we lived in the afternoons. I would go there every day. My job was to keep the front of the building clean, because people--they provided curb service. Sometimes people would eat--white people would eat in their cars, and they would sometimes--stuff would fall out from the--. I'm to keep up everything around there, keep the boxes--the drink boxes with drinks, and stuff like that.

This white man who owned the store--he orientated me when I--as soon as I got there he said, "Now, Charles, listen to this good." He said, "Never answer the phone. Never write anything down." When these--there was a group of white men who would gather there every day, and sit, and drink beer, after they got off from their jobs, and drink beer, and talk, and laugh. So, he said, "When these men are in here, be scarce. Don't get around in here that much. Stay out." This--what he's telling me is no problem. I'm getting fifteen dollars a week for doing like I'm told there. [Laughter]

As I said earlier, when adults told you to do things back then, you did it that way, as close to that as possible, whether it was white or black. And certainly my mother and my grandmother had told me to stay away from white people, especially around men. So he's just kind of [15:00] telling me what I've already heard.

So I'm there working one day. The manager, the man, got sick, and he had to be out for several days, and had this young white lady running the place. So I'm standing around outside there waiting, and making--taking care of whatever I needed to do there. The white lady told me,

she said, "Charles, I'm going to be in the back doing some inventory, and you just kind of watch after for the front." So all that meant was watch after the front.

So, while she's back there, the phone rings. And, hey, it don't mean nothing to me. The man told me don't -- never answer the phone. [Laughter] And he had stressed *never*. The phone keeps ringing, keeps ringing. One of these white men back there said, "Hey, nigger, you hear that white--did you just hear that phone ringing?" I didn't--I didn't--I didn't say nothing. I just kept doing what I was doing, nothing. So, he said, "Nigger, get that phone." Now I'm kind of torn between whether to answer that phone or just leave it alone, but he said it in such a way that he--it was a demand.

So I said, okay. I walk over there I pick up the phone, It's somebody calling in who wants to give an order, and they're going to come pick it up, because we did provide curb service and things like that. The items they wanted, I had to break another rule. I reach over there and get this pencil and write these things down. [Laughter] And, okay. So, after we finished--after I'd finished writing it down, I turned and started toward the storage room where the white lady who's in charge in. [Laughter] She's coming toward me now. We kind of meet up just kind of opposite of where these eight or ten white men are sitting, okay? I'm reaching that note out, and one of those white men grabbed that note out of my hand and said, "Nigger, you black so-and-so, you giving a note to a white woman?"

I'm trying to--I'm--man, I'm--see, now you--I've already started out breaking all the rules that the man told me not to break, that I should adhere to. And now I've got another surprise here, is that he's taken the note and he's telling me that I'm giving the note to the white woman, and that's true. I am handing the note to the white woman, but he had a different--.

So--and he took the note and he looked at it, and he passed the note around to these other white men, and then it came back to him. And he said, "A black-ass nig--." He said, "Nigger, you wrote this?" I'm still not talking now. So he said, "Nigger, you wrote this?" The white lady walked up, and she said, "Charles, go to school." And he looked at me and he looked at her, and he said, "I'm talking to this nigger. I'm not talking to you." And he said, "A black-ass nigger shouldn't have never held a pencil in his hand." I'm standing here. I don't know if I've already pissed on myself or not, because I'm not--I haven't said anything. I don't know what to say. I'm shocked.

The white lady reached and got the note from him and said, "Charles, you wait outside." Man, from where--that spot to the door, I don't know how far that is, but whatever it was, when I hit the ground, [Laughter] I was running toward home. Then, got home and told my mama, and now I'm getting a lesson from her about Ku Klux Klan, about white men lynching black men, and this--. Now I'm getting some--another lesson here from my mama. She told me to don't go back, that--. "I'll see about your money."

I never went back. That situation was--is now--I'm thinking now it was a little connection toward what my grandmother had told me back there, see? [20:00] We're now up into the--. Do you want me to continue this?

EC: Mr. Mac, let me just hold you for a minute.

CM: Yeah, okay. [Recorder is turned off and then back on]

Male 1: We're rolling again.

EC: So, Mr. Mac, you said there was another incident?

CM: Yeah, this other incident involved a--. My friends I were walking to Jackson, into the city. We lived in Jackson, but we [were] on the outskirts. This white man stopped us and--.

He ran a furniture store. We were passing by this furniture store, and he said, "Hey, fellas, do you all want to help me and make a little money?" We said yes.

So he--what he was doing was having an auction, furniture. It was--he was doing it over in Rankin County. I lived--we were in Hinds County, Jackson. We were over in--he had this store over in Rankin County. So he said, "You all load up on the truck there." We got on the truck, and he took us over into Rankin County, to his furniture store. And he said, "Now, tomorrow, we're going to be selling furniture store, and you all's job would be to put it out. We'll tell you what to put out. Then, when people buy the furniture, then we'll put it back--put their names on it, and then when we have finished, you will deliver it to them at their homes."

So, we got out there, and we were working.

EC: How old are you?

CM: I'm about seventeen. I'm almost seventeen, because what happened was, earlier I had been in the Army Reserve, I had on this old Army shirt, It had a PFC stripe on it. That's the first grade of someone in the Army, the ranking. Okay, I had taken it off, and was just wearing the shirt. So as we were bringing furniture in and out, in and out, as I walked out of the store this day, a little old white man walked up to me. And he said, "Nigger, what are you doing with that shirt on?" And, hey, again, I'm shocked. I mean, everybody got on a shirt. [Laughter] You know, most people are wearing shirt.

EC: He wouldn't like it if you didn't have it.

CM: Yeah, I would have been in trouble then. So he said, "Ain't that an Army shirt you got on?" I said, "Yeah, boss." In other words, I'm no longer--I had done six months active duty, training, in the United States Army, I had been released to the Reserve. I was going to my Reserve unit periodically. But this shirt was an old shirt that I had just--. Anyway, he said--.

EC: Can I--I'm ignorant about some of the Army stuff. So did you take it off because you're not supposed to wear it if you're not active duty, or--.

CM: Well, it had been said that you wasn't supposed to wear them when you were representing the--. You know, there was--when you put on the shirt that was--that had these insignias that would go on the collar or on the shirt somewhere. But a lot of other people were--these were old shirts that really was discarded. A lot of men who had got out of the Army were wearing these old shirts. I had seen them.

But he said, "That stripe--wasn't there a stripe on that shirt?" I said, "Yes, there was." And he said, "Did that mean that you were over men?" I said, "Not necessarily." He said, "Did you--were you over white men?" I said--I didn't-- if there were--that gave me a little rank. If there--those people who were without one of those at all would think maybe I had a--I was kind of over them. He said, "Were they white men?" I said, "Some of them were white." And he said, "Well, let me tell you this." He said, "Nigger, I don't want to see you back here in that shirt no more." He said, "Don't you--if I see you in that shirt this evening, after lunch, I don't know what I'm going to do with you." [25:00]

I looked at him, I could see he had a gun on him, a holstered gun. And--but he was wearing a regular shirt. Then there was a little old badge on him that said "constable." I didn't know what the heck a constable was. [Laughter] So, he left, I came back into the store I told the white man who run the store. I told him, and he said, "Well, I'll tell you what." He said, "Don't you go back outside today. You work inside. Don't you go outside for nothing." I said, "Okay, no problem with me." After all, I'm working. All that--I--we'd make a little something.

The--after we left that day, the next morning when we all reported to work, he told me he couldn't use me, he said, because there was going to be some trouble. I couldn't out what

trouble there was going to be. He said they're going--there's going to be some trouble. I tried as hard as I could, I said, "What kind of trouble?" And he said, "No, just you don't--we can't use you no more."

So I go home, I tell my mama about this. Now I'm fix--I'm getting another lesson here about the Ku Klux Klan, about these white people who just don't want to see blacks advance. That you got on a shirt there, In the Army, they--not too long ago they--the Army was desegregated. There are white men that--who don't want to be led or supervised by blacks. So, chalk that up to that.

That--now we're up into--right at the '60s, right at the '60s.

EC: Mm-hmm. Mr. Mac, can I--how did you get into the service? Were you drafted, or did you sign up?

CM: Well, one afternoon some of my friends I were just goofing off. We had played hooky from school, and there were two guys of our group--I think there was five of us this day--and two of them wanted to go to the Army. One of them said, "Let's go sign up for the Army." I said, "No, I don't want to go into no Army. [Laughter] I don't want nothing a part of this." So we go to--he said, "Well, just come on and go with us up there." So we go up there to the federal building, and the recruiter talks to us. And he said, "So, okay, you two guys want to go. So we've got a test that you--." And he said--so I said, "Well, I'll wait over here." He said, "Oh, just go on and take the test, and you ain't got to go to the, you don't have to go. Because they--and even if they pass, they would have to sign some papers," or something like that. "So you wouldn't have--."

So, we went on into the place where he gave us the test. Then--.

EC: He's slick, huh? [Laughter]

CM: --we came out. The two guys who wanted to go didn't even pass. And he said, "Well, you have made enough to get in the Army Reserve." I believe we must have been around tenth or eleventh grade. That's--we would have been there eighth, ninth, tenth, eleventh--it was somewhere around the ninth or the eighth grade, tenth grade, somewhere in there like that. Because I--I been--I tried--as I'm writing my story now, I've been trying to remember how this all came about. Then, as I'm writing now, I'm learning things about myself that I never even thought about, that I did. Okay, but anyway, he said, "You made enough to get into the Army Reserve." And he said, "What you would do, you would be--if you decide to go, it would be around October." This was in the summer. This was back in June or July. And he said it would--there would be a training cycle in October. "And you would go--you could go for active-duty training for six months, and then you'd get out, and you'd have a choice of re-in-up for the regular Army, or you could just go and be--we would re--the Army would release you to a Reserve unit in your community."

So I said, "Well, I don't know." And he said--. So, later on, one day, this--a recruiter came to the office somewhere around about September, and asked if I was interested in going. Now I've had some experiences here that I wanted to get the hell out of Jackson [Laughter] Now I'm ready to get out of Jackson, Mississippi. I'm ready to leave the South, you know? This is offering me an opportunity to get out of Jackson and--but my mother told me not to take this. [30:00] She said, "No, don't, you need to stay in school." I had to have the signature of one or both of my parents. My mama wouldn't do it. I went to my dad.

Now, my dad wasn't able to get into the Army in the--during--back in the war, because he had a cripple--he had a foot that had been--he had been born with some kind of deformity in his left foot. So, he couldn't get into the Army, so he really resented that. He really wanted to

go when people were going to the war. Black--a lot of black people got into the Army and the Navy to get away from Mississippi, and for--to a better life and some opportunities. But--so my dad did. I went to my dad with it, and signed me up.

I take my--get my papers and turn them in. Then, one day, I've almost forgot this whole thing. [Laughter] One day, this re--a recruiter a showed up at the school, at Lanier High School, where I was, and said that this training session was coming up in October and, "You--these are your credentials." Gave me a pile of papers. Now I'm really hesitant about this now, because I had really forgot about this, and--. But then, when I think that this gives me a chance to get out of the state--. So I said okay. I got ready. I had already been and taken this six-months active-duty training, and that's where I got hold of this shirt.

EC: So was it--was your training segre--integrated?

CM: This was just kind of the start. This was around 1955, and the Army had just been desegregated--the national Army--some--whoever was president then had signed the order to desegregate. Because when I got there, you could tell that there was--that they were transitioning from a segregated Army because of the barracks and the way things were set up. Then, they were talking about having--not having had black officers in situations over whites, and stuff like that. And--.

EC: What was that like for you?

CM: First, it was--it was a surprise because I had never expected to be in the company or the presence of whites. You see what I'm saying? I've been taught to stay away from them. That's with my mother and everybody. We lived in our little world, kind of, in the black, until we had to go over into the white section for something, work, or--really for nothing else, because we had everything we needed over here. But I'm kind of--now I'm kind of torn between my

early lesson and what is now facing me. Here I am in--I'm in a unit. When we arrived in--I went--the first place I went to was Fort Jackson, South Carolina. This was around 1955. There had been some demonstrations. The NAACP, CORE, and some of these organizations had been demonstrating, and there had been some riots or something that had happened. But I wasn't at all aware of none of this merge, but I could hear this through people talking, some of these kids who were coming here from Florida and New York and California and all around, who were coming, who were here.

The first day there--at Fort Jackson, South Carolina--I got dumped out of the bed. I was on the top bunk. I gets dumped out of the bed on the floor by the sergeant, because I was--they--you--we were all supposed to be up, [Laughter] and you had to get up and make up your bed and get your--make sure your shoes are shined. If the sergeant came by and dumped up a half a dollar or a quarter or whatever, it was supposed to hit that bed, and that bed was supposed to be--. Then your shoes got to be--. All--everything's got to be arranged a certain way in a foot locker.

EC: Welcome to the military.

CM: Yeah, and so, here I am getting dumped off on the bed. [35:00] This guy's yelling at me to get out into this formation, and your bed ought to be straightened up, you should do this. Then I finally wound up out there in the formation. Then we were out there for a while. Then we were going to breakfast. So now--and the sergeant over this group is a white man. So, after breakfast, then we were going on a march. The way they lined you up, they put the tall men in the front line. It kind of came down to the little guy, to the short guys like myself. [Laughter] I'm finding trouble here walking, because now every--there's supposed to be thirty inches all around you. But the front guys with the long legs are stepping it off, so I'm back there trying to

keep up, and the sergeant is, "Get in line! Shape up there! [Imitating indistinct shouting of sergeant]!" [Laughter]

The first chance I get, I write a letter to my congressman. I found out who my congressman was. It was a guy by the name of John Bell Williams in Mississippi.

EC: Yeah, he was quite a man.

CM: I found out about--finds out about him. [Laughter] So I'm writing a letter trying to get out. I'm telling him I'm underage, and then all this, and, "Get me out of here." I thought I was going to get out in a little while, so I'm not really doing all that I was supposed to do. I'm still bucking. I'm still getting harassed and hollered at because I'm not exactly getting my bed right, or the sheet. The sergeant would come in, snatch the sheet and all that stuff off of my bed and throw it out on the floor, I got to get it up and put it back together.

So, after a while, a letter comes. [Laughter] I don't--I never see the letter, but the letter came. When I went to the office, the letter is being read to me by a sergeant, a desk sergeant, whoever it was there. He said, "Your congressman answered the letter, and he said that as a little black boy from Mississippi, you ought to be proud to be able to wear the uniform of the United States Army. Therefore, your exit from here is denied." [Laughter] He said, "You got to soldier. You're going to soldier." So now, I've got to now make up my mind that I'm here, I've got to shape up, I'm not going to be able to ship out. [Laughter]

So this is--that experienced happened. So that's why I had this Army shirt, because it was left over from that period when I did that training. That had been a long time between 1955, and we're up to 1960, right at 1960. So the old shirt--. Now, I had gone to a few Reserve meetings in Jackson, but that was still segregated.

EC: So the training was integrated but the Reserves, once you get up in Mississippi, it's still segregated.

CM: It's still segregated. And--.

[Recorder is turned off and then back on]

CM: Yeah, the--it's still segregated here. But again, Mississippi was segregated. So, now I don't have no real problem about this. Then, the next thing that happens is that Freedom Riders are coming to Jackson. We're up to around 1961, [19]60, [19]61. I had been reading about the goings-on out in North Carolina, Greensboro and those places, where-- and about--. Now I'm a little bit more interested because I kind of understand the NAACP a little bit. I had heard of Medgar Evers.

EC: Are you in school at this point?

CM: Yeah.

EC: So are you at Jackson State, or are you still in high school?

CM: I'm still at high school.

EC: Okay.

CM: See, because I--when I left, I was away for six months, and then I came back. The first thing my mama had me to do was go back and enroll in school. Then, now, I want to be in school, because while I was there in the Army, I learned what I didn't know. I found out that I was not ready. Not only ready for the Army. I really wasn't ready for nothing as far as the world is concerned, I can now, as a result of that Army experience, [40:00] I can see beyond Jackson. I can see beyond my immediate community where I had kind of expected to grow up, and really hadn't thought about what I was going to be or what I was going to do, or what kind of direction to take.

But now that I'd been in the Army, I saw my shortcoming, I saw that I did not know, had not been exposed to some of the things that these people who were there, who had come from these various other states and--that I didn't--I was not prepared. So I come back. I go right back. I go to high school. I go back to Lanier, pick up there. Okay, and then, one of the things I learned was that there was a high-school-equivalency examination that you could get. I didn't know how to go about doing none of this at that point. Then, when I finally get that information, I study this and think about doing it. But in the meantime, the Freedom Riders come to Jackson.

EC: Can I ask you, you had mentioned by this time you know about the NAACP and Medgar Evers. Can you tell us know you found out about that, and what you thought about it?

CM: Yeah. What I--what happened was, the--I learned about Medgar because Medgar lived in the community where I lived, in--kind of like Georgetown, Mississippi, kind of north, west of Jackson. My friends I were, one afternoon, hitchhiking a ride from our community, Georgetown, down to the city, down into Jackson, to Farish Street, to the theater. We were picked up by this tall, handsome man that I didn't know, and they didn't either. But we didn't--we were just getting a ride to downtown. Two, three days later, after we--in the newspaper, here's this man, Medgar Evers, who was the NAACP leader.

So, when that happened, then I kind of got interested in this organization. What is the NAACP? My grandmother had mentioned it back there, and this stuff didn't stick then because it wasn't important. But now I want to know who--a little more about the NAACP. My friends I had went out to Medgar's office out on Lynch Street. He had told us where his office was and everything out there. So, we go out there, and we get to talk with him and some of the people in his office. They had a youth chapter and that kind of stuff there in Jackson. I didn't keep that up. I didn't continue to go to these meetings and everything, because we already had our kind of

little junk we were carrying on, our rivalries between black communities. I went to Lanier, and these--there was Jim Hill High--Lanier High and Jim Hill High. So there was a rivalry between these schools in basketball and football and track. And periodically we'd get to fighting after the game, and this was kind of a little something we wanted to do.

Then, one night after a basketball game at Lanier, some white kids drove through our community, through by Lanier, and threw rotten eggs on our building and on us and things. So, what we decided was, that we were going to retaliate. Now, we were going to--.

EC: Against the white kids.

CM: Yeah, yeah. See now, nobody had--our people had told us to stay away from them, and they had told--taught us to respect white folks, because they were, I guess, white. But now, here we are. They hadn't told us about them doing things to us. We'd heard of the Klan. We knew they did--. We didn't see ourselves as those people that got lynched, you know? Mack Charles Parker and Emmett Till and all of that.

So, we loaded up one night, and got rotten eggs and Coke bottles and things, and decided we were going to retaliate. And--but when we went through the area where these white kids would usually be, [45:00] they wasn't--they weren't there. So we put that off, but then there were some other kind of things that was going on that Medgar Evers was involved in, so we went back to talk, and told Medgar about what happened and everything. And he talked about what they were doing, what the NAACP was doing. All of a sudden, Freedom Riders. These people are coming into Jackson. There had been a bombing over in Birmingham, and people were beaten. This was kind of exciting to us, but it didn't mean nothing, really, to us, because there were these people coming to do this. Of course, we didn't know nothing, really, much about that. But of course, now we know that the Freedom Riders' destination was to be New Orleans.

But they never got out of Jackson because they got arrested there and got put in jail, and stayed there. The purpose of the city and the state of--the city of Jackson and the state of Mississippi was planning to break the NAACP and CORE and these organizations by making them put up these bonds, and not giving them their bond money back, and really not doing anything about the cases. As these Freedom Riders starting to getting out of jail and going home, a little--one of these Freedom Riders named James Bevel--the Reverend James Bevel--.

EC: [Laughter] Mm-hmm.

CM: --went to work for Southern Christian Leadership Conference. SNCC was formed. Ella Baker had brought the SNCC people together, and had brought the demonstrators from the Woolworth's sit-ins and other sit-ins together. They had formed the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, or SNCC. But now, again, we didn't know nothing about any of that, except Bevel comes in one night, and he'd come into our community in Georgetown, there where we lived, to the pool hall where we hung out. We were getting ready to have a rivalry battle between the West Jackson kids who mostly went to Jim Hill and the Lanier kids who lived over in Georgetown. We were assembling our weapons and bottles and bricks.

It was--and Bevel come in, and he sat around--. We saw this stranger come in. We didn't know who he was. And he's sitting around as we're planning and talking. Then, just as we were about to load up and go get killed or put in jail or whatever, and--he hopped up on the pool table and said, "Hold it." He said, "You all, you're brave, you're bad. You're going to go out there and kill one another, shoot up one another." He said, "But is there any of you bad enough to buy a ticket at the bus station on the white side of the bus station?" So, some of the guys said, "Well, we ain't got no money." He said, "Don't worry about money. I got the money, if you got the nerve--.

EC: Uh-oh.

CM: --to not fight among yourselves, but go to--I'll take you to the bus station. You're going to buy a ticket to New Orleans, and you'll be met in New Orleans by--." So several of my friends said, "Yeah, I'll buy a ticket." Then one was James Jones, Ralph Floyd, Levon Brown, and a guy by the name of Charles Cox, and two or three other people. But James Jones and Ralph Floyd was my friends and buddies and pals. So they--Bevel took them down.

EC: So you didn't--.

CM: We didn't fight. We didn't go ahead with the battle.

EC: Yeah.

CM: We took this challenge.

EC: So, did you know what he was doing? [Laughter]

CM: No, no, I didn't. He didn't give us a lot of information, because he--it was the challenge that he had thrown at us.

EC: He tapped into that.

CM: Yeah, and so, these guys, they didn't think they were going to get put in jail really. They really just took the challenge; I guess they were going to come back onto the block with the rest of us tomorrow, the next day. So if Bevel told--I don't think he told them they were going to jail. He never told them that. There wasn't--and we really weren't smart enough to see the relationship between these people--the white--the people who had been coming and getting put in jail [50:00] and us getting put in jail in there. They got put in jail because they came to cause a problem. So, we didn't connect that.

But anyway, the next morning, the newspaper, Jackson *Daily News* and the *Clarion-Ledger* newspapers, had in there that these fellows, my friends, they were in jail. They were

arrested. And Bevel came, talking with us again, trying to get some more of us to go. I couldn't see that. One of my concerns here now was that there are problems between blacks and whites, and there are a lot of things going on that I don't understand. But one of the things--see, Emmett Till had happened. We had been very made aware of Emmett Till because of the sensational photographs and--that came in the *Ebony* magazines and the *Jet* magazine. It pissed us off. We were angry about this, but that was all it was.

EC: Were you afraid? Did it make you--some people say seeing that picture made them afraid, sort of feel like--.

CM: No, we wanted to get together a group and go up there and find these guys. We sat on the corner one night after we--and--because we didn't know where the delta was. We sat on the block there and talked about going to try to find them, going up there to the delta. No, we--one of the things, there was no fear in us. We didn't fear white folks. It's just that we had been taught to stay away from them. Don't get involved with them, except if you've got a job you go to work and you do your job, and you get paid, and you go home. You don't socialize or nothing with them. So--but we weren't afraid of them. Our parents and people had the fear of us being lynched or something, and their fear was not something that they had passed on to us. They had given us lessons about how to live, and not about fearing whites. Because two or three times, they threw the eggs on us, we were going to go and retaliate. So every time they did something, that something happened to our folk, we got ready to deal with it.

That, with Bevel coming out now and getting us together, kind of causes our thinking to come around, and him telling us about--explaining now the sit-ins and the beatings, and the buses, and CORE. We learned now about CORE, SNCC, and the NAACP, and about Morehouse College. Because this was one of the colleges he talked about a lot, Bevel did.

Talked about Spellman and Howard University, and like that. So, now, as he's coming back, and my friends are getting out of jail, we now are trying to think about what we can do.

[Recorder is turned off and then back on]

Male 1: Okay.

CM: We're thinking about what we can do now that they are out of jail. These other people are out, and they're gone. So it was decided that we would develop a movement in Jackson.

EC: Did Bevel have any workshops on nonviolence? Did he try to do that with you all?

CM: Not that--not at this point.

EC: Okay.

CM: It wouldn't have really done any good, teaching us not to retaliate. That--so, no, he didn't deal with that at this point. Bevel was a smooth little fella, I admired him. Because he reminded me of--my grandmother talked about Booker T.--not--yeah, Booker T. Washington and Du Bois, and about the difference in their philosophy about segregation and integration and stuff like that, at a very small level. But now Bevel is talking about these things, and he's talking about the overall picture of the Civil Rights Movement.

So then he said, "We'll develop a movement," and we decided to make it to Jackson with Jesse Harris, who was one of my friends who had went on the Freedom Ride too. I had forgotten Jesse. And Jesse was into this nonviolent thing, you see?

EC: He was? [55:00]

CM: Yeah, because you--[Laughter] here's what--this happened too, that kind of involved us, It was kind of hilarious too. Jesse, when Jesse was arrested for trying to buy a

ticket, they had--the city of Jackson had not yet been kind of conditioned to the federal government's [being] involved in this effort. So Jesse Harris--they sent Jesse to the county farm. When he was arrested, they sent him to the county farm, and Jesse told us--now, this is him back at--. He says there was a sign up over the gateway to the county farm, It said, "We break your--we--" no, "We break your spirit or we break your behind." [Laughter] So, he said that was across the gate. Now, I don't know about all that, but this is Jesse talking.

EC: It sounds right, don't it?

CM: Yeah, and he says, so, he was there. Then they had a work crew that would go out every morning to work, cutting the grass along the roads and byways and everything, picking up trash, and just doing whatever white folks wanted you to do. The--when they get up in the morning, after they have their breakfast, they had to line up and count off before they went on the bus. They said that when you got ready to--you're on the bus, and then when you--as you're getting off of the bus you say--you count off: "Nigger one, nigger two, nigger three," right on down through whatever the number is. So Jesse was the fourth person. I think he said the fourth person. The guy before him stepped off and says, "Nigger one," "nigger two," "nigger three." And Jesse just stepped off of the bus, and the other guy went on and counted. The sergeant, a white man, said, "Hold it." He said, "Bring that nigger back."

He said, "You all get back on the bus," having to count off. Stepped off of the bus: "Nigger one," "nigger two," "nigger three." And Jesse just stepped off of the bus, and that other guy said, "Hold it. Bring them back."

They brought them back the third time, and when they--when, the fourth time, he didn't sound off, said--the sergeant said, "Stretch him." That means lay--get him over there on this big table. Jesse said they had a big table, and they had one big burly, black guy to catch him by his

feet, his heel, his ankle. Another one grab him up there at the front. Then they had a guy there, a black guy, with a strap about--he said it was about four or five inches wide, it was short, and it had two holes in it. The sergeant would give the signal, and they would rap him across his butt with that strap, and then he said they rapped him about four times. He said, "Now put him back on that bus. Put them back on the bus." Said they fell off. And Jesse said he was in pain, but when he came off of the bus, he still didn't--.

"Stretch him!" Carried him back over there and gave him about ten or fifteen other licks between his--the bottom of his butt up to his shoulder. And put him on the bus--put him on the bus, and they were coming off. [Laughter] This guy said, "Nigger one," "nigger two," "number--," Jesse said, "Nigger four!" [Laughter] Before they even got to his number. And that's what I said it was the laughable kind of situation, the way he told it. Jesse was tall, and the way he talked, and he's serious.

So, now, we're developing this movement. So what happens is, Medgar and Bevel, Dianne Nash, I believe Chuck McDew, and some other--the people who had been in McComb with Bob, who came with Bob down there, who went to McComb later. But anyway, we were developing this movement.

EC: This was like Paul Brooks? Was he there?

CM: I think he may have been the chairperson or something. Yeah, Paul Brooks. [Laughter] That was a guy who never stopped talking. I mean, Paul--.

EC: Did he really?

CM: Yeah, It seemed like he'd argue with stop signs. I mean, he really--I mean, he talked all the time. There was another, Lester McKinney.

EC: Yeah.

CM: The mayor of--.

EC: Marion Barry? [1:00:00]

CM: Marion Barry. You know, these guys. They were talking all the time, and they were debating. But anyway, Medgar is involved here. Now, Medgar comes into the picture as we were setting up this Jackson movement. So, Diane Nash and all these people, we set up this movement. Then we were going to have a meeting. This was around 1961, or in mid--somewhere over in the summer here now, moving towards [19]62. They said that--.

EC: Are you in high school still? Or what are you doing at this point? Are you working?

CM: I'm working. I had gone to high school, and then I had decided then that I was going to take this equivalency examination. I was in eleventh grade now, I think, around eleventh grade. That summer--it's summertime now--and so, now it's the--. I have learned now that I can get this test down to Mississippi Valley State University.

EC: Okay.

CM: Okay? So what happened now--what I did during that summer was help work with this movement. Then, in 1961, after the Freedom Riders had been through there, our group decided that we were going to attend the state segregated--previously segregated fair in Jackson. We were to meet at a certain place and go to the fair. There was four of us supposed to be going. We were supposed to meet. So we met--no, the meeting didn't come off because these guys didn't show. Three of the four of us who were supposed to go didn't show. Then, I went on down to the fair, and tried to buy a ticket to the fair. They turned me away.

EC: So in your mind, what's the difference between going down to the bus station for a ticket and going to the fair? Why were you willing to do the one and not the other?

CM: Because I wanted to go to the fair. [Laughter] See, the going to the bus station was not going to get me nothing but arrested maybe, I didn't--wasn't thinking about that. But the fair, I had watched the fair come into town. Now, we had a black fair and a white fair, and we couldn't go to the white fair, and the white folks ran the ones we had. But--I had gone to that, and it was over. This is the week that the white fair is coming, and they were advertising it as a state fair. This is a fair for the whole state. You all come, you know? Schools and everything are coming to the state fair. Plus, several of my friends had gotten jobs helping to set up this fair down at the fairground in Jackson. I had come around sometime where they were, and saw all of these things that's going to be at the fair. We didn't have a lot of this back at the black fair.

They were going to have--they had a burlesque show. I was really--wanted to go to the burlesques show, and--because legally I don't know if I could, because what am I know? Around about eighteen, nineteen, somewhere in there. I don't think--I think you had to be twenty-one to go to the burlesque show. But I was underage, but I was assured that I was going to get a chance to go, because of my friends and these people working there. I had found a way to get in by slipping in. [Laughter] You know what I'm saying?

EC: I hear you.

CM: Yes, see, I--back when I was growing up, I was not a fearful person. I was always looking for the opportunity to do something I wanted to do, and not be told and guided by--. But anyhow, I made up my mind I wanted to go to the fair, for entertainment and all of the goodies. I decided--the four of us had decided that we were going to go. Now these guys had already--Charles Cox, [1:05:00] Levon Brown, and somebody that wasn't--Jesse wasn't with that. No, Ralph Floyd. And--that we were going to go to that. Now, in the meantime, they were--we

were trying to get together this Jackson movement, our guys. Medgar had a group of NAACP kids that he was working with out of Tougaloo, but they--I don't they had on their agenda the fairground. They were going to go to the library.

So, anyway, I went down there, tried to buy a ticket. They told me I--"Nigger, this ain't your fair. Your fair was last week. Get your so-and-so away from here." I thought about it. I said, well--. I walked away, a little piece from the ticket area, and thought, hopefully, by now, my friends would have decided that they'd come in, and they--we would meet. I waited around a little while, I went back. The lady said, "Nigger, we've told you to get away from here. You ain't going to this fair. If you don't get away from here, we're going to call the police."

So I stepped off again, and thought about it. And now I'm kind of angry, because I wanted to go to the fair. They said this is a state fair, and you all come. I decided to go back. They called the police. The police came and put me in jail. Now, I'm in jail because I couldn't go to the fair. Now, I'm thinking--now this--a lot of stuff is coming clear to me. See, it took a long time to beat this into my head, I'm telling you. Because I don't want--didn't want to do wrong, really. And, but, at the same time, there was something standing in my way to what I wanted to do. Always there was something. Anytime I stepped outside of the perimeter set by my parents, my people, black folk, I'd get cut off. I can't go.

Okay, so anyway, I'm in jail. Next day, the jailer came to me and said, "Nigger, there's a nigger down there in the courtroom to post your bond." I'm thinking maybe it's Jesse or some of them, you know? [Laughter] I get down there. There's this handsome, black, well-dressed man sitting there with his leg crossed and a briefcase down beside him. I remember I'd seen this man before. This is Medgar Evers. So he's posted my bond, we leave, and he's talking to me all about this Jackson movement coming up, and talking to me about a workshop that was going to

be at Mount Beulah, over there in Edwards, somewhere near Edwards, that was going to be held about voter registration, and about civil rights, and that kind of stuff. I told him that I would be glad to go.

So anyway, and we went on, and we're working now. This thing happened at Edwards, and there was a white boy, a white lawyer named Bill Higgs, who was in charge of this. He was a former legislator, I think, in Jackson, but he had brought down some lawyers from up north, and they ran this workshop now. I--.

EC: Can I ask you? So--.

Male 1: (break in audio) OK, you're back.

EC: Bill Higgs comes up a lot in this part of the story. Do you have any idea what motivated him to--. I mean, he's a native white Mississippian, right?

CM: Yeah.

EC: Any idea what motivated him to be in the movement?

CM: I really do not know. Now, I think he had gone to school at Harvard or somewhere. I'm not sure, but I believe he--.

EC: I think that's right.

CM: [He] had a Harvard Law degree, and he had served in the legislature, I believe. Because I didn't think much about that, except that I was surprised that these white lawyers were teaching us, because in Mississippi we only had three black lawyers: R. Jess Brown; Carsie Hall; and Jack Young, Sr. So why are these white boys teaching us? We don't have no blacks, I don't guess, or whatever. But now this is--. All this is far from my mind, because now I'm focused on [1:10:00] what can I do, what is it that--? Why can't I do what everybody else can

do? What is it that-- Why is it that white folks can do this, I can't do nothing? That I really--. Till had been lynched, and there had been other lynchings, and nothing happens with that.

So Martin Luther King was coming. Medgar--. I mean, the Movement had set up to have Martin Luther King come and speak at the Masonic Temple in Jackson, Mississippi. This is around the latter part of 1961. You're almost into 1962, if not already 1962. It's kind of vague to me right now. But King came and spoke, and he had these SNCC people with him, Diane and a lot of SNCC people who I'd heard of and seen earlier, now come and they're around and with King. And King, I had heard about King, read about him from the Montgomery boycott, bus boycott, and Rosa Parks, and this. I never thought I'd ever get a chance to see this man in person. But he is in Jackson, Mississippi, and he's here with these SNCC people, I'm with these SNCC people and he gives a speech.

Now, I'd heard Medgar, I thought Medgar was the greatest there was, and how the oratory, how he could stand and just these words would flow from his lips, and continuously. I said, damn, I want to be like that. Then I get to hear King, and get to be there. The other thing was I liked the way Medgar was always sharp. Then King, he's sharp, had on a suit that I thought ought to be mine. [Laughter] You know what I'm saying? I mean, that suit, the way it fit him, it was double breast, I think it was green, kind of--.

EC: Y'all are about the same height, aren't you?

CM: I think he may have been a little taller, but I could've--. I'd have put that suit on even if it was bigger, you know what I'm saying?

EC: [Laughter] Yeah.

CM: So I said, gol-lee, that's the suit. And his shoes were neat, and these satin and croc socks. I thought, this to me was really the highlight of everything that I'd ever been in. So

Medgar started to work with this white woman named Hazel Brannon Smith, who ran a little newspaper down in Lexington, Mississippi, and called the *Mississippi Free Press*, I think. So Medgar would get with us after this paper were delivered to him, and we would help him distribute them. So this is how I'm now beginning to be more involved.

We've got this little movement that ain't really off the ground, and we are really helping Medgar with this distributing this newspaper, I'm reading about the beatings and the lynchings and things that are happening, and here I get a chance--I learn about Aaron Henry up in Clarksdale now. He's prominent in this newspaper, Medgar. Then I'm reading about George Lee being murdered, you know, over in a town called Belzoni. Most of these places I don't--. I'm not familiar with any of them. I just--. These are names. And even the Emmett Till thing is still in the back of my mind, that happened out there in the Delta. There are some beatings up in Clarksdale that Henry's dealing with, the NAACP.

So one afternoon, as we were distributing these newspapers downtown, we were arrested, those of us who were distributing Medgar's paper. I call it Medgar's paper because he and Hazel Brannon Smith was doing the paper, but Medgar was helping her get the--. Because she was dealing with some issues that no other--the *Clarion-Ledger* and the *Jackson Daily News* would not deal with. So in being around Medgar this particular day, I said, "Mr. Evers, how are we going to stop white people from lynching us?" You know, and Medgar took a minute or two, [1:15:00] and he said, "Bring the guys by my office this afternoon, around three o'clock. Round up all the--."

So several of us met Medgar in his office there on Lynch Street, up in the upstairs there. And he took this big map out of the state of Mississippi, and drew a circle around the Mississippi Delta, and said, "Here's how we start: with voter registration." And he talked about how the

legislature was apportioned, how the people got to be there, and how many of them we could possibly send if we got up into the Delta and registered these people. Now it's coming to me about what Higgs and these people had talked about, voter registration, about--. Because that's what Bill Higgs--. This is now dawning on me about voting, and registering. Then I learned that Lawrence Guyot has now--is in the state, and he's with SNCC.

So I don't know Guyot, but then one afternoon my friends I were standing on the campus of Jackson State College, and they were contemplating going to college, I was thinking about this is where I ought to go to college, and so--. But I had not yet gotten my certificate of graduation. So, but anyway, we were talking, and this big red fella walks up to us. He said, "Fellas, my name is Lawrence Guyot. I'm with SNCC." And he had an armful of papers, as he always had. [Laughter] And he whips out one of these papers and said, "Look, y'all gather round." He said, "This is a duplication of the application for voter registration." He said, "Any of you fellas here twenty-one?" He said, "But you can help register blacks to vote, and the vote is going to free us. That's--. We're going to get free through the vote." Said, "Now, I've got a headquarters on Rose Street, so come by there. Just come by. Y'all come, I'll talk to you. We'll talk about--." He said, "There's a guy coming named Bob Moses, fixing to set up a voter registration project in the Mississippi Delta. Come by." We--. He went on. We didn't think much about that.

EC: What did you think of Guyot?

CM: Well, we were really kind of--. I liked the way he approached this thing, you know? Because he--. The salesmanship, do you know? The way he promoted himself and what he was doing. See, one of the things about me, I was always interested in these people who could project themselves, and who could speak well, who just had words flow out of them. I

want to know how to do this. How can I do this, you know? So anyway, several days passed, and one day my friend James Jones I were just goofing off, and each day we would go around over to Jackson State, because the young teachers were coming for the summer, young kids, girls were coming to the campus, and we'd go down there and stand around and pick at them and get a few phone numbers or something. But anyway--. [Laughter]

So we dropped by 714, I believe, Rose Street, the Freedom House. We dropped by there one day, and Guyot was there, along with two or three other white guys, and who were people related, were involved somehow. So Guyot talked to us, and went through his whole thing. He picked up on where Medgar had kind of got us to, and he told us this was how it was going to be, and then Guyot said, "You got a chance to be right there in it."

EC: Are Bevel and Diane, are they in the Delta now? Are they staying with Mr. Amzie?

CM: They're in the Delta, I don't know where they are really at this point, but that's where they were. They had been up with Amzie, and worked with him,[1:20:00] and had worked in Ruleville, see. That's why we didn't have a bunch of trouble getting into Ruleville, because Bevel and Amzie had already been there, and several--. And Bevel had taken several of the young women from Ruleville to Southern Christian Leadership, Citizenship training over in Dorchester, Georgia. He had taken several of them, and they had been over there and been trained. A lady by the name of Mary Tucker was one of these people.

EC: I didn't know that had happened before you all went in.

CM: Yeah, Bevel had been there. But Bevel was constantly coming back in and out of Jackson, because he's working for Southern Christian Leadership Conference for Dr. King. And

Diane, I believe she was still with SNCC, or she--. They had gotten married, and--. But anyway, when--.

EC: Let me ask you one more question.

CM: Go ahead.

EC: What was Diane like? What did you think of Diane at the time?

CM: She was pretty.

EC: Yeah.

CM: Yeah, she --. I think what mostly I thought about is her involvement here, and all of these guys, and of course there were several other women, but she was always outspoken, you know? And usually women had kind of been more in the background. Most of the women that I knew, girls that I knew, were more naïve about things. And here she was, right up front, debating with Brooks and all of these other people. She'd seemed, she was a partner in this, you know what I'm saying? We didn't have no girl partners in our effort, because we considered ourselves to be, I guess, little gangsters. One of my favorite movie stars was Edward G. Robinson, and George Raft, and these guys, because they were bad men, and the police didn't threaten them. They didn't feel threatened by the police. They seemed to be able to function and and do things. We didn't think about whether it was right or it was wrong, but they were in defiance of what thing that stood in their way.

I was always now concerned about things standing in my way that for somehow I can't--. That seemed like every space that I had, if a white man wanted that space I had to get out of that space and give it to him. I had to always take a step to the side, or a step to the back, and never a step forward. So that bothered me. So if I'm getting involved here, and they tell me that this vote is going to get Mr. Charlie off of my back, it's going to get Mr. Charlie in a position where

that if I walked up to him, two equals are meeting, you know? That because the mentality of being--that a white man don't shake a black man's hand, he don't look a black man in the face when he's talking to him, and he always assumes a subservient type position or attitude, or when I walk up to him I've got to take my hat off and look down and hold my hat behind me, you know? That bugged me. I mean, it bothered me.

So Medgar had said that get up to the Delta, register these people. Blacks outnumber whites. We could send this number. Instead of legislature, this is how we're going to change things so we're not treated bad, and this, that, and the other. We're going to equal the playing field. Then Higgs had talked somewhat about that. He didn't go into that kind of detail. Medgar didn't go into de--. Guyot goes now into organizing in various communities for voter registration. And now Charlie Cobb--this is where I meet Charlie Cobb, at the Freedom House. Now, Charlie Cobb [1:25:00] had come through there on his way down to Texas, to write a story about the freedom movement. And Guyot had got him here and told us, "Ain't nobody going way down there. Why you going? [Laughter] You can be up front. You can be in it. You can be a part of it, by--." That there's a guy named Bob Moses who's coming through here in a while, and he is taking--. He will take the people who are here, ready to go to the Delta. So--. That's--.

So Cobb is hanging around there with Guyot, and my friends I are going back to doing what we were doing, not really thinking maybe none of this is going to happen. Who knows? And Jesse is involved in a boycott then, Jackson, and we're helping him, and just kind of doing things. Then Guyot sends word that Bob is coming on this particular night, which was going to be a Saturday night, August 1962. He was going to come to Freedom House, and he was going to take with him the people who Guyot had recruited, to the Delta. So myself, James Jones,

Charles Cobb, and another student from Lynndale named Landy McNair is there. May have been some others. So now Bob Moses is coming all day long. We're hanging around.

I'm thinking that this guy, Bob Moses, since he's been talked about, and everybody's talking about him, that he's a Paul Bunyan type, seven feet, 395 pounds, bass voice. We're all there, kind of having the punch or whatever it is we're having, and sandwiches. After a while people are coming in, in the door, and then after a while Guyot gets up and says, "OK, we're going to listen to Bob Moses." I'm looking all around, because I haven't seen this fella that I'm expecting come in. I've seen people coming in, and then--. And he says, "You got it, Bob." This little fella [laughter] come out of the background out there. Bob may be about 5'9", 5'10", somewhere in there, and certainly not what I was thinking. And he said, "My name is Bob Moses." Then he goes to talking about the move, and talking about voter registration, and about stuff like that, and freedom, and all of this kind of stuff. And now, instead of expecting this big, tall guy, who could seem like his voice would calm the sea, there's just a little fella, little meek-like fella who--. But he's saying important things. [telephone ringing in background] He's--. The words are--. So now I'm catching him, catching on now to him, because he certainly ain't what I expected. I expected him to come with an ax. [Laughter]

EC: Larger than life.

CM: Yeah, larger than life, like the giant in the story of Jack and the beanstalk. But--.

[Camera turns off and on again]EC: OK. So you were expecting Bob to be like--.

CM: Yeah, yeah, this giant that can speak and things happen, will turn the world upside down, and will get on the table and silence in the auditorium of thousands of people, that kind--. But then, it's the--. It's his thought pattern and his ability to reach out and say things that touch you. But anyhow, so we sat around there a while, and then Guyot and Bob talked, and we're

headed for Greenwood. This is August 19, I believe, 1962. We load up in a car, myself, Landy, James Jones, and Bob, and we're headed for Greenwood, Mississippi, up in the Mississippi Delta, place I had heard about, and was really anxious to see. [1:30:00] I had accidentally been through the Delta once, and that was because I was on the Greyhound bus coming from Chicago, and took the wrong bus in Memphis. Instead of taking the bus that traveled Highway 51, I'd accidentally got on the bus, because it said Jackson, it was going to Jackson, but it was--.

EC: Taking a long route.

CM: Coming around through the Delta. So but I never saw the Delta. This is my opportunity, look like I'm going to be in the Delta. I was anxious, but it was at almost eleven o'clock at night when we arrived in Greenwood. And Bob met there with Sam Block, and--.

EC: So Sam's already in Greenwood at that point?

CM: Yeah, Sam Block, Levon Brown, and maybe Willie Peacock. I'm not sure whether Peacock come in later, but anyway, Levon Brown from Jackson, one of my friends who had gone on the Freedom Ride, was there with Sam. See, Sam was from Cleveland, Mississippi, and he--. Amzie was his hero. And Bob met Sam when he visited Amzie. And Sam was inspired by Bob. Sam was a student at Mississippi Valley State University. And he was pissed off because of when they went to Greenwood, the way they were treated, black people, you know, kids, and the Town of Greenwood, It was segregated, and the blacks had no rights, that white people had the respect. There was no respect of black people. And he was a college student, and he felt like he ought to at least be getting a little bit of attention, other than cursed out and run out of town. So Sam asked Bob to allow him to set up a voter registration drive in Greenwood, in Leflore County, and work Leflore County--Greenwood is in Leflore County--and allow him to work down there.

So Bob dropped Sam off in Greenwood one night or something, that he was up here in the Delta with Amzie. So Sam had been there, and he had finally located--. When Sam first went in there, he didn't have no place to stay. I mean, he slept in old cars in the junkyard for several weeks, and then every morning he would appear, talking to people in the streets and around in Greenwood. And people were afraid of him, really, because what he represented. And Sam finally--. Well, he got a house. What he got was a black photographer named Barnes in Greenwood to allow him to set up a SNCC office on the second floor of Barnes's studio. So Sam did that.

When we came up there that night, Sam Block and Levon Brown and these other guys had already been visited by the Klan, White Citizens Council, and run out of that building. And now the city--. I mean, the blacks in Greenwood was really tightened up now. They were tight. They weren't allowing nothing to touch the movement, to be in--. And Barnes was threatened by the white community. So that night, after we staying, when we got into town, and we were asking about Sam, people knew he was there, and they had been run out of that office. And Sam and Levon Brown and whoever else was there with them--may have been Willie Peacock--were hid in the black community. They were deep into the black community, and they were hid in an area of old--of houses where a lot of black folks lived. And Amzie Moore said they've never counted all of the black folks in Greenwood and Greenville and Clarksdale. These were three towns he said that it was impossible to count them, because most of them were counted because they got welfare checks, or they got food, commodities--that's what was the food stamp then--and that they were functionally anonymous, [1:35:00] was Amzie's word.

EC: Interesting.

CM: That they came out, did whatever they had to do, but you could never find them, and you didn't know how many of them lived in a house. They said the census never counted all of the black folks--.

EC: I believe that.

CM: In these towns, because they lived so packed.

EC: I've been in that part of Greenwood. It is. [Laughter] It's like--.

CM: Over there in that area?

EC: Yeah.

CM: How they are in there, ain't they. I mean, from Highway 49, going east, and Highway 82, and the river, because the white folks on the north side of the river, and over in here, all of these blacks, thousands of them, and that's going to play a role later in something, in the Meredith March, yeah, Black Power. [Laughter] You know, so anyway, after Bob and Sam had talked and everything there, and they had finally--. They had been sleeping in a poolhall at night, after the poolhall closed. This guy who ran the poolhall was allowing them, since they didn't have nowhere to be, to live in, to stay in the poolhall, to slip back in after they closed up. So Bob and Sam talked and everything, and then Bob took myself, Landy McNair, and Charlie Cobb to Amzie's house. We hit the highway, Highway 49 East.

EC: So did you show up in Greenwood that night, after they went out a tele--. When they went out the window?

CM: No, we showed up there a few nights after that. That had happened before we got there, and Bob was going up there, because he--. Sam could've left if he wanted. Bob offered him the opportunity to get out of there, but Sam was determined to stay. You know, I think one of the things that kind of tied us all together, of the group that Bob was able to get up, was this

desire to break out of the box, you know? Because Sam was pissed off, because of the way he, and--.

But anyway, we went on, drove through Ruleville, Mississippi that night, on our way to Cleveland. [Laughter] As we approached Ruleville, Bob told us that there's a curfew here, and the black folks have to be off of the road, in their houses, in this community. Now, it's already midnight, maybe ten, fifteen minutes after midnight, and we're driving a convertible [laughter] Oldsmobile, and Bob's driving, and we're creeping through Ruleville. Now, I'm looking at any minute, thinking that any minute some Barney Fife type is going to spring out from behind a building, and we're going to get arrested and be in jail in this little one-horse town. I write about this story on my--.

Back in the day, writing a report was important, and making a record. Bob always said, make a record. I wasn't used to doing a lot of writing. My best paper in college was a D, when I got there. [Laughter] But I did jot down stuff, and then things I thought important, I wrote it down. But this particular night, man, I'm sitting there on pins and needles, looking, thinking that we're going to wind up in jail in this town. But we made it on through, and the sweetest little sign, I mean, the sweetest sign that I ever saw was the sign that Ruleville behind us.

EC: [Laughter] Leaving Ruleville.

CM: We were on Highway 8, headed for Amzie to Cleveland, and when I finally looked back and saw that sign, said Ruleville, Mississippi, I know we--. I felt safe. So when we finally got to Cleveland, to Amzie's house, at 614 Chrisman Street, I was surprised at Amzie's house, you know? In other words, we done passed, we done been in Greenwood for a few minutes, I ain't seen no brick houses for black folk, because I really didn't get around that much. We never got off that little area on Avenue I, rather there, kind of little business type

area.[1:40:00] I never got off that. But as we traveled on through the community, I didn't ever see what I would consider middle class dwellings. But they were there in those days, but all of the blacks had to live together in those days. There were no middle class settlements out there with fifteen, twenty, thirty brick houses and nice cars and--. They were there, but they were all--. All the blacks had to live together. So a schoolteacher with a good salary and a nice car would be living next door to a shack that's falling down, in those days.

So anyway, but when I get to Amzie's, we come off the highway. The way we came in, I didn't get to see a lot of Cleveland, It's after midnight. All of a sudden, here we are pulling up in front of this nice brick house, and we're going there to see a black guy. So we got there. Bob was up. I mean, Amzie was up and waiting for us. We go in, and nice living room and dining table and kitchen, and everything is here. And Bob and Amzie talked all night. I don't ever remember them going to bed, but Amzie, before we fell asleep, told us kind of the history of his life Involvement after the war, and what he--and he NAACP there, and what he had been doing, and Amzie operated a business there, and a nice business, café and gas station, and the troubles that he had been having getting money, and how Ella Baker had helped him by setting him up with Tristate Bank in Memphis, because the banks wouldn't make him a loan. They had tried to fire him from his job at the Post Office. And because he was a federal employee, he was able to keep his job, and that he had managed to function kind of anonymously, because what he did was Amzie organized the NAACP there, and he'd put on his overalls and old clothes and old hat and go out onto the plantations to register people. Then he had a choir, and he would take his choir on a Sunday to the churches in the very surrounding community, and while they are singing, and people are shouting, Amzie's writing the NAACP memberships. [Laughter] You know? The little girl--ladies and things and they're happening right by--and they're passing up

the little envelopes with the fee in them. For the NAACP. Next morning, Sunday morning, Bob Moses wakes us up. Said, "Let's go." We didn't know where we was going. And said, "We're going to church." Yeah. I'm trying to figure out. Now, yeah, I'm not a church-going person. Not very much now. But then, not at all. "We're going to church." We load up in Bob's--in Amzie's car. I learned that we're going to Ruleville. Geez! Darn, I'm glad it's daylight! [Laughter] We go to Ruleville, and we drive through the way we came in there, and go to a little church right at the edge of the community of Ruleville, called Mount Galilee. That was the name of the church. It is here that Bob and Amzie had set up for us to meet the black leadership in Ruleville, who had requested SNCC organizers to help them get set up and carry out their voter registration drive. To help get blacks registered.

[Camera turns off and then on again] CM: We--well, Bob and Amzie brought us to Mount Galilee church. The service was taking place there, and we stayed for the service, and then after the service was over, Bob introduced us to Mr. Joe McDonald, his wife Rebecca, George Gerdin, Miles Foster. These are local community people. Jack Salesin and his wife, and Mary Tucker. These are people who are wanting to register to vote. Bevel have been through that, and he's talked with them about voter registration and about getting registered. Sunflower County is a county where seventy percent of the population is black. [1:45:00] Each one of the little--there're six small communities, and that are incorporated, and they have white mayors. White aldermen. Everything is white. Constables, justices of the peace, all are white people. Yet blacks are seventy percent of the whole county. But they didn't--had very few if any people registered to vote, because of the violence and intimidation and the murder of Till, and that kind of--and the forced--they were forced to run the NAACP out of the county. The post office and people who received mail from the NAACP turned that mail over to the White Citizens' Council.

So what they wanted was to bring in the SNCC people who could organize around, you know, without the fear of taking the steps to help them get registered to vote. Amzie Moore had promised them SNCC people. See, Bob and Amzie had met a year or so earlier. At that time, when Bob wanted to talk about voter registration, SNCC was not ready. SNCC was into demonstrations. Rather than settling in the Delta, in the early days of SNCC, they went to Macon, where they could--they started demonstrations, and the kids walked out of school, and a lot of pressure was put on the local people there. Bob and SNCC had to get out. Then, they moved into Jackson, and then now this project is developing in the Delta. So at Mount Galilee that day, Bob and Amzie assigned us to live in the home of Joe McDonald and his wife. They had agreed to take us SNCC people in. All three of us--Landy, Charlie and myself--to take us in, and to assist us to their ability to get registered to vote. So they took us home that evening, after that service. Bob and Amzie--now this is one of the things that I always kind of tease people about--said, "Well, you know Bob, he just brought us to there and dropped us off and said, 'Sink or swim!'" [Laughter] So, good enough. And so he left us there, and next morning, after our first night there, Bob--I mean Charlie, myself, and Landy walked out into the community. I believe--if I make no mistake, Charlie will straighten it out. He's written a lot of this. We walked out into the community, to familiarize ourselves with the community. After we had gone a few blocks, this car, white car, pulls alongside of us. This little white man steps out, and says, "You niggers get in the car." I said, "For what?" He, "Because this .38 says it."

EC: Okay.

CM: We looked at one another, and got in the car. We were taken to the City Hall in Ruleville, and told to take seats. So we took seats. The mayor went back in the back room, and made some phone calls. Then he came back, and he said, "If I were you niggers, I would go

back to New York. I would go back to New York. I'd get out of here now. If you don't, something bad is going to happen to you." I said, "We're not from New York. I'm from Jackson, Mississippi." So he went and made some phone calls. Then he came back, and said, "You niggers can go." And so just as we were leaving--now, when we were arrested, how the black folks who were out on the porches looking and everything, who were not aware of what was happening until they saw the mayor and saw us get into the car, and then they disappeared. They went in and hid. You could see them peeping out of the windows and from around the corner of the house, or under the house,[1:50:00] or whatever. The kids--nobody was anywhere. That, to me--.

Male 1: ( )

EC: [Laughter]

[Camera turns off and on again] CM: Well, anyway, the mayor told--this guy told us to get in the car. We didn't know who he was. He's the white man with a gun. And so he drove us off, and carried us to the city hall. Now, we're getting--when he finally tells us we can leave, I says, "You're not going to carry us back to where you got us?" He said, "No! Hell no!" I said, "No, you don't want--you told us you didn't want no trouble. You didn't want--." I said, "Now, you're going to allow three strange black kids to be walking around the community lost? Because we don't know how to get back to where--" he said, "Get y'all's ass in the car."

EC: [Laughter]

CM: But, now, a part of this, to me--and I believe to Charlie and Landy, certainly to me--is that these--now, we're here to register blacks. To help them overcome the fear. And, now, we--if he took us back to where we were, where these people could see we're still alive, then that's going to have an--why didn't we get killed? Why couldn't he run us out of town?

Why are we allowed to come back? See? That's what was in my mind. It worked. He carried us back to right where he had picked us up and put us out. Now, these blacks who were out, who saw his car come back, were sitting all out at first. They disappear again. Then, when we get out of the car and he pulls away, then they--here they're back out. A young guy by the name of Lafayette Surney was one of the kids who walked out to where we were. He said, "Man, I thought y'all was gone." I said, "Gone?" He said, "Yeah, man. That--we thought y'all was going to be thrown in the river. That y'all was surely dead. We were going to read about you and hear about y'all. What h--why didn't he--what happened?" We told him who we were, what we were doing, and he said--I said, "We're going to have to work this community. We're going to have to meet people." He said, "Well, I'll walk with y'all, and show you people." So that's what he did. He walked around the community, and introduced us to those who would allow us to talk to them. And certainly young people. He was a graduate, a recent graduate of Ruleville High School. And so he knew a bunch of folk. And people knew him. He--so we walked around all of that, the rest of that evening, and there was a mass meeting then held at William Chapel church in Ruleville that evening. So that evening, we went to the meeting, and he came with us. And so at that mass meeting, we talked about taking people down to register to vote, and we wanted to take a group down right away so we could get the feel of it. That night, five people agreed to go down to register to vote. This was on a Monday. We were going to take a group down that Wednesday. That--and they were to meet at the church at eight o'clock in the morning. And so, at eight o'clock on a Wednesday morning, we came to the church, and two old ladies, two or three old ladies, met us. Of the five, only three people met us there that day. I know it wasn't more. Irene Johnson, who was one of the local ladies there involved in the movement, had her son to drive. It was decided that I would be the first person to go with a

group down there. Charlie and Landy would stay in the community and canvas and continue to do things. Be present. I went, got in the car, and we took the two old ladies. They were in the back, and Tommy Johnson, Irene's son, drove us to Indianola. Now, in one of the papers that I wrote, I described that trip to Indianola. I also talk about the fear that was in me, as we drove up [1:55:00] to this statuesque courthouse. These--and there was a--our--my intention to lead these ladies into the courthouse. But, now, when we moved--parked in front of the courthouse, when I didn't do anything, they were already out of the car. They were walking up to the courthouse. So here I come behind them. And really, looking for some sheriff, deputy, or some Ku Klux Klan member, some White Citizens' Council person, to meet us or to come and--with baseball bats or something, you know? I'm hesitant. I'm still walking. These ladies are walking on. Then they're going up the steps into the courthouse. I still haven't made it to the door. Then they went in. And just as I walked into the door, they were coming back. Because the office was closed. They couldn't get into the courthouse. So here I stand, in this building. I could see a sign that says, "Sheriff's Office, Colored Entrance." "Water fountain, colored." Little dingy thing off there to the--for colored. And looking around, there wasn't a single black face in the courthouse, other than a janitor who approached--who came out. He seemed to be glad that we could get on away from there. You know, he didn't say nothing, and he just kind of looked frightened. He didn't know I was too.

But, now, as I walk out of the courthouse, these ladies are walking down the walk back to the courthouse. So I kind of stopped, and looked back at the courthouse, and I thought about George Lee. About Emmett Till. Mack Charles Parker. These people who had been lynched. Killed, by a white. And George Lee had been killed about voter registration, about not taking his name off of the book, and stop encouraging other people. Here I am, here in a little town all

alone, the jailhouse is right across the street, you could see the bars up there. There's a bayou, running along that bayou there, you know. It looked like something out of "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow." I'm thinking about, as we--I get into the car. I said to myself, I said, "Damn. I've got to grow up. I've got to grow up. I'm going to be making this trip numerous other times, perhaps." You know? That "perhaps" was whether or not I was going to stay in the Delta now. You see what I'm saying?

EC: [Laughter] Yep.

CM: "Now, am I going to stay up here? If I'm going to stay here, I've got to be able to not be frightened myself." So I said--told my friends, and I mentioned it in something I wrote about growing up there. Becoming a man. [Laughter] You know, I was a boy. And so now I'm thrown into this situation here. I thought saying, "Damn, Bob!" [Laughter] Bob threw us into this, and we didn't--we came here with our eyes open! But we didn't realize what these people here knew. That was fear. You don't see nobody. But you know they're there. This is the seat of power.

EC: How do you think those ladies were able to just walk right up like that?

CM: You know--and this is what--if you look at this period, these are people who were born in the '30s and the '40s. Maybe some back into the '20s. They had great hope of seeing things different. Some things change. They had, in a sense, changed, because they had came up on a plantation, and they knew about the plantation boss, and the power, and the authority of this guy over their lives. That the legal system protected them. These owners. [2:00:00] Their hope was that they would see enough change that their children wouldn't have to live like they did. And so, the guy asked me one day, he said, "Why did blacks go and register in spite of this fear?" It had to do with their wanting to get out of the box. I tell you, it was really--this was a

transforming moment for me. I said, "Darn! What am I going to do? What am I going to tell Charlie and Landy when I go back and tell them that I'm going back to Jackson?" [Laughter] "What am I--how am I going to say to Medgar, who said, 'This is the way we'd stop Mr. Charlie from lynching us,'" and I got up there and thought about my own lynching. I hadn't thought about, you know, my lynching. So on the--all the way back, I'm thinking. I'm thinking.

EC: So the ladies, did they--they didn't even get to take the test?

CM: They didn't get to take the test. No. But, now, these ladies came back again and again. If you check the records for that period, 1962, that August through, thousands of black people from Rulevi--from, well, from the Delta, from that area. Because there were only--the population of Ruleville wasn't even 2000 at that time. So almost every adult person in Ruleville at one time or another during that period went to the courthouse, and some of them's name appear every week.

EC: In the paper?

CM: In the paper. Because they had to publish--the names were published in the newspaper, of those people who made application to register to vote. But when I got back to Ruleville, and was talking to Charlie and Landy about this, what I think sold me on the idea of really staying was that ten days after--well, several days after that, we held another mass meeting. At this meeting, Miss Mary Tucker and them brought in folks from the plantation. Now, Fannie Lou Hamer is one of these people, but I don't know her at this time, see? I don't know her. So she raises her hand as one of the people in this next group to go down to register to vote. So we had about twenty-some people who said that they would go. And so as a result, Amzie and Bob and Bevel rented a bus from a guy in Cleveland, Mississippi who hauled sharecroppers to work--I mean, labor to the field, and each year took that busload of people from

the Delta to Florida to pick fruit and to make money over the summer between the harvesting seasons. So, on that day that we got--August 31st, now. Remember, we started out August the 19th. August 31st, 1962, a bus of eighteen people--included in this bus was Fannie Lou Hamer--and we took that bus to Indianola, with this group of people on it, to register to vote. This time, Bob and Jim Forman and a bunch of the SNCC people met us at the courthouse. I was on the bus with this group. I don't know Fannie Lou Hamer, and I don't even know her at all, because I was not at the meeting the night this next meeting was held.

CM: I had to go somewhere, Jackson or Greenville or somewhere, on that night. So all I--when I--that morning, was I was to be one of the ones to ride on the bus with the group. I think maybe Charlie was on that bus, or Landy. Somebody--.

EC: I think Charlie was.

CM: Okay.

EC: I think he said that, anyway.

CM: Okay. Well, Charlie wrote these stories, and he wrote them like myself. What I saw, what took place. But anyhow, when we got to Indianola, [2:05:00] the people got off and went in, and this little lady, stocky lady led the group on up in the courthouse there, and they went in, and they took the literacy test. First time, now, that they're getting a chance to take the test. The man was there. He probably knew he were coming. Because word had been out and around. He obviously knew. So he don't want--they probably told him, "Don't cause no problem. You let the niggers in, and y'all let them make their applications, because they ain't going to get registered no way." Anyhow, when they had all taken the test and got ready to go, the police, city police, stopped the bus. Arrested the driver of the bus. Now, on this bus is these eighteen people, and me. Because I think at this point, Charlie joined Bob and the others when

they left, and went to wherever--another--one of the things was, Charlie was too--was planning to write. See, he never planned to be a stationed organizer in the community. But anyway, he stayed around in the Delta here a while. But they took the driver back to the city hall, and charged him with driving a bus the color of a school bus. There was too much yellow in the bus. Now, here this man has been driving this bus, hauling people to all of the plantations around that would hire him and hire these people, and then he had taken this bus all the way to Florida and back, numerous times. Now all of a sudden on this particular day, it's too yellow. Okay. Thirty dollars was the fine. Now, while they were away, the bus parked out on the highway 49, headed back to Ruleville. We're on that bus. White men in trucks with guns are driving by and yelling insults, and "Niggers, y'all going to get killed! Niggers, go home! You ain't going to be voting, we ain't going to have no niggers voting!" That kind of--.

So the people on the bus was real nervous. I, at this point, I didn't see how they--I didn't think they were going to shoot us up. I thought maybe they might run us off of the road when we got started. Now, I'm trying to--but as the people were uneasy, then this singing. "Paul and Silas, bound in jail, had no money to go their bail." And somebody says, "That's Miss Hamer. That's Fannie Lou." Now, this is my first hearing of her. So now, the driver comes, we proceed on back to Ruleville with these trucks and these men following us and yelling and passing in front of us, and I'm thinking they're going to run us off of the road. Because that was--I felt like that would be an easy way for them to get away with this, is that we--the driver ran off of the road, and then it was not somebody's fault. But it didn't. We made it to Ruleville. The people got off, and went home. Some of these riders, these men, followed the bus around to see where these people were getting put off at. At their houses. But then Fannie Lou Hamer got off and was taken out to the Marlowe plantation, where she and her husband and two daughters, to

adopted daughters, lived. When Miss Hamer got there and went into the home, getting ready to take her bath and everything, the boss man of the plantation drove up in front of the house and said, "Pat, did y'all--did you tell Fannie Lou that I wanted to see her?" He said, "Yes, I did."

And so Miss Hamer heard the--out there. And she walked out on the porch. And said, "Here I am, Mr. D." He said, "Fannie Lou, you've been over there trying to register to vote." He said, "We're not ready for that. And either you go back to Indianola, withdraw your application to register to vote, or you've got to leave. You've got to leave my plantation." So that was when Miss Hamer said, she thought about it and said, "Mr. D., I didn't go for you. I went for myself." [2:10:00] And damn! I thought that. You think about that! You know? Here this woman, black, challenging this man. Damn! [Laughter] I said, "Shit! Look at this." Now, what happened then was, they talked it over. Her family. And said, "Okay. We're going to--you go, Fannie Lou. We'll stay here. Bring in the crop." They were sharecroppers, and they owed the man a crop. If they had left without bringing in the crop, then he had a legal reason to charge them, or to, you know, have them arrested or sue them or whatever, to get his money. To get his share of the crop. Okay.

So Miss Hamer being the woman that she was, and trying to be fair and just, left them there, and called her a ride with one of her neighbors from the next plantation into Ruleville, to the lady's house that got her involved, Mary Tucker. To Mary Tucker's house. And Tucker told her, said, "You can stay with me as long as you want." Okay. Now. Ten nights later, night riders rode through the Ruleville community. Shot up the community, shot into the house where we were staying at the McDonalds', shot into Sissons' house, shot into Mary Tucker's house where Fannie Lou was staying, and two students at Jackson State College who were visiting their relatives at the Sissons' were shot. And of course they didn't die. But then the mayor of

Ruleville, that next day, went to Joe Mac's house, where we were living. Joe McDonald, where Charlie and the rest of us were living. Took his gun. He told him he was taking it for his protection. So we were in Green--who had been in Greenwood there all that day, meeting and trying to see where we were--get planned for what our next moves and everything's going to be. So when we came home that evening, Joe McDonald told us that he had been visited by the mayor, and that the mayor had taken his gun. We said, "Hey, man. They don't have no right to take your gun. You've got a right to have a gun to protect yourself and your family and your home." And Joe said, "Sure enough." Said, "Yeah." Said, "You got a government book? History book?" See, Joe McDonald's son had just graduated from high school with Lafayette Surney. He said, "Yeah, I've got one."

So his wife went and got the history book and brought it back, and Cobbs opened it to the back where they had the Constitution. US Constitution. Told him. "Second Amendment here gives you that right." He said, "Sure enough!" Said, "Yeah." Said, "Fold that page down." So Charlie folded the page down. Next--every morning, before we left, we would meet with the McDonalds, have coffee, and tell them kind of what our day was going to be like, what we'd be doing. Because after all, we were there at their request, and we reported to them. To this group. And so, brother Joe wasn't at the table. Charlie said--Charlie was talking to somebody. He was conspicuously absent.

EC: [Laughter]

CM: I mean, because brother Joe was six feet tall, dark, handsome guy, you know? He wasn't at the table. So I said, "Miss McDonald, where's brother Joe?" Said, "He went to the city hall." We didn't think nothing about it. We kept on getting ready to go out for the day. Because, light bill, gas bill, whatever you have to do to go the--you go, kind of transact that

business at the courthouse. And just as we started to walk out the door, Joe Mac's truck pulled up in front of his house. He had a fence around his house. He pulled up in front of the house. Joe steps out. Holding his gun.

EC: [Laughter]

CM: [2:15:00] Because he knew that his neighbors knew that the mayor had come and taken his gun. They never expected him to see the gun again. You know? And really, they never thought. And really, if Joe had told us the night before he was going to do that, we would've wanted to go with him, or we would've told him to wait and let the lawyers get that. You see what I'm saying?

EC: [Laughter] Yeah, I do.

CM: But Joe told us. "What ab--Joe, what happened?" He said, "Well, I went down to the city hall, and I told the mayor I'd come to get my gun." [Laughter] Look! Now, here I am. The courthouse scene with these old ladies. The bus ride, Fannie Lou Hamer standing up to this man. Damn. So, now, so Joe said he told the mayor, "I said, 'I've come to get my gun.'" The mayor said, he said the mayor told him, "Tight-head nigger, you are going to get killed. You get them boys out of your house. If you don't get them boys out of your house, something bad's going to happen." He said, he just stood there, looking at the mayor. Mayor was a little fellow, he [was] about my height. Mayor Dorrough, Charles Dorrough. Now, and we had learned he's Charles Dorrough by Lafayette Surney had told us, you know. Because we didn't know who he was when he first picked us up. But Lafayette Surney had told us about it. Told us a lot about it. But anyway, he said, "The mayor," he stood there and the mayor stood there. He's looking at the mayor. So the mayor's looking up at him. Here's this black guy. Can't even read and write. Said he--the mayor, standing there looking at him like he could bite his head off. And first time,

Joe said the first time he ever--he had ever looked a white man in the face. Talked to him. Defied him. And Joe said, the man said, "Well, you didn't--you get them boys out of your house." And Joe said, "I come to get my gun." [Laughter] Said the mayor said--looked at him, and he said, "Why--what do you mean, you come to get your gun?" He said, "Do I have a right to have a gun?" The mayor said, "No!" He took this book out from under his arm. Laid it out to that page. The mayor looked at it. And said, "Nigger, you're going to get killed. You and them boys. You've got to get them boys out of here." Went over there in the corner, got his gun, gave it to him, and told him to get out of there. So now, Joe is back home with his gun held high. His neighbors all come out. "Joe! What happened? What happened? What happened?" He's telling them. We had been having maybe twenty, maybe sometimes thirty people at the mass meeting. That next meeting, the church was overflowing. You know who was the speaker? Joe McDonald. Brother Joe. And from then on, we limited our involvement in Ruleville, because now we've got Joe. Joe--and these ladies are leading citizenship classes, and so we move on to Indianola, and to town of Sunflower, and Greenville. Back there we still maintained our place there, but we moved around more now because we've got Ruleville moving. Irene Johnson, and these people are canvassing, and so,

[Camera turns off and then back on again]

CM: First of all, you know, I'm still--I'm puzzled here about this fear that these people have, but they are willing to walk out there, you see? Especially, and now because of what they now know. You see what I'm saying? In other words, Joe didn't know he had that right. These people have seen the man dominate their lives, and there was nothing they can do about it. What we've done, come, and kind of gave them [2:20:00] a little lift in the spirit. Stuff they wanted to

do, and wanted to say, but were afraid. We are now kind of absorbing--we're between them and the man. A little--.

Then I thought about, we thought about--and I'm sure Charlie, and the rest of them--Ella Baker. Go to the people who have the least. Motivate them, stimulate them, educate them to the best of your ability, and then get out of their way. [Laughter] Get out of their way. That's what we did.

EC: When did you meet Miss Baker?

CM: I met Ella Baker at a SNCC conference. I had seen her several times before, but I only met her at Biloxi, on the Gulf Coast, when we had the meeting to decide for the summer project.

EC: Okay.

CM: Yeah, that's when I actually met her. I had never--I had seen this little lady. I didn't know who she was.

EC: Yeah.

CM: You know, and they had talked--she had talked, and Bob, and the rest of the people. She had been introduced to us, but I didn't see her significance other than a guidance person, a counselor. Because she always spoke until we'd get debating, and get to an impasse, or something, or get--and then she would come in, and logically get us back on the right track, and stuff like that. But I only met her when we went to Biloxi, Gulf--wherever it was on the Gulf Coast, Pascagoula, somewhere down there--to get ready for the summer project. Bob laid the course, laid it on the table.

But so following her, teaching is what we got from Bob, and Forman, and Bevel, and these people. See, because they taught--she taught them, and they had taught--I mean, I had read

a little bit about her, and about this, and heard Ruby Doris Smith in SNCC talk about her, Ella Baker; they admired her. I was always kind of interested in knowing these important folk, and how they did things, how they reasoned stuff, and how they were able to get us back on track to say those words that would keep things moving. Even from way back from Medgar I'm interested in this as I'm learning.

See, because this--now what really helped me really decide to stay in the Delta was the Fannie Lou Hamer connection here, you know? She's kicked out of her home. She leaves her family on the plantation. She moves--comes into Ruleville. The place is shot up. People are wounded. Nothing is done about this. She's still that person who is out there, steady-moving. The man didn't make her go back and withdraw her application because she didn't want to.

She had found--she had been wanting to leave the plantation all of her life. She was born on a plantation. Her mother was a--was on a plantation, her great-grandmother was a slave, her grand--yeah, her great-grandmother was a slave. All her life she had seen this man, and his power. What has happened is SNCC has come, and had given her the motivation to challenge the man. Golly.

Okay, then, after the place was shot up, she still don't go back and withdraw her application; her family's still on the plantation. Then Bob Moses assigns me to go and locate this woman, Fannie Lou Hamer, who had gone down to register, went through this, place was shot up, and who was the first person of the group [2:25:00] that she went down with to raise her hand to go register to vote. Okay.

Now I get the assignment. I go looking for Fannie Lou Hamer, because now she's no longer living with Miss Tucker. She's gone to live with relatives up in Tallahatchie County. I find out where Tallahatchie County is, the directions.

EC: [Laughter] Being the city boy you are.

CM: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, yeah. I'm really lost up here. I only know my way to the courthouse, and to Amzie's house, and to Greenwood at this time. You know what I'm saying? So, anyway, I ask people about where to go, and they tell me; they give me directions. And black folks--you got direction from black folks, you got lost. [Laughter]

EC: [Laughter] Where the tree used to be.

CM: [Laughter] Yeah, yeah, "Take a right up there at a store up on top of the hill." That was there twenty years ago, and they tore it down now. "You'll find a big pecan tree twenty miles down the road there." They done plowed that up, and planted cotton.

EC: [Laughter] That's right.

CM: So, anyway, so I take off, driving a convertible 1957 Chevrolet car, with a Hinds County tag on it, belonging to Dave Dennis. So here I am driving up, and hunting for the place, and got lost. And got off on a road, listening to these people, and got stuck in the mud. Got the car off the road--because I'm not used to driving on gravel. I'm used to driving on the highway, pavement. I grew up in Jackson, Mississippi. I ain't used to this, but--. A white farmer comes by. Sees me over there in the ditch, and said, "Boy, what's been done?" I told him that I'm not used to driving up here in the Delta. And he said, "Yeah, I see you're from Hinds County. What you--what are you doing way up here?" I said, "I'm up here visiting my relatives. I go to school down in Jackson, and I'm up here to visit my relatives, and I just got lost." He said, "Well, boy, you get in the car, and I'm going to get you out." So he hooks the winch thing to the car, pulled me out. I thank him, and he says, "Now you stay out of ditches, now." I said, "Yes, sir!"

I go on, and finally cross Highway forty-nine, and am driving back up through the highway there, and I ran into these black guys sitting at a little store. I'm really reluctant to ask

them because I don't want to be lost no more. But I go over there, and ask them, and I'm about where the people, Fannie Lou's relatives had told me up in Tallahatchie, in a little town called Cascilla. I'm there, and I tell these guys what I'm looking for. They say, "Oh, yeah, I know Fannie Lou." They called her Hip.

EC: Yeah.

CM: Said, "I know Hip." I said, "You do?" "Yeah." Said, "You see that house up there?" He said, "That's where you'll find her." And, man, I'm happy as I don't know what. Now I've been lost, and then taken all day long--it's in the evening now--and to get right here, and then it ain't far from where I was. But it's the way I had gone all around, listening to people.

So now I'm up there. I go up there. It's been raining; pouring down. And it starts back to raining as I'm headed down to the house. When I get there, up there to--it's a hill, and there's a plantation shack at the hill, top of the hill. I get out, and I don't want to walk in the mud, really, because, again, I'm from used to walking on concrete streets, and everything, but I'm--my mission is to get Mrs. Hamer. Get her to Tougaloo College in Jackson.

I walk on up the hill, and I get up there, and it's a shack. And if you've seen these plantation type houses, some of them have got a big open space in the middle, with rooms on the side of it. It's a big open like corridor that opens on the back and the front, but there are rooms off to each side. I get up there, and first--now it's pouring down. I knock on the door, and a voice inside said, "Who is it?" [2:30:00] I says, "My name is Charles McLaurin, and I'm looking for Fannie Lou Hamer." The voice says, "Come in."

I go into the--open the door, and sitting right in front of me is this wingback chair, a big chair, and a stove, wood burning stove, red hot. This person gets up out of the seat, and says, "I'm Fannie Lou Hamer." I'm happy now. I have spent all day long looking for this little lady,

and I've finally found her. I tells her that, "Bob Moses had told me to come locate you, and bring you to Tougaloo College today." She says, "Have a seat. I'll be right with you."

EC: Just like that.

CM: Now think about that.

EC: Just like that.

CM: She don't even know me from Adam's house cat, whether I'm a robber, or murderer, or burglar, or whatever the hell they have. She says, "Have a seat. I'll be right with you." She goes in there, and packs up her little bag, and everything. Comes back. We go down the hill to that car, get in the car, and she talk all the way to Tougaloo College.

EC: What was she talking about?

CM: About her life. She's just talking about her life, her life on the plantation, and all of the kinds of things that she'd been doing, and how she wanted to get--wanted to get away from here; to get away. About how she had tried, and her family had tried to get away, only to be stopped by plantation people. A white man on the plantation killed all--killed their mule, and broke up their plow, and poisoned the stock, the pigs and stuff that she--they were going to use to make enough money to rent their own land to grow a crop. So she talked all the way to Tougaloo, and told me about her life.

I don't know if I ever said very much, because there was no in-between, and I'm glad now to be getting out from up there, and I'm headed for Jackson, you understand? I'm not sure what I'm going to do when I get to Jackson. I don't know what Bob and them got up, because he just said, "Bring them to Tougaloo." You know, Bob had a way of just telling you, asking you to do things. He always asked; he never demanded. You'd just do them because he said, because

you wanted to, you know, you really want to do it. I'm thinking about whether or not when I get to Jackson whether I'm going back up there or not. You understand what I'm saying?

EC: Yeah.

CM: So we get to Tougaloo, and find out that this is a rendezvous point for people from McComb, and south to meet with those of us in the Delta, and travel to--from there, from Tougaloo to Nashville, Tennessee to a SNCC conference. So now, when I learn about that, now I've got something else to think about, because we're going to Fisk University. You see what I'm saying? To a college. So now I'm interested in--. [Interruption, door alarm] Now I'm interested in this because here's another learning opportunity for me. We're going away from Mississippi to Tennessee.

That night we load up in the car. Hollis, and--I meet Hollis. I have never met Hollis; Dorie, and Joyce, and Curtis Hayes, and Victoria Gray. I meet all of these people that Bob has got coming up to get to go to Nashville. So we load up in a car, and several cars take off for Nashville. And Fannie Lou Hamer's in the car with-- strange thing about this, when--.

Now I was around twenty, right at twenty. I would be twenty soon, because I registered to vote shortly after I was in the Delta. I believe I was around twenty, and going to be twenty-one, you know, at that December. So, anyway, we never--Fannie Lou was forty-four years old, and nobody in that car, or at the SNCC conference questioned her age. [2:35:00] I didn't even know how old Fannie Lou Hamer was, and really gave it any thought until she had been in the movement for months, or maybe a year, or more. Everybody just, "This is Miss Hamer." She was dubbed Miss Hamer, and that was what stuck with--she was until the day she died. That's what she still is today, Miss Hamer, to SNCC people.

So, but anyhow, we took off for Nashville. Had problems with tires tore up on the old car. We managed to get another tire, and we made it on to Nashville. Because we ran off of the road late at night, we were blessed to not get killed. And Dorie, you ought to hear Dorie tell that story.

EC: I think I have. [Laughter]

CM: [Laughter] There we went off of the road. We were basically asleep, you know, and the guy, Landy McNair was driving the car. And he said--after we finally went off; I was in a field, and back up on the highway, and going backwards down the highway in the car. [Laughter] And they said, "What happened?" He says, "I guess I went to sleep." [Laughter]

So I think Miss [Fannie Lou] Hamer told him to get out from under the wheel. I'm not sure; I think either Charlie, or Hollis started to drive.

EC: Yeah. [Laughter]

CM: And, okay, when we got to Nashville there, and then the next night the conference, SNCC conference, this is where Fannie Lou Hamer is discovered, you know? She--during the SNCC meeting SNCC people would get up, and go to testify, and about this and that. When Miss Hamer came on, and went to talking about the things--her life in song, singing, and then moving from that over into Biblical--Shadrach, and Meshach, and Abednego, and Daniel in the lion's den, and Paul and Silas bound and jailed, the Hebrew children; all this kind of thing. How she could mix that all in, and everybody's in there spellbound, you know, because she had captured this conference of all of these big people. Jim Forman, and Bob, and McDew, and Julian Bond; all of these folk there at that meeting. When the meeting broke up, James Bevel, myself, Emma Bell, James Jones, and Lafayette Surney came back to the Delta, and but Mrs. Hamer, they took Mrs. Hamer on a whirlwind tour of Northeastern universities and colleges.

EC: Right from that meeting.

CM: Right from that meeting. I don't see her again until late in December. This conference was in--I believe it was either in October or November. Right at the end of October--

EC: I think it was Thanksgiving.

CM: Okay, in November. It was in November, okay. And--but I don't see her again until late in December. By this time her family had moved into Ruleville, and paid off that debt. They had moved into Ruleville. So.

EC: Did Miss Hamer, or any of the other people up in Ruleville, they started trying to register, and all of this happens. Did they ever express any hesitation? Any--.

CM: No. This--they got more involved. It invigorated the movement, because now the people, they all were running it, really. In other words, I dropped through there, give them stuff that they needed printed up. I'd get it to Greenwood--to Greenville, or wherever it needed to go. And now I'm writing the reports. Charlie has moved on to another--because Charlie was in charge of writing the reports. Landy and I would sit down with him, and we would go--but now I'm in charge of writing the reports. I've got the tie on now. It's my project. Landy had moved on, and so I'm now there, and--.

But these people kept me going. I never thought about [2:40:00] going back to Jackson now, because now I've--I'm kind of in the middle. There's a song, a blues song. The guy said, he said that he had found himself in the middle of a big fish fry, you know?

EC: [Laughter]

CM: He said, "I was right in the middle of a big fish fry." So here I am, all of a sudden I'm right in the middle of all of these people. Fannie Lou over there, Joe McDonald, Irene Johnson, and all of these folk, these young people I'd met, and all these young, good-looking

women, and things, who are now coming to the project, and they're bringing me lunch. There's an old white lady--there was a black lady there in the town that was afraid of us, who wouldn't even let us come to her place. She's now inviting me to come, and sit inside the door while she sit on the porch to talk to me. She had this good baloney in her little old shelf, and she'd cut me a big slice of baloney, and a red drink. I would talk, and she would tell me about what's going on.

So now I'm the one. I wrote letters. I remember there was a guy named Nick Barnes. He had got a dishonorable discharge from the Army. And he told me his story, and I sat down and wrote it up, and sent his letter. He received an honorable discharge.

EC: Wow.

CM: So now we're empowering folk. You know what I'm saying? So we had empowered Joe McDonald, and all of these people here who wanted to get out of this situation, this box. They wanted to overcome this fear. We had helped them by bringing in the Justice Department, even though they didn't do much. We were bringing in the FBI, and they wasn't doing nothing. But these people are--and the mayor of the town is backing off of them, see?

The last battle we had with him was when the insurance company cancels the insurance on the church, on William Chapel. The mayor stop allowing--started making them pay a water bill, and they had been getting free water. The--let's see, an insurance company, and the mortgage holder on the church. So all of this pressure's now coming on them. The mayor told them that all they had to do was run us out of town. He said, "Run these boys out of town, and you--we won't have this trouble." The church board met to consider the question. Joe McDonald and these people, "We ain't going nowhere!" [Laughter] I said, "Shit. If I went back to Jackson, what would I be doing?"

EC: Yeah.

CM: I ought to be--I ought to go back there and go to college, because now I see the need, you know? I went down to Valley State one day when I was goofing off, and learned about the equivalency exam. Went back two days later, and took it; passed it. Got--.

[Camera turns off and then on again]

Male 1: Okay, we're back.

CM: Yeah, I was against it because we had been working--we had registered very few voters, almost no voters had come out of our effort. But we had brought these communities to a point where Greenwood, Greenville, Cleveland, Clarksdale, all these places where we'd been working we had established SNCC, in a sense. We didn't organize SNCC chapters; we helped them put together local organizations where none existed, and we helped them to stimulate the NAACP, and to help pull together meetings consistently in these various communities.

So--and we had helped them kind of get over Mr. Charlie dominating their lives, because the white man, his wife, and children [2:45:00] were more than they were. They had to treat these children like they treated a man. We felt that--I did, and I think Charlie, this was kind of some of what Charlie said were that, "We're going to bring white people into the communities, and put them in people's homes, and they are going to be--the blacks are going to be again dominated. They're now going to be led by the people we--the white folks we brought in."

We have kind of pushed Mr. Charlie back off of them a little bit, and he was allowing them to breathe a little better, because we had had boycott in Ruleville, and shut the town down in a period in here. When Miss Hamer got back to Ruleville, we conducted a boycott. We hauled people to Cleveland to spend their money, and we boycotted Ruleville. We had had some new movement over in the town of Sunflower. This--I felt that this would all be lost.

EC: Yeah.

CM: But just the opposite happened.

EC: Yeah.

CM: We brought these--we had the training in Oxford, Ohio, and brought these kids there. While they were there, Schwerner, Goodman, and Chaney was killed. Bob came before them and offered them a chance to chicken out. Said, you know--. Nobody did. I don't think nobody left from Oxford. The kids all came; we brought them into the Delta. I met Tracy Sugarman there, but I had lived with him earlier. See, SNCC had sent several of us north to New York for rest and relaxation, and they had sent us to these big white--rich white folks out in Connecticut; Westport, Connecticut--excuse me--and I was assigned to Tracy's family. We had already met, and were friends. Tracy heard about this coming together, and he came to the conference there, to the training session, and I met him there. He said--I said, "Tracy, what are you doing here?" because all these other people were college kids.

EC: Right. You were older, right?

CM: Yeah. Yeah, he's an older guy. And he said, "I was thinking about going South." I said, "You don't have to think no more. You're with me. You can come to my project," you know? And he told me then about how he had this contract to do these drawings of the movement; to portray the movement in picture. I welcomed him. He came on my project, and then was very helpful. He brought a car. You know, the strange thing was SNCC didn't have a lot of transportation.

EC: Right.

CM: A lot of--.

EC: Yeah.

CM: But the car he brought was a car he ran [19]50, 1950--[19]64 Chevy Impala, canary yellow.

EC: [Laughter]

CM: We were trying to be as inconspicuous as possible always, you know? Yet we had--but, hey, that's okay.

EC: It ran.

CM: It ran, and it was new.

EC: Yeah.

CM: And he was willing to drive it, and to be involved here. We placed these blacks--for instance, we placed Tracy in the home of Rennie Williams, and her granddaughter, and her husband. They didn't have running water in the house. They didn't have toilet facilities in the house. Now here's Tracy coming from Westport, Connecticut, an illustrator, artist, and writer, upper middle class, coming to--and we placed him there. All of these other kids that came from other places came from--Linda Davis's dad, one of the young white girls that came, was a tax accountant, big-time tax accountant up in New York; a lawyer and tax accountant. Congressman from--had a Congressman's son from California. [2:50:00]

EC: I can picture him.

CM: On my project there. And he was in law school.

EC: Edwards?

CM: Edwards. His dad was Don Edwards, and he was Len Edwards. And he brought a car onto the project. And Dale Gronemeier, communications specialist from up in--way up in Minnesota. All of these kids coming, it was my feeling in the early days that they would dominate. These people that they were coming to live with were sharecroppers, shoeshine boys,

you know, garbage collectors, laborers, you know, low paid laborers that are poverty-stricken. I said, shit, they're going to come in and undo everything we've done. Put these--these people are going to be subservient to them, you know?

Well, some interesting things happened. Tracy Sugarman, he went to live with the Williams. One morning--and I was living with Amzie Moore. Now I didn't live in Ruleville no more now; I'm living in Amzie's house in Cleveland, and working the Delta. I'm responsible for the second congressional district now. But one morning, as I came to Ruleville, cut around through town, I see Tracy's canary yellow car sitting up at a grocery store in downtown Ruleville. I said, "Okay." We had had our discussions, the thing was that these kids were to not journey on--not go off by themselves, and to be as inconspicuous as possible. Stay in the black, within the black community until we had reasons to go out.

I look and see Tracy's car over there at the supermarket. Then I look and see Tracy coming out of the store with bags in his arms, with Rennie Williams, and this little girl. Miss Williams, and her little granddaughter coming out of the store with bags. The little child eating a lollipop. [Laughter] I said, hey, what is this, you know?

I mean, and then another situation, we set up a freedom school there. Had our freedom school, freedom house, and all these kids, these young kids from the North had set up a library. I went to Jackson, and stayed two days, getting ready to go to college now cause see I'm going to lead a project out to the end of Freedom Summer, and go to college.

I had to go to Jackson, and get some stuff done, and see what money my parents had, and stuff like that, and to figure out some things. But, anyhow, I'm on my way back to Ruleville, driving along the highway, and this big canary yellow and black Buick passed me on the

highway with all of these--with full of little black kids, you know? They were hanging all out. Well, I don't think they were hanging out of the window, but this is the way I described it.

EC: [Laughter] This is the way you imagine it.

CM: Hanging all out of the window. Let's say this thing is supposed to seat six people. It looked like there were ten in there. Okay? There was this little white person. I wasn't sure it was a little white person. See, Linda Davis had gone home for a day or two to be with her daddy and family, and when she came back she brought this car. She drove back to New York in this car while I was away.

EC: So you got all these yellow cars on your project. [Laughter]

CM: Yeah, looky here, I'm really right in the middle of all of this conspicuous happenings, you know what I mean?

EC: [Laughter] You better leave the state.

CM: Looky here. I drove--I was curious. This car passed me, and I'm driving within the speed limit. The speed limit then I believe may have been around fifty-five. No more than sixty, anyway. But they had passed me. I was probably driving less than the speed limit, because I wasn't in no hurry, and I didn't want to get stopped by the highway patrol, none of that. But so I saw this car, and these little kids, and then in the back I saw a little white woman down in there, and so I'm curious. I speed up [2:55:00] to see what this is, and this is Linda Davis, one of the freedom school teachers, and she done been to Cleveland with all these little kids.

EC: No, she didn't! [Laughter]

CM: They had been to the drive-in theater, and they had, and they--. [Laughter] I got back, man, I was in shock, you know? Then--.

EC: How did you handle that?

CM: Well, when we got back, and we had a meeting, and we were also going to deal with one of the young white girls--we had told them don't never leave at night, especially. Really to stay within, and don't--one of the little girls had been to a nightclub out in the Bolivar County, with some of the--some people who lived there in Cleveland and Ruleville. And not even, not a lot of people with her. But, anyway, so we were going to talk about that.

So we met, and I'm telling you, I was so amazed about it that when we talked about it, and everything, and we just kind of confirmed the fact that we still wanted to be as protectors, we didn't want to place people's lives in jeopardy, and stuff like that. And now I'm seeing what all that what I thought was happening--was going to happen, that these children, and these old people were developing respect for these kids, I mean, for the blacks who were living in their house--I mean for the whites who were living in their house, and it was reciprocal, you know?

In other words, they weren't--they were there, and they were calling these people Mr., and Mrs., and hauling them around to meetings, and started showing up at meetings with them in the car, and walking them through the community. And, hey, what--why would I say something about this other than, "Be careful. Always be watchful. It's dangerous still." But these people did the--just the opposite happened, man.

They established relationships with these folk, even though I don't think there was any houses that they lived in that had running water in the house, and bathing facilities. There are some pictures of some of these kids with a makeshift shower, where they had put a bucket of water, and, you know--.

EC: Yeah, pulling it over.

CM: And pulling it over to bathe.

EC: So it really changed your mind.

CM: Look, they changed--all of a sudden, I felt different about white people. You see what I'm saying? Really, my objective for going, if you remember, was because of the large black populations, and the possibility of registering these blacks to vote, to send them--send blacks to the legislature, to elect blacks to local offices, which meant that we were going to vote out white people in these offices. That's all I thought about.

That was my motivation earlier. I didn't see how we were ever going to connect with these white people in such a way that we could sit across the table from one another as equals. I just couldn't see it happening. Then these people came, and they are--the people that I'm supposed to work with, that I'm part of are working with them, living with them, and enjoying them. These people brought resources into this--to these homes. They wrote back home about the situations that they lived in, and people sent clothing for children, shoes, and things. So--and then they brought books. And it was nothing--I tell you one of the strangest happenings was for me to walk up to a freedom school in the morning, where the kids are. A school, and there would be a classroom full of people fifty, sixty, seventy, eighty years old. [Laughter] Empowerment, you know? Man, it always just made me feel so full, and empty. Empty because [3:00:00] I never expected these kind of things to happen. All I saw was registering, voting, voting them out of office. Voting the people in office out, replacing them with blacks. That was--I thought that would be a solution to the problem. But another something too. I thought that we was going to be able to come to the Delta, register all of these blacks, and go back home within the next six months. I figured that I would be back in Jackson, in school, within the next six months.

EC: You thought you were going to do all that in six months.

CM: Not just me, all of us.

EC: Yeah, yeah.

CM: Going to do it across the Delta.

EC: Yeah.

CM: Yeah. Yeah, I thought--see, I didn't understand the situation.

EC: Yeah.

CM: I didn't understand this fear. I didn't understand the economics, you see? I didn't know. I was just--it was just getting the vote. The vote has always been my objective, and it still is. I just--I thought we would, after we'd registered them all, I'd go back home, and I would know these legislators. I would have helped put them--these blacks.

EC: [Laughter] You would have these connections.

CM: I would, yeah. I would know these people. I was always interested in the law, you know? I said, "Well, I'll go back to Jackson, get an education, and go into law. Become a lawyer." These people, and Fannie Lou Hamer, and all of these kinds of people that I met. It was Fannie Lou Hamer that made me feel closer to a God somewhere. Because I don't know what I thought when in other words, I--that religious thing was something, and it was not my--it was not for me, you know? I couldn't see the connection of religion, even though Dr. King, and all of these ministers, and people who were around us all the time, and they were teaching us, and--but I was not tuned into that side of it.

EC: Yeah.

CM: Nonviolence was a technique with me.

EC: Right.

CM: We--they said, "If we don't be--if we get violent, then the state, the national government can just wipe us all out, and end our movement. So at least accept nonviolence as a method of bringing about change." That's how I saw it. I didn't see the role of the church, except a meeting place to get things done related to the vote, and to the movement. When Fannie Lou Hamer often talked we'd be-- one other thing was later, during Freedom Summer, we set up our, just before Freedom Summer we set up our own mock election. See, we couldn't get registered to vote by the state rules and regulations that they had set up, so what we did was since we had now got a lot of people coming to the courthouse to register to vote, and they're not really getting registered. They are being turned away because they either couldn't read, couldn't write, and they had to interpret a section of the Mississippi constitution. We just kept bringing people. Now we decided that, "Hey, we've got to challenge this reading and writing. Because, after all, Mississippi, the state have denied black people, and were still denying the right to education. People only--in the Delta only went to school four months out of a year, they had to plant and harvest crops, and so they had a short schooling session. Then most of the schools were ill-equipped with the kinds of resources that the children needed to make them totally aware of what's happening in their surroundings, and around.

Their basic mobility was from the plantation to Chicago, or various places north once they got out of school. They really didn't have any educational--a broadened type education to make them more equipped for the jobs [3:05:00] and opportunities that they could get up north. So a lot of training needed to be done. And it was in Ruleville that Charlie Cobb developed this freedom school idea. Once he went to public school in Ruleville, and elsewhere, and saw the kinds of things that they were being denied, then he wrote about the need for some supplemental education to the little that they were getting.

EC: I didn't know--well, I mean, that makes sense that he.

CM: Yeah.

EC: Do you want to stop?

Male 1: We're rolling again. Okay.

CM: I think we were at the point where we are bringing all these people to register to vote at Leflore County, and then Sunflower County. And in Leflore County SNCC finally got a stable office there. Then Jimmy Travis, one of our SNCC organizers, was shot and wounded near Greenwood, on his way, with Bob, and Randy Blackwell in the car. When Jimmy was shot they couldn't get him into the hospital in Leflore County, and--but, anyway, when the shots were fired, they hit Jimmy in the back of his neck. Bob and Blackwell were not wounded at all.

Then SNCC called a convening, you'd say, of SNCC people in Greenwood. Brought SNCC workers from all over the south to Greenwood as a show of force, because the white citizens council in Greenwood had vowed that we were not going to have a project there in Greenwood. They--we pick up here now where Guyot and them had been run out, but we had managed to stay in Greenwood because Sam Block later had started to put together the black leadership there, working with churches. The Elks Hall opened its doors to SNCC meetings, and one of the churches there opened their doors to SNCC, and then other doors were opened.

Sam then met with Cleve Jordan, the father of David Jordan, Senator David Jordan today, and June Johnson came out of that group in Greenwood. Euvester Simpson, and a bunch of other people there, young people got involved in the movement, and we then started to move people to the courthouse in numbers, and they were being rejected. Bob and Forman, they were working with the Justice Department, and they sent John Dorr, a Justice Department attorney, investigator down. Dorr was sympathetic to the movement. I mean, he came and talked with us,

worked with us, and helped us to get the state of Mississippi [showed the back some?] by allowing the applicants who made--the blacks who made application for voter registration at the courthouse, that they had to maintain those applications. What we did was with people who could not read and write, we had a person stationed there to let them make their X, and then--and this person signed their name for them.

EC: Was that Emma Bell?

CM: Emma Bell did that, and Mary Lane, and some of those young ladies that were with SNCC in Greenwood, so--. But now the Leflore County board of supervisors, in an effort to stop our voter registering drive, voter registration drive, discontinued the federal food surplus to black families. Well, to families, and blacks were the people who needed them most. They had used these--these families depended upon that food between harvesting season.

They could, they--whatever these foodstuff was were very important to these sharecroppers who had a planting season, and then a harvesting season, and between there there was nothing for them to do. That's why many of them would go to Florida, and pick fruit, and to other areas to work, [3:10:00] and then come back home in the winter--in the fall of the year. The children only going to school four months out of a year were getting a very poor education, and their parents, most of them, had limited education.

So there was these families who wanted their children to get an education, and they were--wanted educations themselves. There was a big move here now. So what--we felt that the momentum we had going, with that momentum, we needed to try to somehow, you know, salvage something out of that. Because now the mechanization was taking place on the plantations, the plantaters and owners didn't need these large families now, so they are trying to

find all the ways possible to get them off the plantation. The tractors are here, the combines, and the cotton pickers are coming.

So now they just kind of threw these people away. What we did was set up our own voter registration forms, set up our own registration locations in these various communities where we were working across the state. Then we'd contact Dick Gregory, Harry Belafonte, Sidney Poitier. These people came down, and brought monies to help these people live--find places to live, and food, and clothing. We set up a clothing distribution center here, well, in Indianola--not Indianola; in Greenwood, and in Ruleville--where we had the largest number of people having been evicted from the plantations as a result of the efforts to register to vote.

But then we set up these mock elections, and ran Aaron Henry, a Clarksdale pharmacist, a black pharmacist up from Clarksdale as governor; and Ed King, a white Tougaloo chaplain, as lieutenant governor; and Fannie Lou Hamer for a congressman, congressperson in the Second Congressional District, this Delta. And Victoria Gray in South, and Annie Devine in Canton. We got these people to run on our Freedom Ballot, our mock--in our mock election.

EC: Mr. Mac--.

CM: Yes.

EC: Can I ask you a question? At this time, when you all are running this election, almost everybody in Congress is a man.

CM: Yeah. Yeah.

EC: And do you know how it came to be that SNCC, and COFO, and the Freedom party picked three women to run for Congress?

CM: Well, the women were the only ones brave enough to do it in these--in those particular communities, and they were the active folk. But now Aaron Henry, up in Clarksdale,

was a pharmacist, and was a--had his freedom, as far he did not depend on the white people for his living. So he was independent enough to run as governor, and then he was president of state branches of the NAACP. So he had been surviving up there through all of the efforts to kill him, or to--then he was jailed, and all of that, and harassed. But he was in a position economically to stand on his own.

But these, in these other communities there just wasn't any men who were willing to step out there. But these ladies, these women, Fannie Lou Hamer, and you know her story; she had no fear. There's an interesting thing about, now, in order to--a challenge is being planned to challenge the seats in Congress for--from the state, and to challenge these various laws and regulations; that reading, writing, interpreting the constitution, and that.

So we're setting up challenges here. We start to taking people to the courthouse whether or not they could read or write or not. Then we started--and we didn't listen to that cry about whether you could read. We stopped trying to teach people to interpret the constitution, and all that. Said, "Go in there and write your name. Do what--put everything down you can, answer any questions. They give you a section, just take--write that section over. [3:15:00] You copy it down just the way they gave it to you." That's the interpretation of that. That lawyers and Supreme Court justices are arguing over what this stuff means, and they're asking you, a person who had been limitedly educated. You know, it's designed to keep us from registering to vote, systematic.

Okay. Now we decide--we got these ladies to run, but now we were planning to bring a challenge in Congress, and the only way to do that was at least one of these people, to bring the challenge, needed to be legally a candidate, had to be a candidate who was now challenging the system.

EC: Not just the mock election.

CM: Not just the mock election.

EC: On the actual ballot.

CM: On the actual ballot. They chose Fannie Lou Hamer. So now one day I received a call one morning, early, from the COFO office in Jackson. Said, "Go get Fannie Lou Hamer, and take her to Jackson, Mississippi to get her legally qualified to run for Congress." Okay?

EC: That sounds simple. [Laughter]

CM: Well, I can do that, but now I'm thinking. See, I'm into this mentality that white people are in Congress, men, and it's going to require education. See? My brain is back in this frame of mind about the lack of education. So Miss Hamer's a sixth grade scholar, and I'm being told to go and get her, and take her, and get her legally qualified to run for Congress. Now I don't know, but I don't--I suspect there's not a single person in Congress without at least a college degree. I don't know, maybe. It may have been back then, I don't know. But I don't know any, because I don't know none.

EC: [Laughter]

CM: I'm familiar with Adam Clayton Powell, and I'm familiar with William Dawson, and them people, because of Chicago, and New York, and the fact that these are places that we looked to for our leadership. Okay. That's the only reason I'm familiar with them. But so they--I get up, drive to Ruleville, all the way over there thinking that the rest of my day would be spent doing whatever I usually do. I go to Fannie Lou Hamer's house, walk in. Because I would go to her house almost every day when I was in the area to find out what she needed me to do, what she wanted me to do, or whatever plans I've gotten from COFO office, and Bobby and them to get done. So--because she was doing something every day.

I got to Mrs. Hamer's house. Went in, as always. Her husband get me a cup of coffee, or drink of gin, or something. And he loved--.

EC: [Laughter] One or the other, first thing in the morning.

CM: He drank the hundred proof Granddad. Yeah. So it's around ten o'clock in the day when I get there. Some time I'd get there in the afternoon, and we'd have our hit, and--. But anyway, I said, "I need to see Miss Hamer this morning bad." And Pap said, "Okay, I'll get her." He go in there, get Miss Hamer. She come out. I'm on the couch sitting out there, and I said, "Miss Hamer, I was called from the COFO office in Jackson, and they told me to come pick you up, transport you to Jackson, Mississippi, to the Secretary of State's office, and get you qualified to run for Congress." I expected her to say, "Mac, I ain't going to do that. You don't know, I just don't-I ain't even qualified." She said, "Mac, keep your seat, and I'll be right with you."

EC: [Laughter] I get the feeling Miss Hamer was always ready.

CM: I told people, I said, "Look, this woman was always ready." I never--I'd gone to her house [3:20:00] twenty-five times, and never did she say, "I'm not going today." Never. But, anyway, now she's gone. She's just got up and gone back there to get ready, and I'm sitting up out there trying to figure out why she's going to do this. [Laughter] You know what I'm saying?

EC: [Laughter] Yeah.

CM: I'm trying to figure out: why is she going to do this? I expected her to tell me, "Mac, I don't--I ain't qualified."

EC: You really did?

CM: Yeah. I would have got up and left, or whatever else we were going to do that day. She came back. We got in the car, drove to Jackson. Went up to the Secretary of State's office. Went up to the desk of the Secretary of State, and told the lady we wanted--that Miss Hamer wanted to run for Congress. The white woman bucked her eye. Looked at us. Went back there to the door--and there were a bunch of other white women back there at the desk, I guess secretaries, and various other people--and said, "Hey, y'all, there's two niggers out here say they want to run for Congress." [Laughter] In a few minutes that door was full, and they're all looking out there at us like we were in a freak show, or something. You know, they were looking out there at us.

EC: [Laughter] You should have charged admission.

CM: Yeah, we could have! [Laughter] But look here, that white lady stood there for a few minutes, and saw we were serious. She brought us a stack of papers over there, and said, "The candidate has got to fill out these papers." We take the papers, go back out into the corridor of the Capitol. Fill out these papers to the best of our ability. Evidently, we did good. After we brought them back to her, she accepted them, and she said, "Wait a minute, you're not registered yet." Now this is the last day to qualify to run for Congress, last day. We brought them back to her. She checked them over, and she said--and we were fixing to go. She said, "Wait a minute now. You can't leave yet." Said, "The candidate have to pay--if you're going to run as a Democrat." I'd been told we were going to run as a Democrat by COFO. Said, "You need to bring me a check for five hundred dollars to be paid to the Democratic Party Executive Committee. And it should be made out to a guy by the name of Bidwell Adams, who is the secretary of the Democratic Party. That check needs to be here, with these papers." Okay? So we go back out into the corridor.

EC: Now Mr. Mac?

CM: Mm-hmm?

EC: For the people that don't know this time period, five hundred dollars--how much money is five hundred dollars?

CM: Now it's not a lot of money, but then that was--some of these, some of the sharecroppers wasn't making five hundred dollars a year.

EC: So she needs a year's earnings in--.

CM: Some more, because--.

EC: In that afternoon.

CM: Yeah, because some people wasn't getting but a thousand dollars, clearing maybe a thousand dollars after the harvest season. And people working in the various restaurants, and places like that were making about fifty cent an hour.

EC: Yeah.

CM: You know.

EC: So this is a serious amount of money.

CM: This is serious, yeah. But now we knew that the COFO people that told us to come here, that they must have known, because they--some of the people in--Jesse Morris was one of the--was the person who called me, and told me. I go back out there, and we call, get the--still a telephone booth. Call the COFO office, and tell them we need a check for five hundred. Morris said, "Don't leave. It will be there." Okay. Shortly, from the COFO office on Lynch Street, and getting a check made out, and everything, brought us up to around twelve-thirty, or one o'clock. Well, it wasn't quite one, because these ladies wasn't going to lunch yet. So it wasn't quite--. They got there, brought the five hundred dollars. We took the five hundred

dollars, and carried it to her, and--and we start to leave. She says, "Hold it, you're not finished yet." [3:25:00] Said, "Now at the time the candidate qualifies, he or she must name their campaign manager, and the campaign manager signs a form here." Okay?

So we go back out there in the corridor. We call the COFO office, and said, "Look, we need a person here to become Mrs. Hamer's campaign manager." Said, "Don't leave." They said, "Don't leave. Somebody will be there." So we go back out into the corridor. These ladies go to lunch, and everything. Then around three o'clock in the afternoon, nobody has come yet. Four o'clock. The white lady says, "Look, we're closing at five. This is the last day to qualify, and unless you--a campaign manager is here, and signed in, then you can't get qualified to run for Congress."

So we called the COFO office again. Nobody answers the phone. So we said, "Okay, probably Jesse Morris is on his way, or they're getting somebody." Four-thirty, the lady come back out and says, "You've got thirty minutes. We leave five minutes of five, getting ready to get out of here." So Fannie Lou and I go back out into the corridor, and we're sitting there with our hands in our--with our head in our hands, trying to figure out what to do. Then Miss Hamer gets up, take a couple steps around. I thought she was fixing to say, "Well, I won't get the chance to run." She says, "Mac?" I said, "Yes, Ma'am?" "Go in there and put your name on them papers, and let's go home." [Laughter]

EC: [Laughter]

CM: I mean, she didn't say, "Would you?" or, "You ought to." She says, "Mac, get up, and go in there, and put your name on them papers, and let's go home." [Laughter]

EC: That's how you got the job. [Laughter]

CM: Looky here, looky here. I don't know. Maybe I said to myself, "Shit. Why me?" [Laughter] But I said to her, I said, "Miss Hamer," I said, "I'm not qualified to be no campaign manager." She looked at me, and she said, "Mac, you know enough about being a campaign manager as I know about running for Congress. Put your name on the paper." I go in there, and put my name on them papers.

EC: You didn't have no choice.

CM: I couldn't--I never thought about it not doing it. I just couldn't see why I ought to do it. You know, in other words, I didn't decide this, because if it had been left to me, we wouldn't be here in the first place. You see what I'm saying? We went in there and put our--I went in there, and I signed the papers. The lady said, "Now, everything is complete."

EC: She seems like she was actually more helpful than you might expect.

CM: Well, she could have told us all of this up front. She could have said, "Look, fill out these papers. You've got to have a five hundred dollar check. The campaign manager got to be named before this process is complete." She could have told us that all up front, you know.

EC: That's true.

CM: But she drug it on, each step by step. So, anyway, so I became her campaign manager by default. I mean, nobody else showed up.

EC: Well, you knew you were the right person anyway.

CM: No, I didn't. I didn't know that, because I really didn't--I didn't bargain for it. But now as we were leaving, I thought about this. Really deeply, truly within me I've always wanted to root step up to a challenge. I was challenged at the courthouse, back when I first got there, then all along the way I'm being challenged to step up, and do what I really kind of deep in me wanted to do was to be like Medgar, like, you know, Amzie, and these people that I met. My

heroes. But then if they had just given me just a little inch, I'd have backed out. [Laughter] [3:30:00]

EC: [Laughter] It seems like with SNCC a lot of people did things they never thought they would do.

CM: Yeah, they did. [Laughter] If anybody had told me back in Jackson in 1961 that I would have done some of the stuff that I've done, man, I'd ( ), because I've done some things, and--. But now the challenges didn't stop. You know, now I'm way off into this, and then I'm going to get on up to the Freedom Summer so we can get out, so we can end.

But I remember in Greenville, Mississippi, Charlie and I were there, and we had a little youth group we had set up. We were working on a youth group. These kids--the bus station in Greenville was segregated. This is 1963. The bus station, everything in Greenville was still segregated. Greenville was the so-called liberal community in the Delta, but segregation exists in the bus station, train station; everything that was segregated. But the black folks had a little bit more freedom there because of the connection that blacks had.

For instance, James Carter, a black businessman on Nelson Street owned the pressing shop. And he was the head of a voter registration drive there. Edwards, a black funeral home director. You had Dr. Paige, Dr. Matthews, you know? These guys were involved. Then you had the Delta Democrat Times, the newspaper there that didn't tolerate the Klan, and the Klan activities. They'd shun any involvement like that. They had, Greenville had two black detectives.

EC: Did they really?

CM: Yeah. You understand? There was not another black law enforcement officer in the whole state, except Indianola. Indianola had a black policeman. They put him in office in 1955.

EC: How did that happen?

CM: Well, to keep down racial disturbance, to keep down racial violence. To--if there's a lawsuit, or anything came up, there's this black who's in charge of the black area. Because here in Indianola a guy by the name of Nathaniel Jack, called him Slim, was appointed. He was the first uniformed black policeman in the state, but he could not arrest white people. He could not do anything on the white side of town, and he better not mess around too much with the black lackeys over on his side of town, but--. So he was there to keep the peace, to keep the--keep down racial disturbances as much as possible. We had some encounters with him down the road, but--.

Now in Greenville they had two black detectives, and these were--they were nice guys with us, you know? We never had trouble out of them. But when we challenged segregation there, they arrested our kids. They were holding a trial in the city courtroom, and Charlie and I were there with the kids. They had--there were blacks standing outside, you know, a hundred people standing outside, blacks, who couldn't get into the courtroom. I had been in the courtroom before because I had gotten a traffic citation back earlier, and I knew good and well all of them seats couldn't be taken. Was that many white people there, you know? I walked up, and went into the courtroom, and the side where the blacks were were full, and there was a whole section over here with no white people in it. You know what I did?

EC: ( ) [Laughter]

CM: I took me a seat over there. A black policeman rushed over to where I was, [3:35:00] and told me that there was somebody outside who wanted to see me, you know? When I walked out that door he fastened it. He locked the door, and locked me out. I went around to the other door, and they wouldn't let me back in. I went out on the outside, and I went to telling these people, I said, "Look, there's plenty room in the courthouse. They have got you standing out here because they don't want to break their segregation policy. They don't want to use that side. We need to demand the right to get them seats."

Policeman came out there and told me I was trying to incite a riot, and arrested me, put me in jail. Charlie learned I was in jail, and he picked up where I left off. They put him in jail. So Charlie and I are in jail now, and so we--our cases went to court. Charlie was now in Atlanta, or somewhere, and--when the case went to court. I went to court because I was still in the Delta. They were able to subpoena, give me my subpoena. I had--I think I had two blacks on my jury. All I needed was one to disagree, and that guy put me in jail. I had to go back to jail.

Now in the meantime, R. Jess Brown, one of the three black lawyers in the state, came to represent me, and appealed my case to the next highest court. So between 1963, and 1965, I believe, or [19]66, somewhere in there, my case came before the US Supreme Court. It was before Nixon got into office, you see? So whatever that was, in that period. By the time the ruling came down, Nixon's in office, the court is turning, and they remanded my case back to the local court, so that--and hoped that they would resolve the question. They didn't want to deal with it. You know, that my case is before the US Supreme Court.

What happened was they ordered me back to jail, the city of Greenville. The guy who was the prosecutor, I was told by Jess Brown, said he just wanted my black ass in jail; an arrogant so and so. He wanted me in jail because there was disgust. "Why don't we just let the

nigger go?" I want him. The lawyer was named Robert Shaw. Robert Shaw. The case--I went to jail, and I got out on a habeas corpus. Then the case went back up to the Supreme Court. The case went to the Supreme Court three times. By the time it got up there, Nixon was in, and the court had changed. They remanded it back to Greenville. They didn't--and the city of Greenville ordered me and Charlie Cobb to go to jail. Cobb never came.

I was in New York when this last ruling came down, and if I had stayed in New York I probably would have never went to jail. So what I did was I set up the--Stokely Carmichael came to visit me while I was in jail, and he told that the people in Greenville to law enforcement officials said, "Look, so we're tired of putting up bond for our people, and spending all our money putting up bond." Said, "The next time you all put one of our people in jail, we ain't going to pay you nothing. We're going to break him out." [Laughter] "We're going to break him out."

So here I come to jail, you understand? Now they thought of me, they asked me, and I, through my lawyer, told them that I will present myself at the Greenville city jail at noon, on this particular day. So what happened was Frank Smith was in town, and Frank came by the [3:40:00] SNCC office there. I had stayed there all night, see, so they wouldn't know where I was. Because I'm planning to surprise them.

So Frank gave me a ride over to, and we parked right in front of the city jail, where I'm supposed to present myself. At twelve o'clock, I got out of the van, and walked over to the jail. And policemen were down on that end, and all around on the other end, you know, expecting to get me. I walked right in there, presented myself at the desk, and said, "I'm Charles McLaurin, and I'm supposed to be locked up today." The policemen from all up on the other end, all out there came in. [Laughter]

EC: [Laughter]

CM: Looky here. Looky here. The last thing they expected was me to walk in there. They were going to arrest me, if I--when they seen me, they were going to put the handcuffs on me.

EC: They were going to.

CM: Yeah. They was fixing to put those handcuffs on me right there in jail, standing in the--.

EC: Even though you had just presented yourself.

CM: I presented myself. There was a--and the police chief at that time was a guy named Burnley. Fairly nice guy by Mississippi standards. White Mississippi standards, for white men, he was a fairly nice guy, and he was the chief. And he came over, and told them go put the handcuffs on me, and we went on around then, talked a little while. They locked me up, and I stayed in jail several days. And we didn't try no more appeals. I don't know if I ought to say this before the camera, but it can't do me no harm, or him; he's dead. Is that the chief of policemen, Burnley, and I talked it over, and we agreed that I would stay in jail a couple nights, and the day. Then he would release me to go to college, to go to school. Because I had told him about I was planning to go. So one day, late one evening, jail doors opened, and I walked out; with the understanding that I would not come back to Greenville and cause trouble for at least a year. That's how I got out of that.

EC: This--you said this is after Nixon's been elected.

CM: Yeah, Nixon is now--.

EC: So it's like [19]68, [19]69, something like that?

CM: Earl Warren is gone.

EC: Yeah.

CM: The--and Nixon had appointed somebody, you know. I don't know what's happening. But, anyway, they--they gave the city of Greenville a way out. They just, you know, let me go, you know, after all. I mean, I hadn't done nothing. They said I made statements calculated to provoke a breach of the peace.

EC: I was just going to ask you what the, quote, "charge" was.

CM: Yeah. Making statements calculated to breach the peace. I remember when--it was around 1966, because now--[19]66, or [19]67, because now I'm employed as a social service director for one of the Head Start programs that we had set up, Amzie, for--Amzie Moore, and the rest of us had set up. I remember they--when I left, I didn't even tell the people where I worked where I was. I was in jail that night, and a day, and then I came home, and come back to work.

EC: Come back to work? [Laughter]

CM: Yeah. Stayed there until 1972.

EC: How many days was it supposed to be, if you had served the whole time?

CM: I had a hundred and eighty days, and I believe around five or six hundred dollar fine. I either had to pay the fine, and serve the days, or they could whatever they--.

EC: Did you pay the fine?

CM: No.

EC: They just--so you made that deal?

CM: I remember it kept going up to the court, and then finally I was in jail, [3:45:00] so going to serve my time.

EC: Instead of the fine.

CM: Instead of the fine. And--but then the chief opened the jail door. And do you know, later he became the--Burnley became the mayor of the city of Greenville. About two years later I was working for the National Council of Negro Women, and he was on the committee, or something, for National Council of Negro Women in Greenville. We ran into one another, and talked, and joked, and he was very--he was a nice fellow. Burnley was an exceptional white person.

Because I didn't really know any until Freedom--until after we got Freedom Summer. I didn't really know any white people, had no respect for them, and I know they had none for me. I just, that's why Freedom Summer brought me around, meeting these other people from the North. But after we met--after Fannie Lou Hamer got to run for Congress, we campaigned across the second congressional district, because we wanted to change the second congressional district.

See, the second congressional district had always been running--cut to run along the river, which meant that it picked up all of the black counties, which gave it a black majority district. That district was the district that John R. Lynch, the black who held--was the congressman prior to Reconstruction, and during Reconstruction. And he had a--but then the Mississippi legislature had come, and cut the districts diagonally, and split the black vote, and attached these heavily white communities to the east, as a part of the Delta. And, therefore, diluted our votes to the point that we couldn't elect a congressman.

But then we filed lawsuits, and some congressional hearings were held, and I presented a plan for redistricting the second congressional district. And Guyot always--and I always, he always said that he was in the federal court up there, and they brought up the McLaurin plan. When he discovered it was my plan, from then on we always joked about the fact. He said,

"Ain't nobody going to tell me nothing about Mac. Mac presented a plan for congressional redistricting, and then it was considered."

So, but anyhow, Fannie Lou and I ran and ran. Then we--then the lawsuits were filed. By now Henry Kirksey, who--a mapmaker from Jackson. Who became, I believe, the first senator to serve in the senate since Reconstruction, black to serve.

EC: In the state.

CM: And, you know, he resigned--in Mississippi.

EC: In the state senate.

CM: Yeah, in the state senate. And he resigned. I mean, he didn't stay there, because he said he wasn't doing no good there. I mean, one in--.

EC: Just by himself.

CM: One in fifty-two. There's fifty-two members, I think, of the senate. And one in fifty-two, wasn't nothing he's going to do.

EC: So, a lot of people think the movement's over when the Voting Rights Act passes, or when Dr. King is killed. But you and Miss Hamer--and not just you and Miss Hamer, but I know that you and Miss Hamer worked on a number of really important projects.

CM: You know, one of the things after the challenge in Atlantic City in 1964, a lot of the movement people just kind of dispersed. SNCC died as an organization, field organization, with field people out there. But no, but Fannie Lou and I, because I can understand that the disillusion, and the feeling of loss, but Fannie Lou and I didn't feel that way, because we had invested so much in the movement earlier, and we were Mississippians.

See, a lot of these other people who were going back home, who got angry, and everything, went home, or went to doing something else. We were coming home, and the same

problems that existed when we went to Atlantic City were still here. The so-called compromise that they offered us in Atlantic City was nothing, [3:50:00]and Fannie Lou, and the rest of us delegates from the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party had rejected it. That the regular Democratic Party delegation from Mississippi had come home, have refused to pledge loyalty to the Democratic party, or to the--support the candidate of the Democratic Party. Lyndon Johnson was the one who wanted to be president, and he had--and Hubert Humphrey and these people had come up with this compromise of one seat at-large, representing nobody. They didn't even tell us that we were going to have one seat in the Mississippi delegation. There were one, two seats at-large, with no representation nowhere.

EC: So.

CM: So Fannie Lou Hamer said, "Hey, that ain't nothing." And people say Fannie Lou Hamer did that. The whole delegation voted with her. There was no dissention in the Mississippi delegation, even though there were some who would have taken this. Now there were even--the Lyndon Johnson's group were going to even name the two people who were going to get the seats, see? They weren't going to say, "We're going to have a vote, let them vote among themselves, and select a person, the two people." They named them, so--.

EC: Do you think it would have made a difference if you, if the delegation could have chose its own two representatives? Would people have been different about that?

CM: I don't know, but I do know this. If the choice had been thrown to us, it would have at least been discussed by us, but this way, there was no discussion, you know? That the discussion took place between Humphrey, Mondale, Joe Rauh, Walter Reuther, Aaron Henry, Ed King, and some of these people. But now the decision had already been made when they

brought it to them that Lyndon Johnson just wanted to get rid of this, because he feared he would lose what he thought he had.

He thought he had a Southern base. He had some Dixiecrats down here in the South, across the South, who really were not Democrats, but they were holding on to this Democratic patronage that they had all gained over the years as a result of denying the population, the black populations in these states to participate in the primary, and the general election and then in the caucuses. So if we had been able to vote, that solid South wouldn't exist. What we went there to show them was what that Eastland, and some of the other senators were saying, was that the black folks don't want to vote. Our mock election said we did. We got eighty thousand votes, you know, running our candidates. Then we bring to Atlantic City a delegation parallel to--that met party rules, and evidence of our denial of our--of being deprived of the right to vote.

Then they decide that if Johnson go with us, he'd lose the South. I mean, even though he lost the South anyway. I mean, after all, Goldwater was the winner of the South. [Laughter] What happened? Immediately following the Democratic Party rejection, I mean the Democratic Party rejection of us, our delegation, the South turns Republican. All of these white people in the party, who wanted nothing to do with blacks in office, voting, ran to the Republican Party.

So now you have a solid Republican South. Those same states are now in the Republican column. The Voting Rights Act that came out of our struggle, and the marches in Selma, Alabama, and the challenge in Atlantic City, it's kind of thrown to the blacks. "Okay, [3:55:00] this is y'all's party," you know?

EC: Yeah.

CM: So it's made up today of those loyal Democrats who are still in the Democratic party, but most of the white population are Republicans. The only ones that, in the South, and

especially in Mississippi, who are voting Republican, but they are sitting in Democratic seats. They don't--they don't tell nobody, because if they did, nine out of ten times, and especially where we are in the majority population, they wouldn't hold those offices.

Now Henry Kirksey drew legislative maps, and he drew a Congressional map, and he drew municipal and county maps. Reapportioning, redistricting, especially in the Delta, have led to blacks in office. And in 1962, there was not one black elected official in this whole state, other than in the small town of Mound Bayou.

EC: That's right.

CM: And one of the--or some of them little communities up there. So--.

EC: And Mound Bayou is like an all black town.

CM: All black from the get, you know? Founded by slaves, I.T. Montgomery. I'm going to get through it in a minute. My wife, you probably know her. She always tells me to, "Stop talking some time." But anyway, the--.

EC: I have some questions for you still.

CM: Oh, okay. Let me tell--let me tell you this, and then we're going to get onto your questions. I remember that Amzie Moore told me, and I didn't--at that time, I didn't know it that Isaiah Montgomery was the last black legislator in the state legislature at the time, in the 1890s, when the legislature took away our right to vote. That he voted with the whites.

EC: Yep.

CM: I didn't know that at first, and when I found--and then I went back and read about all of this. And it really--it really just kind of hurt me, hurt me to know that he did that. Then I tried to read his logic, and then I compared his logic with the thinking of Booker T. Washington, and I just--but I came later to respect these people as individuals. What I just--it's been so hard

for me to kind of realize that a person like Fannie Lou Hamer, a sharecropper, stood up against the system, and here these guys were--Isaiah Montgomery was a landowner. You know, they were the slaves off of the plantation of the president of the--.

EC: Davis? Jefferson Davis?

CM: Of the Confederacy, yes. Off of Davis's plantation, and they had come up here for freedom. Bought and set up this town, and everything. And he ought to been waving the American flag when they was waving the Confederate flag. But, hey, things happen. Okay. [Interruption]

EC: [Pause] You told me that when Miss Hamer was ill, and you met with her in the hospital, you went to visit her. Can you tell us about that? What she asked you?

CM: Yeah. When I learned that Fannie Lou Hamer was in the hospital, and that she was in Mound Bayou, I immediately went to see her. We talked about the movement, and she was kind of--she was delirious, and she was just kind of talking out of her head. The first day I went to see her, and so I only stayed a short time, and we talked about kind of when we ran for Congress. We talked about the lawsuit that she filed in the town of Sunflower, Hamer vs. Campbell, in 1967. And how that--Robert Clark getting elected. So that particular time.

I left there, and three days later [4:00:00] I went back to visit her. At this time she just wanted to talk about--first she went to talking about, in a way, that she may be fixing to die. She said, "Mac, I won't be here. I'm not going to be here to see this thing through." I said, "Aw, Miss Hamer, come on now. You're going to be here a lot longer than I will, and don't talk like that." She said, "Mac, I want you to promise me." I kind of said to myself, "Every time I promised Fannie Lou Hamer, we got off into something that I really didn't want to be off into," you know? I said, "Come on, Miss Hamer."

She said, "Mac, I lived on a plantation all my life, and I do not want to be buried back on a plantation." I said, "Miss Hamer, why are you talking about this? I mean, you're going to be here. You're going to be here." She said, "Mac, promise me." I said, well--and I thought about it. I said, "Well, since you're going to be here longer than I am, why not make this promise? I ain't going to have to live, I'm not going to have to live up to it." I said, "Okay, Miss Hamer. I promise you will not be buried on a plantation." They had given her medication. She said, "I'm going to rest now," and I left. A few nights later, I was called.

Well, what happened about three days after that, one of Mrs. Hamer's relatives, and Pap Hamer came to my office. I was working for Community Action Agency in Indianola. I was director of purchasing and personnel. She--this lady came in, and Pap, and he said, "Mac," he said, "Miss Hamer passed last night." Man, you're talking about--I don't think I--I'm sure enough scared now. I was almost as scared as I was when I was walking up to that courthouse, because it came back to me, "Now what have I--what am I into here?" I promised her that she would not be buried on a plantation, and really this is just a few days after that. I hadn't had time to even think about that no more, and really I didn't plan to, because I figured she would outlive me. And he said, "The body is in Greenwood, at McSwain Funeral Home." I said, "Okay. I'll meet you back in Ruleville." Myself, Jimmy Strong, a friend here in Indianola, and Eunice Jenkin, our friend. These are people employed in the Head Start program. All of us who knew, and loved, and worked with Mrs. Hamer.

And Eunice Jenkin, and I, Jimmy Strong drove to McSwain Funeral Home in Greenwood. Right away I was depressed when I saw the funeral home, you know. Because, again, I got these, I don't know, you might want to call them false values, you know. I'm looking for a nice looking building, you know, and this place looked like a little shanty,

plantation shack; the funeral home. We go in and we walk in, and he shows me how he's going to bury Mrs. Hamer. I said I just couldn't see this. I just couldn't see it. When--and I saw him, he was standing there with a beat up hat on, and with all due respect to Mr. McSwain, and he was wearing spats on the shoes. I mean, this is 1967, and he has on spats, and a suit. It was just not—[4:05:00] he was an elderly man, but none of this came to mind, because I'm living in this time, and it seemed like he was living in the past.

I said, "Well, we're going to have to get together, and I'll let you know something. I'm meeting Mr. Hamer and her--and whoever there was with him, in Ruleville. We'll meet you there at three o'clock today." He said, "Okay." In the meantime, we're on our way back to Indianola. I was going back to the office to sign out, let him know where I was. That I--what I was going to be doing.

We were stopped on the highway by Henry Espy, who is a burial director. Espy, the funeral home, in front of the home. And he said, "Look," he said, "I know you all have been down to Mr. McSwain." He said, "I've got nothing against Mr. McSwain, but I would like to bury Fannie Lou Hamer." He said, "Come on, let me show you how I would bury her." So we followed him back to Greenwood, and went to his burial--to his funeral home, and he showed us how. I mean, now we walk in. This is elaborate. I mean, hey, this--what he's offering would be suitable, in my estimation, limited knowledge about burial, and everything, suitable for the president of the United States of America. So right away I'm sold, Jenkins is sold, and Jimmy. Okay?

Now I said, "What would it cost for this, to do this kind of funeral?" He said, "Don't worry about the money." I said, "We've got to worry about the money, Mr. Espy." He said, "Don't worry about the money." He said, "But I need you all, in order--if you're going to let me

bury her." I said, "You can bury her." He said, "But I need you to sign these papers to get the body from that other funeral home." So he got the papers out, and I signed them, Jenkins signed them, and Jimmy signed them, that he could bury Mrs. Hamer.

So in the meantime, we go on. He brought us back to where we left my car on the highway, right outside of Greenwood, and before you get to Valley State. We came on back to--we got back there. Then I went back to my office, signed out, went to Ruleville, and we told Mr. McSwain that we were turning the body over to Century Burial. It was Century Burial. So he communicated with Mr. Espy, and Mr. Espy paid him for whatever he had done.

While we was there, the question came up about Mrs. Hamer's burial. I said, "One of the things we want to make sure is that she's not buried on a plantation." Then there was some discussion with--about that, because there's some people there disagreed about her being--they wanted to bury her where the other blacks were being buried out there. I said, "No, we're not going to bury Mrs. Hamer on a plantation." "So where are we going to bury her?" I said, "Well, we've got a few days to decide this." We left there, and the next evening some guys came to me.

EC: Let me ask you a question now. So where do other black folks get buried at this time?

CM: All of the plantations. All the burial spots are on a plantation. They're all on a plantation. They're around--there's a church, and then there's a burial ground. Mount Galilee has a church, the church--the first time I'd ever seen a funeral, I mean a burial ground at a church. Remember, I grew up in Jackson, and the cemeteries were not on churches. What--they had one out there. Okay? But the one they wanted to use was down there on a plantation out [4:10:00] just across the highway from where Mrs. Hamer lived on that other plantation, on Sidney Livingston's plantation. That's where they wanted to bury her.

EC: Okay.

CM: Because they went on--I think they went on to talk about other relatives. Whatever it was, I wasn't listening. I wasn't into that. So we left that evening with the understanding that Century's going to bury her, but we didn't know where. At this point, we don't know. Now, two young men that I'm not going to name came up to me, and they were interested in Freedom Farm. They said that they had gotten approval from Mrs. Hamer to reopen Freedom Farm, or something like that. Or that they--they could have a meeting. She had told them that if they had a meeting, that I was to--that McLaurin should be in that meeting. That's why they had come to me.

Then they held that meeting that next evening, and I came. Now while I'm there, I learn that Mrs. Hamer owns some property there in the city, six lots, big location, where she's buried right now. All of that property there was owned by Freedom Farm. They wanted me to sign papers allowing them to take possession of the property to Freedom Farm, to reestablish. Freedom Farm had become kind of in limbo since the manager, Joe Harris, had died. And it had just kind of just been there in limbo, you know, hovering. So. Then when I learned, I learned about that, and they wanted me to sign these papers. I said, "No. I want to see this place." And carried me out there, and showed me the place.

And now a burden was lifted off of me, you know? All of a sudden, I have a place to bury Fannie Lou Hamer, and it's not on a plantation. But what I didn't know was that you could not bury a person in--within the city limits. There was no--unless there was an approved cemetery, or something, already existing, or something there. Attorney Cleve McDowell, the second black to go into Ole Miss after Meredith, who had had to leave, and who had gotten his law degree down at Southern in Texas, and--Texas Southern. And he was a member of the

NAACP, and I knew him. I kind of knew of him because I knew his sister worked for us in the CAP Agency.

So when he learned about Mrs. Hamer's death, that next morning he showed up in my office in Indianola, and I told him what the situation was. And he said, "Don't worry. We'll bury Mrs. Hamer on that property." I let that alone for the right then. Now what about her funeral, you know? So evidently everybody's got me stuck with this. You see what I'm talking about?

So, man, again I'm frightened. When I got to Ruleville, Owen Brooks was at Mrs. Hamer's house, and I told him that Henry Espy had the burial. I think Henry Espy came through there that afternoon, and him and Owen talked. And Owen said, "Well, what about the funeral?" So he said, "Mac, I've started to make these--I've been calling these people. I've been doing this, and I've been doing that." I said, "You've got to--you--you plan it, Owen." I said, "You've got it." And he gladly accepted it, you know, and he talked with Henry. Then later I learned that it's going to cost nearly [4:15:00] ten thousand dollars to bury Mrs. Hamer. The kind of funeral that Henry has here, it was over eight thousand; almost nine or ten thousand dollars. We, the three of us, Eunice, and Jimmy, have signed papers giving the body to the man, and then--.

EC: Don't worry about the cost. [Laughter]

CM: [Laughter] Don't worry about the cost, yeah. But it's costing nearly ten thousand. So now what happened was after Owen got that, I was relieved, all right? Then that afternoon, Cleve came, and said that he had met with this city board of alderman in Ruleville, and at that time the city of Ruleville had a female mayor, Dr. Virginia Talbert. She had passed a resolution during Mrs. Hamer's life, when Mrs. Hamer was sick, making Hamer Day,

designating Hamer Day. We had held--had a big gathering, and everything, and she had spoke. Nice lady, by Mississippi standards, you know.

So Henry Espy, and Owen got together on the burial. Cleve created the legal thing, and had that set up, and so that she could be buried there. Henry Espy had the body. Now all I had to do now was try to take this pressure off my heart and head. When I learned that it was costing what it was costing to bury her, then I went and told my friends. They said, "Man, we ain't got--we ain't got no ten thousand dollars." But Owen Brooks had agreed to take care of this, and at that time the Delta ministry was--he was director of Delta ministry. Charles Beneman was the president and CEO of Mays, a Delta Foundation. So Delta Foundation paid the--paid the bill, and we buried her where--out there. There was no memorial, there wasn't nothing out there but her gravesite. And in one of my papers I wrote after that that I hoped that some day, somebody here, in this town, would pick this up, and run with it.

Then things over the years, there were a lot of, there were some people--some people had me arrested about donating that property for them to be buried. So over the years nothing happened with that gravesite for several years. Then a little lady in Ruleville working for the Head Start program, raised some money, and put a headstone out there. Head Start people raised that money. Then later, a lady named Pat Thompson, a graduate of Delta State, admirer of Mrs. Hamer, and Victoria Gray, and them others, started to holding some meetings out there, invited Congressman Thompson, and others. Then slowly the things started to develop.

Miss Hattie Jordan, the lady who is over the thing there now, got elected to the Board of Aldermen. She worked with the city to get a self-help grant to put the provision out there. Some other people, white and black, helped come up with some of the monuments, and things out there. I made a promise that one day I would have her standing in the Delta. I saw a picture of

her standing in a cotton field, looking like she was surveying over the area. I was able to sell that idea to several people, and to Pat Thompson.

And up in New Jersey, people up there had been carrying [4:20:00] on a program in Mrs. Hamer's honor since she spoke up there back in at the credentials committee. They decided that they would work with us to raise a hundred thousand dollars to put a statue out there. So we started that project. Two years after we started it, we erected that statue.

EC: It's beautiful there. It really is.

CM: Still a work in progress.

EC: It's beautiful though.

CM: Yeah.

EC: I've seen--when I first came to the grave, it was just a headstone you'd see.

CM: Yeah. See all of that other land around there was a part of Mrs. Hamer's. We donated--in order to get her buried there, we donated all of that land to the city of Indianola--not Indianola, to the city of Ruleville in order to create that special burial site for her. The city of Ruleville owned the rest of that land, you know, and they've used it as, I guess, to help economic development. But it was really our intention that that land all become a part of Mrs. Hamer's burial site. We expect to have--move our museum into a building that we would erect down there, and that we would have a paved parking area out there, a beautiful area parking. So we ain't told the city about that yet. [Laughter]

EC: In good time, in good time.

CM: Yeah. Yeah. My grandmother used to always tell me, she said, "To foretell is to forewarn." Okay?

[Camera turns off and then on again] CM: Okay. So as you know, James Meredith, the first black to knowingly graduate from the Ole Miss, graduated. And, there was a big flare-up up there while he was there, and some people were killed. But he later graduated from New York, I think in New York. Then, after he was back for a while, in a few enterprises, he decided to walk from the Tennessee state line to Jackson, Mississippi to encourage voter registration, and blacks' participation, political participation, and he called it A March Against Fear.

So on a particular day in June, 1966, James Meredith stepped off on his walk alone. After he'd gone a short distance, he was shot down from ambush by a white person. Okay. While he's in the hospital recuperating, Dr. King, and McKissick, of CORE, and Stokely Carmichael, who had just become chairperson of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, succeeding John Lewis, met with Meredith, and got his approval to continue to march along highway fifty-one, into Jackson, Mississippi, where there would be a big rally.

So the march took off from where Meredith was shot down, and was headed to Grenada, Mississippi. It was going to be their first overnight stay. And Fannie Lou Hamer, who had been--talked with Stokely, and Dr. King, and others about the march, had--she wasn't able to be there because of other speaking engagements. That lawsuit Hamer vs. Campbell, 1967, had been filed, and was in court. And it had been known that that suit was going to come down.

So what had happened, Guyot, and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, what was left of it, had moved the office, the official office, state office to Sunflower, the small town of Sunflower, in the Delta. When that march started--.

EC: Can you say quickly what that case was?

CM: That case was Hamer vs. Campbell, dealing with the right to vote, and to be able to participate, for blacks to participate in the electoral process.[4:25:00] That lawsuit set back

throughout the elections in two communities; in the town of Sunflower, and in the town of Moorhead. And it set up a voter registration period for blacks to get registered, and then to hold new elections. That's what that particular was about.

So now that we had the FDP office in Sunflower, and the march was to march against fear about voter registration, Fannie Lou Hamer set up a march from that small town to Indianola, to the courthouse, and asked me, and Joe Harris to go and ask Dr. King, and Stokely to bring the march through the Delta. To deviate from highway sixty-one in order to bring it so that blacks in the Delta could get the feel of this big march, and to, hopefully, encourage them to register, and to vote.

So we won the approval of Dr. King and that group that they would bring the march along highway seven to Greenwood, and stay the night in Greenwood. So then a forward group, a group made up of myself, Stokely, Cleve Sellers, James Jones, and another guy. I'm not sure whether that was Willie Ricks, or not, but somebody else was with us.

But, anyway, we were to go and secure a place for them. We decided Greenwood was it, because our history in the Delta, was in Greenwood, and we had had a lot of things happen there. Travis was shot there. The national SNCC office was once located there. We said, "We're going to--we're going to stay in Greenwood." So the marchers took off, we took off. We got to Greenwood, and Stokely went to talk to the black leadership there about putting up on a school ground, Stone Street Elementary School, over in the black community. Cleve, and Jones, and I went to Valley State to meet with Dr. White, the president, to see about an alternative spot. We were so sure we were going to get Greenwood, but we wanted an alternative spot in the case we did not. So. We would rather put up on that campus anyway, because of the kids there.

We went to Valley State, got permission to meet with Dr. White. Dr. White told us we could meet with him around three or four o'clock that day, in his house. So Cleve, James Jones, and I went to Dr. White's house, and he read us a prepared statement denying us use of the campus. And he's flanked by about eight or ten white state troopers. Right after that, they run us off the campus.

We went back to Greenwood, and we learned that Stokely's in jail. That he had been arrested for trying to erect a tent on the Stone Street Elementary campus. Now Stokely had received approval from the black leadership in Greenwood to put up the tent, but then the white power there had overruled these blacks, and told Stokely he couldn't put up the tent. And, of course, Stokely being the guy that he was, and like most of us, it's our school, it's our community. He's going to erect the tent anyway. So now he's in jail.

The marchers are on their way to Greenwood. They don't know nothing about what's happening in Greenwood. They are headed there with the understanding that we are going to be able to put up here. Okay? So now that Stokely's in jail, and the marchers are coming, Cleve, myself, James Jones, and whoever this other person, got together and talked. I said, "We are going to stay in Greenwood."

So how are we going to do it? Okay. SNCC had once had an office in Greenwood. Our last SNCC office was right around the corner from a big [4:30:00] black park, that opened on all sides. Said, "What we're going to do, we're going to put up in this park." Said, "Well, the police." I said, "Look, what we do is we don't--we send a runner back to meet the marchers, and tell them to come into Greenwood by this route," we said, "and just tell them what's happening. Then we're going to stay in Greenwood. Don't tell the--them officials, the highway patrolmen, and the local sheriffs, and all of them up front, and in the rear."

So they--we went along the route that we wanted them to come. When this guy was on his way back, Cleve, and James Jones went to get Stokely out of jail. We, the marchers are approaching the city limits of Greenwood. We were out there telling people along this route that Stokely's coming to town, the marchers are coming to stay here tonight. Get out to the park, and--. [Laughter]

Look, we were thinking that maybe we'd have a few people, because now this park is right in the heart of the black community. So we--some people there who knew us from the past agreed to go to houses all around the park, and tell them to come to the park. Man, when we got there, and Stokely--and went and got Stokely out of jail, all the way when he was walking from where we had--the crowd was so big that we had to park the car, and walk to the park. About two streets, three streets over.

Now the policemen were out there on the highway. They didn't know what happened, how the marchers disappeared from following them. Then the ones behind trying to communicate with them. But by now we're in Greenwood, and circling that park. We had told them as soon as you circle the park, stop your cars, jump out, and fill up the park. But the park's now already full of the people there in Greenwood. So now we've just got that whole area. So somebody said, "I wonder what they're going to do." I said, "Well, they'll have to kill us all."

What would they--and the news media is there now, you remember. Now Stokely's coming all the way there. We went and met him, and he said, "We, us black people can't do nothing that the white people can't take away from us." He said, "We ain't got no counter-power. We need some black power. We need some black power," all the way there. As soon as he stepped up there on the stage with the target, and mentioned the black power, the news media, man, they defined black power for us, as you know, immediately. Stokely met--but now you

know black power originally came from Willie Ricks, one of Stokely's comrades who had been talking about black power all along. But now you think about this, and Miss Hamer defined black power for us. But you think about this: you're talking about registering blacks to vote in rural Alabama, rural Georgia, where we are the majority of the population, and in bigger cities, where we're majorities.

Now what are you going to get out of that? You've got thousands of blacks, hundreds of blacks who have never registered to vote. Now they're getting the chance to register to vote as a result of the Voting Rights Act, and federal registrars. Now black voters are going to be black power. Stokely said if we had said colored power, everything would have been all right, but the word black frightened people. You know what I mean? And, black power!

So my paper talks about what happened. How we did that. About King coming to speak in Indianola, to meet Fannie Lou Hamer's group. Fannie Lou had to go somewhere. She was not at the meeting at the courthouse. I was there. And if you look at that marker, that--.

EC: At the park?

CM: At the park, there I am, standing right there by Stokely. See, I had--when Stokely came into office, he named me one of his comrades in Mississippi, and gave me the responsibility to pull together his people, his folk in Mississippi, and bring all of our cars and things into one location. [4:35:00] Then to go from there. But so black power got to frighten people as a result of the media. Because, after all, I consider what we have now, especially in these areas, is black power.

Black power only means, Miss Hamer said, that we want to help determine some of our own destiny. To have something to say about our lives, you know? It's the media, and the scared people who got frightened about that, because all Americans have the right to vote, you

know? I mean, and to vote, it's the essence of our democracy. So there ought not to be a need for a Voting Rights Act. Why? Because all Americans ought to be able to vote. It's--and it ought not to be--and it ought to be such an amendment that forbids anybody to just take it. States ought not to be allowed to take it. It ought to be a national effort, because this is America, and--.

But we wouldn't have Obama in office if we didn't get--hadn't got a little power. And, you know, Freedom Summer, and all of this, with these young white people coming down here. The young people in this country put the boy in office. [Laughter]

EC: [Laughter]

CM: All right.

EC: Thank you, Mr. Mac.

CM: Yeah.

EC: Thank you.

CM: Thank you for coming and recording this.

EC: This is great. This is great.

Female 1: This has been a presentation of the Library of Congress, and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.

END OF INTERVIEW

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