

Interview with volunteer Jim Kates

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Natchez, MS.

By KZSU Project South

Institute of American History, Stanford University

Interview

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Natchez, Mississippi

White; male

FDP summer volunteer

Q: Why don't we just start by finding out a little bit about yourself--how old you are, where you go to school, where you were brought up...

A: I'm 20 years old, a student at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut,...grew up Elmsford and White Plains, New York.

Q: How long have you been involved with the Movement?

A: That's really a hard question to answer. Someone once asked me that and said, 'don't worry about all the psychological business.' I know that...actively since about 1963, the middle of 1963.

Q: This is when you were in college though?

A: No, I was in high school?

Q: Were you in high school? How many summers have you been south?

A: This is my second summer in Mississippi.

Q: Last summer you were down with COFO?

A: Right.

Q: Could you tell me a little about how you made your initial decision and all?

A: Well, I first heard about it when I thought I had other summer plans, thought I had a responsibility and a commitment, and I was really very sorry I couldn't come. And then the other thing fell through, and I had it open, and it's a combination of a lot of things. When I was...first started working in the North, I once saw a photograph and read a story about a month after Jimmy Travis had been shot in the back in Greenwood, and I remember remarking to a friend of mine at the time, 'I'll do all I can in the North, but I'll be damned if I'll come to Mississippi.' And... I don't know how it was that I ended up coming to Mississippi and now Jimmy Travis is one of my closest friends. I guess, you know, reading--I got involved for a while with French existentialism and things around that and, you know, intellectually that had something to do with it--the two ideas, the one that a man is defined by his acts not his words, and two, that it's not a question so much of what you accomplish as that you are doing something--the Camus

idea from Sisyphus...it's the struggle that's important.

Q: How about this? Was there any difference in your motivations?

A: Yeah, it was much much more of a personal commitment. this summer. This actually occurred over last summer. I like to fool around with words, and freedom songs give me ample change for that, and last summer before I...when I was in Ohio, I was singing verses, you know, like 'leave your home and leave your plow...go and vote for freedom now,' and by the end of the summer I was singing verses like, 'I'm getting sick and I'm getting tired of seeing my friends get beaten and fired.' It was that kind of change. It was a personal commitment and a personal feeling that people I knew and loved were in a situation I didn't like. Rather than an ideological thing.

Q: You've worked with both COFO and MFDP, and I wonder if you have any ideas about differences between the organizations. As to what they're trying to accomplish.

A: COFO is much more centralized than last year in terms of projects. It was also...it emphasized voter registration before the election, community organization was almost secondary. It was a way of achieving voter registration. This year, with the MFDP, community organization is a way of... voter registration is a way of achieving community organization. And the idea is to build up "pockets of power," to use John Lewis' phrase. Where people have a consciousness of what power is, and what they might be able to do with it.

Q: What kind of thing have you been trying to do in Natchez this year? Well, what have you been doing?

A: In Natchez, our main job has been to organize the community to realize that it has some kind of potential. To set up... it has never had a strong FDP organization, and that's really our first goal, to get it interested--and that's really not too difficult--in the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, to get it...to get the people of Natchez involved in it, so they can become a functioning part of this party which is for the Mississippi people.

Q: What kind of success have you had?

A: In those terms it's much too early to say. We just got around to having our first precinct meetings, of which the response was mostly favorable, and apparently very spirited and very involved. But it's going to be months and maybe years, before you know whether anything has been accomplished.

Q: Would you care to make any contrasts between your work this summer and your work last summer?

A: It's very difficult. Last year I was working in a rural

community, with a certain set of givens in a certain part of the state. This year, I'm working in an urban community with an entirely different set of givens. In a part of the state that has always been kind of legendary in the movement for its terror. Well, Pánola has always been, because of court orders and things like that, and it was a fairly open county. I mean, there's hardly any comparison. I mean, comparisons in the attitude of the project, which I don't know if that has anything to do with Natchez, or Batesville.. I seem to have seen it...last year, there was an exuberance, a sort of a spirit, which I sort of put down to the new blood. The new ideas that were being put into the movement and into Mississippi. And this spirit is still very very much apparent and very much alive among the people of Mississippi, but everyone who's worked in Mississippi, and who's been involved, either constantly or intermittently, there seems to be a whole air of fatigue about the whole thing. Just an air of tiredness. Bob Moses talked about it last year, and we didn't really understand what it was. And I think I'm beginning to realize. You know, it's an awfully hard job; the sense that gets pounded into you, well, it comes very slowly, and then suddenly you realize that way down, from the innards, it suddenly makes you very tired.

Q: Do you think this is going to mean either an end or a slowing down of the movement.

A: No. Certain people, this affects them and they move away from the movement. Others try to analyze it in themselves; but most of the people just go on working, and not much differently from the way they did before, if I can speak from personal experience. It doesn't make any difference to them; they still have the same ideals, and they have the same value sense of what's important and what's being done, only in the sense of that they begin to feel different things. But we keep on working, and we keep on wanting to come back, even with this. I'm sorry I'm leaving soon, and I'm going to want to come back. And I will come back, even though I feel this very very deeply, and I feel very many ways in which I will be very very glad to get back to the North. I know that the minute I'm North I'm going to want to come south again. And already I don't want to leave. I'm rationalizing myself day to day that I'm not leaving, having to stay over 'til Monday, and therefore I'll stay 'til Wednesday. That kind of thing.

Q: You spoke about your desire to live in the South; is this something which has developed since you became involved in the movement?

A: Yes. Working in the Delta area of Mississippi, I came very much to love it. The people there that I lived among, the black people, and to feel that perhaps someday I could live

peaceably among them, in terms of friendship with the white people. I don't know; my whole involvement with the South goes back a long ways. When I was a kid, I was a civil war buff, and idol-worshipped Robert E. Lee. There was no more ardent defender of the confederacy, until I became older and realized what the whole thing was about. And maybe that's why I'm going into this thing. Some people come down here with a hatred of the South, not willing to accept anything. Constructive, that is, about the South, the Southern white man. But I guess I came from the opposite direction, so it's harder to pull that into me.

Q: As a Northern white student, working among Negroes from the south, do you sense any difficulties, any barriers to communication? To getting ideas across, to interchange of ideas?

A: Yeah, particularly when there's a language difficulty. We use words in a sense that is not the same sense in which they're used by the people down here, sometimes. That doesn't take too long to overcome. And after that, there's really... I haven't found too much. My personal way of going about things has always been to let the other person set it up, and then work on his terms, be they agricultural, or Biblical, in the terms of what this person is involved of. And I find the communication on that way is the easiest part of the whole business.

Q: How about the FDP itself, or within SNCC itself? Is there any feeling about the outsider coming in to the movement?

A: On the part of certain individuals, yes. But this is completely understandable. These individuals...and after a while in the South, I become kind of one of them. You sneer at the people who come down, who are naive, and it's not exactly an open antagonism, but the newcomer, even if he's worked somewhere before, if he's white--and there's a subtle and secret feeling on the part of some Negro people who have been working for a long time--it's not a question of antagonism, but they have to wait until this person proves himself in some way or other, before they can accept him. With the majority, I'd say that's about as far as it goes. Oh, you get the occasional person who's too soured on white people, and he's even soured and vicious about Northern Negroes.

Q: I'd like to turn to the part which religion plays in the movement. And also the part that...well, first of all, was religion any type of motivation in your decision to come down?

A: No, it was no motivation on my part. But you might say,

in a very colloquial way, that I "got religion" since I came down. I've begun, since I've been down, and the more I've thought about it, the more I've realized that religion, whether we like it or not, is a very very potent force. And I have seen what you don't see too often in the North, I have seen--without any scoff at the word religion--I have seen true Christianity in the South. And perhaps christianity with a small 'c', which some people would call communism with a small c. But it's a spiritual thing, too, in a way,; it's a communion of minds and a "look here, I'm with you" type of thing. "You are my brother." A very very real feeling of that. And it's very very hard to resist. I went back last summer, and my father, who was opposed to the whole thing, says, "Oh, you sing hymns instead of freedom songs. You got religion now." And sometimes when I'm in one of my bitchier moods, I oppose him and I say "No. You're all wrong there." But other times, I think...and when I'm supposed to speak to church groups sometimes, I have brought this out, that maybe he's right. Maybe the whole concept of freedom, it's maybe a chauvinistic type of religion. But I'm still not certain of what the religion means, if we go radically, to what religion means as a binding together, then yes, I've got religion. But consciously, and subconsciously that binds me to other people. All this is speaking personally, of course. It's the only way I can really go about it on this. And in terms of the changing of the concept of God, or even better, believing or disbelieving in the concept of God, my civil rights work did get me interested in a religion course at school, where I read some of the modern theologians. And I was very impressed; very very much impressed. Interested, in what Tillich, Robinson, these fellows, have to say, and their full concept of God, which I suppose, I don't give it the name God, but it comes very close to what I feel about the world.

Q: You mentioned a feeling on the part of your parents--or your father, at least--about the movement. Are they generally opposed to it?

A: Most parents or my parents?

Q: Your parents.

A: Well, my father is a Northern white liberal in the most derogatory sense of the term. He's thinking he's doing well when he hires a Negro who's not qualified for a job, and then when the Negro doesn't do well, he says, "See, look what I told you." He thinks my work down South is increasing crime on the New York subways, and my mother, on the other hand, works for the New York SNCC office, is very very much involved. And the whole rest of our family is, except my father. My father is...he makes money. He has a family textile firm, and he has a small business investment corporation, which means lending money to make more, and he also has little

real estate businesses, here and there. He was involved, by the way, in a very celebrated New York case in which he was refusing to rent to a Negro family. He probably has a couple of other irons in the fire.

Q: I'd like to turn specifically to your own political ideas; to whether they had any specific influence on your decision to come down here, initially or this year, since FDP does work primarily with voter registration.

A: Yeah; in a way, I'm basically apolitical, as has been pointed out on this project many times by the more political people on the project. I in no way identify...I identify myself with issues more than with...by wrapping things up into a nice little label. I suppose people are doing more and more of that these days. You could call me a civil libertarian.

Q: What about the ideas which have been expressed by a number of civil rights speakers, that you tend to identify yourself more with the peace movement, for example?

A: I agree, because I personally...the peace movement, because that's the broadest term, and we'll use it that way, but since I'm a liberal, I might start qualifying and getting more specific, is something that I personally support. And I think it's something very basically bound up with civil rights and the whole triple revolution. The thing they call the triple revolution. And I can see the interdependence of all these, and that when you work with one, you find yourself working on the other. And at times, I'm surprised at the way my thinking has evolved, or devolved, just by starting from given point A, and not even moving anywhere, I find myself at point B just because a lot of the...now I'm not thinking about the other staff workers around here...but the local people, the people I am around, you know, I found myself --since they think very radically, because they have a tendency to reduce things to the lowest, to their roots.

Q: How do you feel about the movement taking a position on something like Vietnam, for instance?

A: I believe the Vietnam thing is quite important, for a number of reasons. I'm not sure whether "the movement" should take a position on Vietnam; I think that leaders, acknowledged leaders, individuals who aren't acknowledged leaders--the masses of the movement--individuals, should be very free to express their opinions on it. And my personal opinion, which comes very largely from working in the movement, and this is echoed in the movement by people who do work there, is that there is a good deal of hypocrisy, of being basically against war myself, for basically moral reasons, but which I wouldn't attempt to put on someone else, if we get around to defense down here.

we'll get into that one, but I guess just from a rational or a logical point of view, the whole thing in Vietnam becomes absurd for me, from the perspective of Mississippi. The whole idea of fighting for freedom, or committing yourself, and I suppose this isn't my beef alone. I usually don't talk about this in canvassing. There are a couple of people I know, who do bring this sort of thing up, talking about Vietnam in canvassing, but I usually don't. But I've heard other people start talking to me and among the Negro people I have talked to, there is intense bitterness about the war. From the gentleman sitting in his porch on the lane who enjoys reading the newspaper, and who tends not to get involved with any kind of news, who thinks all news is just something to read, it's amazing, you know, how much he reads between the lines. And the judgments he makes. To the drunk who wanders in to the office, and who lost two brothers during the Second World war, and who is very bitter about it. "Where's this freedom I fought for?"

Q: Why don't we turn then to the idea of nonviolence in the movement? And particularly to the idea of defense; you were talking about that.

A: I personally am nonviolent. Why, I suppose that goes back to when did I actually join the movement. It goes back to a good many things--where, when, how...psychologists could probably do almost as good a job on it as I could. It would take hours, probably, to go back to the first time that I as a little kid was beaten up by the bully in my neighborhood and decided that blows were wrong--since I was a little kid and would always lose anyway. It has...but I would find it very very hard. I've hit people in anger, I have a tantrum-type temper, which I've learned to control. And it terrifies me; just the idea of my hitting someone terrifies me. I just can't let myself go. So I sort of externalize this, I guess, maybe because I see in myself the potential for so much violence. But I'd be so much afraid to unleash it. And we were talking about this yesterday, you know, that's a bad psychological thing to do to pen up all this inside--but now, the other ways of releasing this violence have become extremely much a natural reaction. Not just a stopgap at this point, but that I've found the other outlets for it. And for me, violence isn't part of my life, and I just can't conceive of it being so. But I will never in anything, especially with what I believe in, I just could not just stand by and let myself be killed. I first got into this before I--well, it was in 1963, the year I got involved in the movement, that I also got to know fairly well Conrad Lynd, the lawyer for Robert Williams in that North Carolina thing. I did a paper--an essay for the NAACP, for our high school--on rational violence, which is my term for self-defense type of thing, as opposed to any rational violence of the Klan-type thing. As contrasted and/or compared with nonviolent resistance. Direct action. Taking as my two sources, of the

two points of dialogue on the issue--and perhaps I was a little naive at this point--Robert Williams and Dr. King. And I wound up in that paper coming up for nonviolent resistance, but certainly seeing reasons for rational violence and being in no way able to condemn it. And it's maybe a very very fence-straddling position, but it's still where I am.

Q: Do you see possibility of force in Natchez?

A: I myself could not join anything like a Deacons' Chapter, I think; you know, assuming one existed, but I'd be very grateful if they were here, and I can see where they would be useful as a defensive thing. The minute they would let themselves be released from a defensive position, in a direct action or an aggressive way, I think somehow the only thing I could do if I were involved in something like this, in a community where this were going on, would be to --it's a personal thing, but the thing that surprises me tremendously, this hasn't been done before, not on a large scale before, but it's now all over the South, since the first World War, if not before, and I don't know why this sort of thing hasn't come up already. Let me give an example. We were in Tate County, last year I talked to a small group of farmers, and their first questions, were "Where are the guns? Give us the guns, and we'll fight." And I would start talking to them, and I talked about the fact that we didn't have guns, and I'd talk to them on the basis of "you have a spiritual weapon, and nonviolence is the only way God approves of it" and they didn't like that. So the only thing I could say to them was "look, men, let's sit around in a big circle and talk about what the Federal Government would do if we started a full-scale race war here in Mississippi. You'd lose. You'd lose everything that's been gained so far." And on that basis, I will preach nonviolence. But on no other basis, with any kind of justice or anything in my mind. It's just a very practical thing.

Q: Now back to the FDP. What do you think are or should be their goals regarding the formation of a third party or ...are they just trying to live as an obstruction to the structure?

A: Ideally, I think they're trying to form a third party. Mississippi has--you know, its' party system has gone too far for leverage to be applied, and I think what we need is a kind of sweep. Now later, after having swept Mississippi, whether a party is absorbed back on the general power structure of the country, is something else again. This depends so much...I have a feeling this might be a possibility, no matter what the political convictions of the workers, the full or part time workers. The party decisions still rest very much in the hands of the people whose aspirations,

whose very thought processes are very much in line with our whole social structure. And they aren't out for a whole lot of change. Now a good many of them are, all by their little lonesome selves, without any "agitation," but I think basically the majority are still for achieving within the social framework, with some certain fundamental changes, I think they have a vague feeling that this will work.

Q: What about the challenge? What relationship does your work here have to the challenge?

A: Well, the stronger the FDP is in Mississippi, so by working in Natchez and building up a stronger FDP, the more hope there is for being able to say, when the challenge finally hits the floor of the house, we'll have a strong organization that is responsibly able to handle political affairs. More than that, suppose the challenge wins and the FDP is not seated and they call for reelections. Well, the FDP will be tremendously important in choosing of candidates, in helping to supervise, the way a political party does, the entire political setup. The new elections, to keep them from falling right back into the old power structure, to keep Whitten and John Leeds from being reelected, by the same old people.

Q: How do you feel about the recent effort to boycott the draft?

A: Again, as I say, the FDP is made of the decisions of Mississippi Negroes, and it seems to be bitterness with the war and with the stepup of the draft, that it seems to be very very high. And if a majority of them are of this feeling, then as a party which is representative, the FDP should express this. I think that as long as they have something to say on the war in Vietnam, or any issue, so long as they do it representatively, and get representation of the people who are in the part, I would not agree with them, but I think it's a good idea.

Q: How do you feel about the relative success of last summer, the summer's projects, and this summer's project, and the advisability of staying in next year?

A: It's a completely different experience. Last summer's project, and probably the most blatant success could be marked by the voluntary return. I'm one of the few of my acquaintances who came back down South this summer. One of them is working in London, another is in New Haven, another is in Middletown, Connecticut, one is in Chicago, this is just off the top of my head, one is in Harlem...perhaps the largest success in terms of overall sweep in the movement is that these people became tremendously more conscious. We all did; I did myself, of our own communities, in a way

that we never had been before. I think the real success, then, is not what we brought to Mississippi, but what Mississippi brought to us. Success within this state has to be measured in a completely different way. My usual way of doing it is talking in terms of a white lady in a county I was working in, talking to a Negro lady, about something her son did. Or of a white drugstore fellow who said "sir" to a Negro customer. To me, that was a gigantic split in the three-hundred year old, well, actually in Mississippi it's only two hundred years old, way of life. That's a break wide open, far more than the number of people registered.

Q: What do you think of the younger Negroes in Natchez? Are they more cautious or more willing than their parents or grandparents to move?

A: Yeah, at first; I mean, they're more willing to take that first move, but when it comes right down to the actual, to getting into the work, say, to organization, the older people are much more willing to take it up. The people tend to be very very impatient. They're all for voter registration, they're all for direct action, which is good--that's still needed. But there's a lot of the nitty gritty work of going and talking to people every day, sitting around, talking out things, and seeing what we can do, and it's the adults who really come to the fore here. The youngsters kind of stand on the outside, jumping from one leg to the other, saying "When are we going to do it?" When it comes time to be done, they're very much there, in the front line. Sometimes I see a little bit of the cruelty of the movement in the eyes of older people, in things that we know are to really achieve a profound change only after a period of years. Some of them won't live that long; and they sit there on their doorsteps talking, or they sit in the meeting, talking, or listening, about it...and there's just something in their eyes when they say, "I hope I see that, I hope I live to see that." And you know, there's something of the cruelty, because you know that a lot of these things that seem--we can't deceive ourselves, they're not that close. A truly free Mississippi isn't that close.

Q: Why don't you elaborate a little more on this idea of fatigue that you mentioned within the movement?

A: Yeah, well, the contrast comes with the people who come down for the first time. They're not too many; most of the people who are down in Mississippi this year, at least more than other years--whereas last year there were this huge influx of students who'd never been South, they were very much filled with this very real idea of "it can be done, it has to be done", and this we haven't lost. But there's a very very much more real sense of how far there is to go and what's against us. And--like one of the fellows who came

down here this year said, and he was half joking but half serious, he said he hadn't seen any action. He'd been canvassing, and he was a writer. He said he had been canvassing, and he said, "You canvass ten days, you know what it's like;" you know what it's like but it has to be done. It's the basis for getting to know people, which is necessary for the whole thing to be built up. It's necessary to get them to know you, to know that you're involved in them. And it's this kind of thing...there certainly is no desire for action among these people. In fact, there's very much a feeling of getting through it, knowing it has to be done. Getting through it. We're all very very--really, tired; it's an exhausting thing. I mentioned one thing--when I went back last summer, a friend of mine remarked after several months, "You look more like yourself now; when you came back from the South, you looked ten years older." And I was too pushed to feel it last summer, or too much involved in the newness of work to feel it, but this summer I feel it, and I find myself having a genuine longing to be back in the North, where I can be 20 years old again. Where I can... and this comes in our feeling about the local people; we talk about the local folks' possibilities, and getting the local folks aware of this, so they can take over. And at first, this is just an idea; this is just an idea because we think it should be done. Because we think it's the right way of going about thing--people managing their own affairs. But in addition to this--not replacing it, because that's still very much there--but in addition to this, for a while, there comes the feeling of, "man, I want the local people to take it; I'm tired of having it myself. Please, it's your business. Take it away from me." "I've had enough." And this is in addition. This doesn't stop your work so much; you keep on working, toward the same end. And maybe you never say this aloud, maybe there's just this little nagging voice. It comes out maybe in a very outside way--I'll be very relieved when the local people can take it, and I can do something else. In fact, we had something like this last summer--these people can register themselves. There's an acceptance of responsibility, there's a work within responsibility--it's a tiredness of being tied to this kind of responsibility, that it should have been taken care of a long time ago, and that there's still a long ways to go.

Q: At this point, do you think you'll come back next summer?

A: I think definitely I'll be coming back next summer. I expect I'll be coming back during Christmas vacation, too. Which is an opportunity I didn't have last year, just from physical circumstances. But barring marriage, death, or some other disaster, I don't see any reason why I won't be back South. Maybe not in Mississippi; maybe back in Mississippi; I don't know. Louisiana, Alabama...

Q: How about this idea of fear? Do you find it in the local community as well, of the Klan, the White Citizens, and so on? And on your own part

A: Well, it's a very real fear; the reasons for fear are quite legitimate and rational on everyone's part. That's so in Panola County, where I was last year. There were... well, we were hearing over the radio about churches being burned all over the state. Well, none have ever been burned in Panola County; and the people there, the white folks, take things fairly placidly. Yeah; but I've been hearing about churches being burned all over the state. This kind of thing; or I'm afraid that they're going to come bomb my house. Well, they've been bombing Negro houses for years without being involved in the movement. Yeah, but I'm afraid they're going to come bomb my house. You know, just a thing that's there. It's a defense, it's a block. Down here in Natchez, there's a much more genuine fear. You just can't go up to someone and say, "Now look, man..." Whereas we could in Panola, we could say, "You don't have to worry; they're not going to burn your house down. If you all go together, they're not going to fire you from your jobs." We were able to say that quite honestly in Panola county; but you couldn't say that in Natchez. It would be a lie. It would be a lie that no one would believe. People know much better than that. Fear on my part is something, well um...I had fear instilled in me before I left Oxford, Ohio; I was scared stiff, before I left Oxford, Ohio, last year, which was a very good thing. And getting to Mississippi in a way was an anticlimax, in that I found that...I mean, you set up, in Oxford, Ohio, strict security regulations, which were to be followed in Mississippi. Well, you find that these have to be bent if you want to accomplish something, and by living with these bends, that's a letup. And even when something happens, it's a letup. And you don't realize how much of that is still in you, or I didn't realize how much of that was still in me, until I left Mississippi, until I left the state, and I felt that I was scared. And again, it took me a very short time...I came to Jackson, and was driving with some people--came in by plane to Jackson, and was driving with some people from the airport into Jackson, and by the time I was into Jackson I was mostly readjusted. It was later, when I was in Jackson jail, that I was totally readjusted to the Mississippi air. And...but with this sort of knowledge now, looking forward, it seems just natural to feel any general real sense of fear, and if walking out at night, even, I don't very often feel any real sense of fear.. going into the jailhouse...but I know that it's a negative thing; when I leave Mississippi, I'm not going to feel it; I'm going to feel a lack of it. It becomes just something you live with so much, you sort of transcend it--you just say, "Okay, I'm afraid; so what?" And then you begin forgetting you're afraid, because it's unimportant, it's irrelevant to what you're doing.

Q: Have you been involved in any incidents?

A: Nothing really crucial, you know, with my back against

a tree and twenty Klansmen surrounding me. Last year in Pynola County, there was a time when we heard shots down the road after some other workers had left, but we found out later that the shots were fired into the air, to frighten us. When there were people out in front, and sure, I was afraid that night. There were a lot of people around the car, and the police were coming and talking with the people out there, and I was afraid then, and at times in the same town, when I was on the street surrounded by 8 men who all--eight white men, who all worked across the street, and who were looking very threatening. I was afraid then. Nothing happened. You know, like I became conscious of my fear the other night, when we had been surrounded by Klan cars and then the police came up and picked us up. It becomes relative; these extra fears, this being afraid at a certain time is an extra fear that comes on, on a basic level of tension. And I was...so this again came up when three Klan cars surrounded us, and the police picked us up; we were driving toward downtown, and after the police car picked us up and didn't tell us what we were there for--this is a common enough thing in Mississippi, and it wasn't as long as the other times I've talked about--but I did feel uncertain...which I would interpret, because of the basic thing, as being scared stiff. But it wasn't what...it's not much above what you feel naturally. It disappeared, and I was completely at home again, completely relaxed, when he turned in toward the direction of the police station, instead of continuing toward town. Because that would have been again the point where my fear would have come up, with the Klansmen around, if the police had started taking me out of town. And this disappeared, when we headed into the police station. In the police station, I'd be faced with a set of givens which I was already familiar with. Probably one of the safest...well, not the safest, but one of the most comfortable places, the least tense places in Mississippi, is a police station. Because there you're dealing with variables, but variables against a certain set of things which you know are going to roll out in a certain way. When you walk the streets, or when you're sitting in the Freedom House, or something, you have none of this. Anything can happen, literally. Only a certain number of things are going to happen in the police station.

Q: Let's turn to something else again; what do you think is the future of the FDP in Mississippi? Are they going to find more volunteers here? Are they going to want to recruit more volunteers from out of state?

A: I have no idea; have absolutely no idea. This is summertime, and that's a lot of months in between. There's a challenge to come up in between. There's a new Congress convening; there are local elections going on, and there's a good chance, that if the FDP continues to grow, I wouldn't be

surprised to see a complete change in emphasis, or a complete change in leadership of the FDP, which could change the direction. I couldn't make any guess on that.

Q: How do you feel about the leadership of the FDP? I mean, regarding personalities, or general philosophies?

A: Lawrence ^uGyot, I respect tremendously. I've known him since Oxford well, and he's just, he's a fairly strong person, especially in terms of carrying things, carrying things spiritually on. He exudes a strength. Mrs. Hamer's a very warm, wonderful person. Mrs. Devine, whom I know a little less...I can say only that I respect her in terms of leadership of the FDP. The only other leaders that I know are grass roots people. And my opinions of them, taken individually, would take a few years. I mean, I can talk about the local county leaders in the county I knew last year, the people...people I am really glad to have known in my life, glad to have had the opportunity of meeting. Not rabble rousers, not even real agitators; they're just very strong, very good workers. A real moral vision that they have deigned to share with me.

Q: Getting personal for a moment, do you have any real career aspirations; do you know what you'd like to do after you're finished with school?

A: Yeah; I'd like to write; and probably when my talent has been tested one way or the other, I'll probably be found wanting or not wanting, and if I'm found wanting, I'll probably turn, like most other frustrated writers, to being a frustrated high school teacher, with a manuscript in the drawer. If I'm not wanting, maybe I'll be a writer.

Q: Could you give me an example?

A: Well, when and if I had, and I certainly hope that I will be engaged occupationally one way or the other, so I will have freedom of choice of living, I think it will be in some sort of Delta community.

Q: That's also one thing about your commitment to civil rights; this is something you intend to live with.

A: I think I just grew up feeling that way. For instance, when I first announced to my mother, without asking her advice, but announced to her, that I was going to come to Mississippi last summer, her reaction was "I can't stop you." Well, I'm under 21, so you can sign a release, legally, and stop me. And she said, I can't stop you; the way I've brought you up, I've brought you up to feel this way. And if I stopped you now, it would be a complete negation of everything you've taught yourself and everything I've

taught you. And so it's true, that a good deal of this, I suppose, has been, to put it in the very best 20th-century phrases, "a wise mother," or something. I happened to be very fortunate to grow up in a community which was not especially liberal, but which was very mixed, which fact I did not take advantage of, really, until I'd come to Mississippi. Then I realized how much of the joys of that I'd missed. But it certainly gave me a much more open thing.. White Plains being almost half Negro now, as opposed to Scarsdale, right next door, which is...one economic level, one cultural level population.

Q: Let's come back now to Natchez itself. What is the situation regarding the political structure? In regard to the racial situation? How's the mayor feel, how's the police chief feel--does the police department react?

A: The mayor...the mayor, it's hard to talk about the mayor, because some people would call him a Southern moderate, but I'd call him a little bit less moderate than a Southern moderate as the term is as much charged with connotations as a "Northern liberal". In terms on the race question, his house has been bombed by the Klan because he hasn't taken a strong enough stand about race segregation, but he certainly has been very very far from taking any positive commitment, even in favor of neutrality. There is one Negro on the police force, there are two Negro deputy sheriffs; these men are in inferior positions within the police force, and they're there mainly for show--the Negro policeman, for example, is not allowed to arrest whites. But...or white civil rights workers...in which case he is forced to be the arresting officer, usually. In a circumstance where it's possible. The police department...the police have been the ones...or among the ones.. who, as they pass the Freedom House here, just walking on the street, say "white nigger, white trash"...at the white workers. "Nigger and fuck you" at the Negroes. Well, they're no different; after all, they're just from the people around here, and they're like them.

Q: I wonder if you gave any thought this year, before you came down, to coming down with another organization, and if so why?

A: Well, my choice at that point was either coming back to Mississippi or working in the North. And why Mississippi, well, my original thought was getting back to Pinola County, because of the organization I was working with, even though the organization wasn't such that I happened to agree with their philosophy. But because of the personal commitment I felt to the people there, too. You know; I feel myself responsible, not in any sort of paternalistic way, but as

one close friend for another.

Q: Do you have any ideas of differences between FDP, SCLC, CORE--does each have an association with a particular type of approach?

A: Less so than usual. SNCC and CORE are kind of...are usually, I find, moving closer and closer together. SNCC moved into the area of community organizations well before CORE; CORE became involved with direct action. But now CORE is starting community organization. And there's really no separating the two, direct action and community organization. Because where the community organizes, it either organizes around direct action, or the reason the organization gets together, in the process, there is direct action. I find them moving closer and closer together. There certainly is a basic difference between...well, the classic ones, the SNCC and NAACP, in terms of philosophy and leadership. The NAACP believes in first working with the proven leaders of the community, who are often the approved leaders because of qualities which do not necessarily make them good leaders of civil rights movements. SNCC on the other hand, believes in starting at the bottom and letting the leaders build themselves up, work themselves out, you might say. And of course, at the moment I happen to feel personally much closer to SNCC. I feel none of the gigantic quarrel with the NAACP that some people do; I get very exasperated with them sometimes, and...SCLC has a tendency to work with given leadership, too; but they are certainly much more sensitive to the natural leadership. After all, in a way Dr. King himself is a product of natural leadership.

Q: What about the idea of extending the movement to the North--what do you think?

A: There's no need to extend the movement to the North; the movement is in the North in a very real way. You know, the minute things started happening, they started happening all over. Certainly there needs to be work in the North, in a more subtle way, in many cases, than the South, though; different procedures, or procedures have to be modified. This is true, though; when I first came to Natchez, and realized how urban Natchez is, and my experience had been in a rural county, and most of the SNCC work is in rural areas, always has been--I thought that what we might be able to use here, is just someone who's worked with the SDSSE things. Just to give us an urban perspective; now maybe he had experience with the race problem in its intensity, as you'll find it in Natchez, in its overt intensity. But it exists, certainly, in Newark and parts of New York. Working with the people who are accustomed to working in Mississippi, it would be a tremendous addition, the urban stuff.

END OF TAPE