

MEMORANDUM

To: Tim West



Fm: Joe Sinsheimer

Re: Interview With Mattie Pilcher

Dt: December 18, 1998

Enclosed is an interview that the historian Howard Zinn conducted with Mrs. Mattie Pilcher in 1963. Mrs. Pilcher was active in the 1963 civil rights demonstrations in Greenwood and Zinn interviewed her for a book he was writing on the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC: The New Abolitionists).

In the interview, Pilcher discussed: 1) her personal family history in Greenwood 2) the changes in Greenwood's race relations as a result of civil rights activity 3) the arrival of SNCC coordinator Samuel Block in Greenwood 4) her attendance at a SNCC mass meeting featuring comedian Dick Gregory 5) her attendance at SNCC-sponsored voter registration classes 6) and her son's decision to attend Tougaloo College.

Interview with Mrs. Mattie Pilcher
Interviewed by Howard Zinn
Greenwood, Mississippi
August 15, 1963

Howard Zinn: Well. Mrs. Pilcher I will tell you what I wanted to talk to you about. Sort of about your experiences, and things about your family, and about what it has been like here in Greenwood, and if you lived any other places. And questions like that. I will ask you questions from time to time and you can just go on and say whatever you feel like. What we want to do is get an idea of So let me ask you first, have you been living in Greenwood all your life?

Mrs. Pilcher: Yes I have, near all my life. My father moved to Greenwood when I was three years old. My mother died then in '23. And he married-- we went out in the hills and lived with our grandmother. And we stayed out there until oh I guess about five or six years.

Zinn: Just for a couple of years. Did she have a farm, your grandmother?

Pilcher: Yes, they did, but they worked, you know, on another man's place. But not far they had a farm out here in _____. See he married a lady. And then after he married, see he was out there. And we lived with him. And then I married, and then I moved back home.

Zinn: Hmmm. I see. Did your husband come from Greenwood?

Pilcher: My husband he lived in _____. That husband that I had then he died. Well, he died in Chicago. He went up there with his peoples to work. And so he died while he had pneumonia?

Zinn: In Chicago. What made him go back, he went back to Chicago to work?

Pilcher: Oh well, jobs. You couldn't get anything better than thirty-- it is garbage, it is poor. You couldn't even get jobs. People were just going away on trucks, you know, loads going the ... way to other places to work. Salt Lake City, Pascagoula, you know places like that to get work to do. ...

Zinn: And then you say your husband went to Chicago to try to get some work. And he got pneumonia?

Pilcher: And he stayed up there and after that he died with his

mother. Of course we weren't there.

Zinn: Did you go up to Chicago?

Pilcher: Yes, I did. I went up there and stayed a little while and liked it up there.

Zinn: Did you like it up there?

Pilcher: Well, why I didn't like it was because they stayed bad luck all the time. Wasn't used to it, you know. Lived up there for about four or five months.

Zinn: And then you came back to Greenwood?

Pilcher: Well, I came back here, home.

Zinn: Did you have children then?

Pilcher: This was our home.

Zinn: Yeah.

Pilcher: I said well, I am going back where my luck can go different. 'Cause I just couldn't get used to it, you know. It was kind of hard with me. But probably I would have gotten use to it, but I just wanted to come back home where I could walk out. They would go off and I didn't know the town.

Zinn: It is a big city and kind of confusing to anybody. So you felt more comfortable here in Greenwood?

Pilcher: In that way.

Zinn: In that way, but not in other ways (laughter).

Pilcher: I really liked things up there. I liked the way jobs were up there. In that sewing factory up there they had machines, you know, and rolls, you know. And a colored lady and a white lady and a colored lady and a white lady and a colored lady and a white lady, and I will just pass on down, you know. I liked that because I always liked to try to sew. And I just thought that was wonderful. But I wanted to come back home.

Zinn: You worked in a factory there?

Pilcher: No, my sister-in-law did. And she just carried me there to show me how you know things were.

Zinn: Did you have children at that time?

Pilcher: Yes, I had one boy, one child.

Zinn: Did he go back to Greenwood with you?

Pilcher: Oh, he was a baby. I brung (brought) him back here with me and that is his him on that picture up there.

Zinn: Oh. Where did he graduate, where is he graduating from in that picture?

Pilcher: Down here in this school, when school was out.

Zinn: High school in Greenwood? What was it called, was it called ... ?

Pilcher: Greenwood _____ Street High.

Zinn: I see. And then when you came back here, you lived in town and got married again?

Pilcher: Well, I stayed single from ... when Paul was six, up until 1950 something. It was a while. And then I decided, well, I needed help with my children that had grown. When I married I had two, well when my husband died I was with this girl, with the girl in the kitchen in there. And after he died that gave me two children. And he had a little social security ... it was about \$17 a month from that social security. So I would live off of that for eating and clothes the best way we could you know. And then my Dad he would help me a little. And we were living in his house. But it was miserable living though.

Zinn: It was. You were living in his house?

Pilcher: Yes, I was. I lived in one of his houses.

Zinn: Where was that? Right down the street there? What did your father do in Greenwood, what kind of work did he do?

Pilcher: Oh, he farmed, after he, well he carpentered, he built houses, and filled manholes too.

Zinn: Where, how did he learn carpentry?

Pilcher: Oh I don't know.

Zinn: Just picked it up I guess.

Pilcher: Well, let me think. I remember hearing him say one day when he was a boy he just decided that he would build a house, a play house or something like that. And he

decided that he would just build that house and at one time he just-- he said he could build a house and he just built a house. And after he built that little house out in the hills, he built several more for people. And he said that they were wonderful houses like they built them in that day. And after he left--well he made crops and the man taken everything he had that year over where he lived. And he came in the house and Well, he left my mother with her mother, my two brothers and myself. And he came to Greenwood and started working around, helping people build houses and with other carpentry.

Zinn: He had been out in the country before then ?

Pilcher: And he just started going like that. And he got it so that he could build any kind of house that he wanted to.

Zinn: Is he living now?

Pilcher: Yes, he is living. He is working. He is tearing down a house now. He is just showing them how to tear it down. Oh is he old, he is getting to the age where he can't stand to do things like that now. So the men asked him would he just come down there and, you know, show them to save some of it. I don't know.

Zinn: When you got married again what was your husband doing, what kind of work was he doing?

Pilcher: Are you talking about this husband that I have now. Well, he was waiting on railroads.

Zinn: Oh yeah. What kind of work did he do on the railroad.

Pilcher: Oh you know, cut right of ways. And would lay the ties. And then they would lay them and have big hammers and lay those spikes in them. That was the kind of work he was doing. And so after I married him he seemed to do, well it was better than just me one trying to live and get these Well, I thought it was excellent, because it allowed time to live, to work and to do around and carry things that I would need. I just really couldn't get them because \$17 a month and I am trying to feed two children. It wouldn't feed us and buy clothes, you know.

Zinn: Is he doing railroad work now too?

Pilcher: No he works for _____ Engineer. They cut right of ways, push it on the road, riverbanks like that.

- Zinn: I see. Has he been doing this for a long time?
- Pilcher: Well, he has been doing this for two years. Now what I mean about two years, is summer. Now when it gets cold then he doesn't work.
- Zinn: What does he do when the cold weather begins, find work?
- Pilcher: Well, he finds work anywhere he can get work.
- Mrs. Zinn: Did you find it hard to get by in those days, to feed the children?
- Pilcher: That's right.
- Zinn: What kind of work did he do before he got with this between the railroad work and the work he is doing now.
- Pilcher: Well, I will explain it to you the best I know. Best I have heard, you know, he told me. They was building--well I just don't know what this is-- but anyway, it was something over here between (Avenue) A and B in Greenwood. It was from like--they would make big cement, they had a lot of wells, and they were cementing pipes over, welding some of them. I don't know exactly what he was doing and what all of them were doing, but that was some of the work that was going on.
- Zinn: I see.
- Pilcher: And so he was over there working. But he was hired. See he didn't know anything about that kind of work too much. But after the men hired him he worked real--the man just liked the way he worked. And the man just kept him there until they got plum through with it.
- Zinn: Does he have trouble in the wintertime finding jobs, have there been long periods when he didn't have work.
- Pilcher: Yes, one winter he didn't work at all. He just sit down, it looked like to me. You know what I mean about sit down. He would go out and look for jobs, no jobs.
- Zinn: Was he able to collect any unemployment insurance?
- Pilcher: Well, he did. But now when he did this off the railroad he just, well sometimes he would pick cotton sometimes like that to try to help around until a check would come in, you know like that. Finally I

guess they drawed it all, what little it was. Well, they don't pay that much. And then what would he do--- let me see after he drawed that, well he went to cutting yards for people. You know, just regular way, just anywhere he could get a little job. They paid him fifty cents an hour to go work at 8:00 and work until 4:00 and 5:00 pm somedays at fifty cents an hour. No way you can make a living.

Zinn:

It is certainly not much. Were you working all this time too?

Pilcher:

No, I wasn't working. I was at home. I was sick. I stayed sick about-- well after I and him were married I had a set of twins and something happened to me and I wasn't, I was sick. I was too weak to work, you know. And the doctor said that it would be a long time before I would be able to any hard work. Well, I was working at home and you know I would do---so finally one day I told him well it is so hard for you to get a job I believe I will see if I can't me a job to help.

So I got a job helping out a lady at work, white lady. I worked there until I and her couldn't agree. And why we couldn't agree? There was another white lady asking me to work for her. And my children were going to school. And the teacher would sometimes say, well, tell your mother that we are going to have to have three dollars, two dollars for ... but anyway it was for, you know the children would parade and six different things you know. I forget what they call that thing.

Zinn:

From the school?

Pilcher:

From the school. Sometimes it would just be something that they had to have money for all the time. And so I told the white lady that I was working for that I had another job. And I could make more working at this job than I could for her on account that I would work overtime. And see all those times I got paid for that. Well, she had wanted me to work for her and no one else. And she said, "Well if you just can't work for me only," she said, "I just don't need you." And I told her-- no I called her and I told her well I am going to be working on your job. You see that I had already told her about this, there would be somedays I wouldn't meet your job, because I wanted to go on this job where I could make more. And she told me she said, "Well all right," she said, "you go on the job today." She just said you just come over here on Saturday. She said you just come to work on Saturday.

So I went to work Saturday morning and I did the work just like I always did. When she came in off of

her job at 1:00pm she said to me, she said, "Mattie, have you made up in your mind who you are going to work for." I told her, "Yes Ma'am," --that is what you have to say to them--"I thought I would do your job just like I told you, days they didn't need me. And days that they needed me. And I was-- now she wanted me to I outlined this to her, I wasn't working there but I told her about this job and that lady wanted me to work too. She says if that is the way you think you are going to work, she says, I just don't need you.

So I didn't go back. She paid me off. So I kept working at this job. I would go to work on this job at 9:30am, sometimes we would work until 9:30 at night. But I didn't mind on account that they would give me a little more.

Zinn: You worked there all day all week long?

Pilcher: No, it was just somedays. She had been a nice lady and knew that I had a family and children going to school and wanted to help me. She could of said, well Mattie I don't mind you working because on Monday and Tuesday I worked at her house, you know. They was out to the club. They don't work at all on Monday. And I worked for on Monday and Tuesday. And after Mondays and Tuesdays, well a job would come up after that sometimes and I was going to work because we got _____ too you know. Made more. And so she paid me ten dollars a week. And I would make ten dollars in two days and at night, two or more you know I would work. And so I just told her well I will just work at the club.

Zinn: Do you Mrs. Pilcher, do you do that work now too regularly? Or just off and on?

Pilcher: Well, some weeks I get to work sometimes two days in a week, sometimes three.

Zinn: You don't work for that same person now do you?

Pilcher: Oh no, I work out at the country club. I am talking about where I work now. It is the same place but it was not the lady that said she didn't want me out working for her.

Zinn: What do you do for them now?

Pilcher: I can cook. Well, I help the cook and then we waits on the people you know. Set tables, pick up dishes, you know just anything that needs

Zinn: Do you like it? I mean how is it for, as far as the way they treat you?

Pilcher: Well, they treat me pretty fair while we are getting old. You know ... you been working for the for so long and some of them--well I will tell you about mostly when you are around the white people mostly anywhere while you are working for them they do pretty good. But they don't like colored people.

Zinn: They just don't?

Pilcher: No, they don't like colored people. Because, I will tell you why. It is like any little thing you might do, break something or something, you know they don't like us, you know. And they are quick to call you nigger.

Zinn: Do they call you that to your face?

Pilcher: Sure they call you that to your face! They don't mind it. They want to call you nigger. They will jump on you some of them....

Zinn: Has there been any change in the way they behave toward you since all this business started with voter registration in Greenwood?

Pilcher: Well, I will tell you about that. They kind of (did) like this. They don't want you to fool with it. They don't want you to have anything to do with all them outside agitators or something like that. And they say, "Are you in that mess, or or are you fooling with that mess." What I said. I said, "I don't know anything about that mess, I don't know, what is that?" You know, something just like that. Well, I mean those freedom people I said, "Well, I just don't know about the mess, you know." And these people (I am) working for they will go ahead on.

But if you tell them yes, well they don't want you to work.... But now they don't know anything about telling peoples off. They fear that something will come up against them, you know. And they won't mention to you about this (civil rights activity), they just get mad and find some fault around in the house now. That is the way they do it now. And then they will tell you--you have been working for them five or six years, ten years, twenty years, and just started faulting something you do, you know. We colored people understand what it is all about. But you just can't say anything about it, because if you do then something might happen to you.

Well, they just tell you , says, "You didn't do

such and such things? Why didn't you do so and so and so? That is not right, it just don't look right." And say big words you know ... handle it just like just like ... you were a little child....

Zinn: Are you in better health these days, Mrs. Pilcher? You said you were sick for quite awhile.

Pilcher: Oh yes, I am. As far as I know of, I feel good you know. And goes to work. Sometimes I will be sick, or I mean I will just be sick like a lot of folks from here. Well, I was picking cotton one year. I didn't know I had as much cotton in my sack as I did, seventy some pounds of cotton. I went to pull it up and seems like it hurt me some way. And I went to the doctor and he said that I was all right and he gave me some medicine. But sometimes I can feel it.

Zinn: Which doctor was that?

Pilcher: Dr. Percy.

Zinn: Who was he?

Pilcher: Dr. Percy, he is a man.

Zinn: And is he a doctor here in ...?

Pilcher: He is a doctor here in Greenwood.

Zinn: He is a white doctor?

Pilcher: He is the white doctor.

Zinn: There is no colored doctor in Greenwood?

Pilcher: I don't think there is, there was two colored doctors here but they were ladies (nurses?).

Zinn: I see.

Pilcher: And I don't know why they left, they just picked up and left here.

Zinn: Now there is no colored doctor in Greenwood now?

Pilcher: No colored doctor in Greenwood now at all.

Zinn: So you go to the white doctor?

Pilcher: I go to the white doctor.

Zinn: Does he give you good treatment?

Pilcher: Well, Dr. Percy does, you know colored people go to him because he gives good treatment.

Zinn: He treats white people and colored people?

Pilcher: Yes.

Zinn: Does he have separate waiting rooms?

Pilcher: I don't think so. I hadn't saw it.

Zinn: In Atlanta, you know, we have been living in Atlanta these past seven years, in Atlanta a lot of the doctors have segregated waiting rooms.

Pilcher: Well now I will tell you about his room. I have been there twice, well I haven't saw any whites there. And if the white has a room it must be on the other side of his little office. Back, on the back way.

Zinn: You never saw a white person there?

Pilcher: I hadn't saw a white person, I hadn't been there a time when white people be there but I know he waits on white people because I hear them talking about it, they are going to Dr. Percy He is a good doctor that I know of.

Zinn: He has treated you nicely?

Pilcher: Real nice. My husband taken sick ...and I don't think they have a doctor at Money (Mississippi) And on Saturday he goes to Money, and the colored people up there claim that he is real nice too. And so my husband had taken sick and so before he went we called him out here. So he said-- when he walked in he asked, "How are you all doing?" You know, carry a little joke, you know. And he would sit down and he would talk with him. And he said, "Well, I figured I had to come see about you before I went to Money. I just couldn't miss coming to see about you."

So I told him, "Yes sir, I appreciate it." He gave him a shot and he told him that he was going to send him out some medicine and wanted him to be at his office Monday morning.

Zinn: Is he easy about paying the bills? The doctor?

Pilcher: Are you talking about the doctor? Well, Dr. Percy, well you can owe him and all he wants you to do is to let him know, you know, how you are situated, and he waits on you.

Zinn: Oh, that's nice.

Pilcher: Now you don't catch that with most doctors. ... He is a nice man. You know now Dr. Percy, I don't think that he has been living here all of the, I don't think that this is his home.

Zinn: You don't think that he comes from Greenwood. I meant to ask you beforehand, when did you first get to be involved with the voter registration activity? How did you first get to know them?

Pilcher: You mean about this?

Zinn: Well, yeah.

Pilcher: Well, my father has this building out here. And one day it was so cold-- I had been hearing it talked around, you know. So finally one day, one morning, they said you know they burned the office up there, where the outside agitators had an office, you know.

Zinn: You heard white people saying that?

Pilcher: No, I just heard the people, the colored people were saying things. You know they had a big burning up there last night that it burned two places there. It burned up there, one of the places was a pressing shop. Well, both of them were pressing shops, but they wasn't living in the pressing shop on H (street). But it got burned too that same night. And up there where they had offices it had gotten burned.

The next morning I was playing the radio and it come over the radio, I got it on the radio. And then that day, you know people were talking about it. I told my husband I said ... so we just went by, and people were taking pictures you know. Or just people gathering on the street. Some cars, you couldn't go by just on that side, you had to go down the other side. So I said, "Well."

It was just, we didn't know what to think. Didn't know what to say about it because it was just something that was happening here that never had happened before. And me, myself, just going along working for the white people, taking what little they put on us, doing just whatever we had to do. I never had given a thought about freedom, at all in the war. I said, well--(Inaudible portion). And I was wondering what did it mean about freedom, you know, just kind of to myself and hearing people talk. Still I didn't know.

So one cold day after the building was burnt,

three, (Sam) Block and three other men they came here.

Zinn: Sam Block?

Pilcher: Sam Block? (Looking) for my father. So I told them, I showed them where he lived. So he was at home. So he brought them back over here and it was so cold. And we talked, and they explained it to us what it was all about. Still I couldn't understand it you know. But they was talking. So I said to myself, I wonder how in the world they are going to get up to these white folks here and they is putting people in the river and beating them and going about this work that they want to do, you know.

I was all upset that night you know. Police-- well Sam Block had a car, they knew that car. The car was sitting around out there and they (the police) would just ride by. And I could see them ride by, they would ride by, they would go around and if the car was sitting around where they had the office they would go around and they would come back, and go back around.

I was so afraid that I just didn't know what to do. And so they left. It just made me sick because I had heard about them, you know, jumping on peoples about, you know, talking with them and having anything to do with them. And so I said, well that is not color. It is mighty hard to mistreat your own color, your own blood. You don't come into me you know. And he says they are white and they don't like to mix up with them. I guess it is right for us not to be stuck with them, see I didn't know. And I said I see why ... they do anything to us about them, they are colored people just like we are.

I went on to my Daddy-- he told them, he said well no, he said that they are doing some work and he said I am kind of afraid that I had that old piece of building out there, it is no good. I started building it and I didn't have money to finish it, to do anything like it ought to be, and I just stopped. And he said I don't guess I will rent it to you all because I might have much trouble out of the white people. And saying that was why he didn't rent.

So they went on, they didn't give up. They kept a coming back, talking to him. Two white men gave him a call. I don't know what made ... they were nice dressed men and so they went around, they talked with him. They told him what they would do, what they would have done. Still he was afraid, we was too. We were just afraid because we knew that the white people had been killing us you know, beating us up and Well, they just walk in your house with guns and things you know. Just five or six of them like that you know.

They are not going to ever come just one. So my daddy said I just feel like I-- I am too old a man to have a lot of trouble like that. Finally these two men in their car, they would come every evening, every day. Finally he let them (the SNCC workers) have the building.

And so they went to giving out food over here in a church, Wesley's Chapel. Polices went over there and arrested them-- well they were going to register for voting. I don't know what occurred over there because I wasn't over there. I was afraid and then I was scared. They arrested a lot of them over there. So my father said, "I just don't know what to do." So the white man told him said, "David, don't you worry, you just be quiet see, don't you worry at all. We were are not going to let them, we are going to try our best for any of them not to harm you."

Zinn: Who were the two white men, did you ever find out?

Pilcher: I just really don't know but (Bob) Moses know but Sam Block knows. Because they would

Zinn: They came from the government?

Pilcher: I don't know. So after they-- they didn't have anywhere (for an office) after it got burned up there. They didn't have anywhere to put their typewriters and their things like that, they were just out. So they told my Dad, well this is just all right. We will sweep and clean up and do around and work some after we get in here.... So they did that. They just moved on in that old piece of building as it was. So finally they started their work going out registering people.

About three weeks after then--well, I don't know it was in the Spring like, it had gotten a little warmer-- they started to-- well they wasn't marching but people who were going down to register they would start walking in a line. They (the police) started taking pictures and going around out there. The Polices would block them off you know, turn them around. (Break)

Then they would get in cars and go. Well, they went in cars for awhile. And started locking them back up too when they would come up there, you know. And so a man named Dick Gregory, was that his name? He come up here too. So he said that he was going to lead the marches, the line, that is what he said. He didn't say march, I am going to lead.

Zinn: Were you at that meeting, did you go the meeting, the mass meeting?

Pilcher:

Yes, I went to the mass meeting. And he told a lady that night, an old lady who lives right up the street here, he picked her out to march, to lead the line with him. But we weren't saying marching, we weren't saying that. So she told him, "Yes sir, I will be there in the morning." And he said, "Well, you be there at 7:00 am." She said, "I can get there at 6:00."

It was cold but she did, she got here before he did and she was ready! So when they got lined up and she was right there in front and marched right with him. So they marched on down to-- the Chinaman, I don't know if you know where that is, to I (street). That is where they dropped them you know. So the police, he was talking to Dick Gregory. I don't know what Dick Gregory said-- well when they was going people that had never been up to register for voting, they were marching on down there.

So I was on the other side I had been, you know, up there and I was on the other side walking on (with) people, lots of people, to see you know what was going to happen. But they turned them around right there. And that annoyed Dick Gregory, and he started again. So I think the police said some kind of shucking, I couldn't see because there was so many people. He told him (the policeman), a man said, "Say, you don't have to do that," or something like that. ... He told him well I want you to turn around, some of the men that were taking pictures told him to just turn around. So they turned around. Never would let them march from here to the courthouse.

So he (policeman) told Dick Gregory he said, "If you want to go down to the courthouse, carry them in cars, carry them in cars, I told you to take them in cars." Just like he did before, the other day. So that evening when they got ready to come back-- they didn't lock up anyone that time. But the police had brung them back in a truck, in a bus, one of their buses.

Zinn:

Were you on that bus?

Pilcher:

No, I wasn't on the bus. See they were trying to get people that had never been down to register. When I went down to register I told them that I was going down to register. But I didn't know that they had to take you down. You know I didn't know that they would do that. I just got ready one morning and went on down by myself early one morning. I had to go to work around 10:00 am. I said well I am going on down to register. And they were registering for a bridge to be built here to. So they asked what did I want to register for. I told them well I wanted to register for the bridge, and I wanted to register for voting,

signing up for voter registration.

So the lady (Martha Lamb) told me, she went back and got a paper, you know, and I was right there. I said I didn't know anything about the constitution at all. I couldn't figure it out because I didn't know. I filled out, you know, what I knows. So I just came on back and went to work. So finally we were having (voter registration) classes out there, big classes. She said I am going to start class. She came in here one Saturday ... and she told me , she said we want to learn people how to sign up for voter registration. And want you to read about Dr. Martin Luther King and other men, and different things, you know in this book. I had some of the books. So I went to school out to her about two months.

So finally she said, you are all ready good, she said. But now we might have been really good ...she wasn't afraid like we was. We was afraid. We was in there but all the time we was afraid that they would come in there.

Zinn: Do you know where the classes were?

Pilcher: ... Had the classes out there in the building. And they (the whites) would ride by. We didn't know what was going to happen at all. But we would still go. ... Were so shy that we would go in the back every time we would go, in the back way. They started mass meetings up again.

Zinn: Let me ask you this, Mrs. Pilcher, what did you learn in those classes?

Pilcher: Well, I learned how to-- when we first started we read about Dr. (Martin) Luther King, and we read about freedom, those that had been started in 1957 I believe it was. And we read about how to-- (when) she first started there was a lot of people who didn't know how to read and write. Well, those that know she had to start with us just like she did them, you know, to carry us all along together. And she learned us how to read, how to write, and how to use language, you know. And then she started how to, how you could make out a check, and how you could fill out the demonstration blank.

And learned us how to-- well she had us voting one day too. After we filled out the blank that she has us just like if we were going to vote, you know. And filled out and passed the long envelope, and she had us fold them you know, long way and then fold them back half way just like we were folding. And then she had us to write our name on the back and had a ballot box. And how to put his name on there, the envelope.

Drop it over in the ballot box. Oh, she just learned us lot of things.

Zinn: Did she teach you about the constitution?

Pilcher: Well, no she didn't teach us about the constitution because— I don't know why she didn't but we had, we hadn't there when she here about a month. I don't think she really, I don't think she knows that they was going to want us to all of that you know, because she said that they didn't have all of that, she said. And finally, it come down to sure enough that is what they wanted, you know. Well, they didn't have all of that on the first blank. ... Yes, she did ... because she learned us about ... it was not lawful to pay bills, you know, if you didn't have the money, you know, couldn't anybody just, it wasn't lawful to make you or to whup you like that, and things like that.

Mrs. Zinn: Mrs. Pilcher, since you went down that morning to register have you succeeded in becoming registered?

Pilcher: Oh no, no. I have been down there twice. Next time when I went down there she said now you didn't fill out, you didn't finish filling it out so you didn't write anything about the constitution. Now before you come back you have to fill it out. Well, I didn't know anything about the constitution. So I had learned some about it. So I took it and I filled this one out. Because she told me, she looked at it and she said, "Now, I just don't want you coming back here no more. No more. I don't see why you niggers, you don't know anything about the constitution and you are trying to sign up for voter registration."

Well, she talked so heavy to me about it. And so I said well I won't go back anymore. I said well it has never come up. If anybody asks me I just tell them why I didn't go back. And so I was intending to go back. I don't know why I didn't go back. Everytime I started to go back I ... but still I am going back. But now peoples that she called herself, two ladies told me, they didn't even pass. It is just a few people that she let pass.

Zinn: Have you gotten to know the Movement better since they moved in next door?

Pilcher: Well, I have. I have learned the Movement pretty good, what they say about it and what they want to do. They tell us you don't want to, you are not trying to fight against them, you are not trying to be mean to them. What you are trying to do, see you just want to be as a brother and sister. What you want, we want to get

equal rights. What that means-- if you go and work a day, if the white man or white lady gets thirty-five or forty dollars a day, whatever he gets, you get the same.

They (the whites) say that we want to marry their daughters and their sons. That is what they say what we want to do. But now in Mississippi colored people, I don't think they ever want to do that. Because if it was just grown in us that they didn't do that in Mississippi. Wasn't right to do that. So, you know, we couldn't have wanted to do it when it was born in us. And they would make long speeches and stories and different things over the radio about it, talk about it you know.

Mrs. Zinn: Do you think they really believe that is what you all want. Do they really believe that?

Pilcher: Well, ... what made us believe it so strong and then some it now because we have had children, this boy (Emmett Till) just started being a teenager one and a man I know, comes here. And this boy had been in the North where they are so shaded together and he would, he was just talk loud and be friendly. They killed this boy. They went to-- he was visiting his grandmother and grandfather in Money. And they went in there at night and they carried that boy out and I don't know what all they did, there are people that say that they didn't do this to this boy, but they killed him.

Zinn: Was that Emmett Till, wasn't that Emmett Till? That wasn't too far from here.

Pilcher: No, that is not anywhere from here. And several things ... just like if, they don't like a colored boy to smile at a white lady, not here. Not too much. Only way you do that (is) if you are working for her and she is talking with you about something or somebody you know, like that or something. But they don't like, they don't allow that here.

Zinn: How old are your children now?

Pilcher: I have a boy eighteen years old. And in March, the 16th of March he will be nineteen years old.

Zinn: What is he going to do? Is he going to school?

Pilcher: He is going to college.

Zinn: Where is he going?

Pilcher: Tougaloo.

Zinn: Is he going to Tougaloo now?

Pilcher: This year, see he just started.

Zinn: He is going to start in the fall. And he is all accepted and everything?

Pilcher: He is all accepted and everything. I wasn't able to put him through school. I tried to raise my children without a father, my two biggest children. My husband he is nice to them. But still he doesn't make enough to both a home and to put him through college. He says one day, he says, "Mama, I will work my way through college." And I was worried, you know, about it. He says, "Mama, you don't have to be worried about me," I was just sitting down there talking to me. He said, "I am going to Tougaloo College, because that is the only school I can go to, a school like that." Because you see he joined the NAACP.

Zinn: He did?

Pilcher: Well, I didn't even know it. I didn't know anything about him really belonging to it until the Movement come up. I don't know how he got in. But he was. And so he says it is the only school that I can go to is a school like Tougaloo. And he got a, he got a ...

Mrs. Zinn: Scholarship?

Pilcher: Scholarship to Itta Bena College.

Zinn: Is there a college in Itta Bena? I didn't know about that.

Pilcher: And he told me one day, he said Mama I can't go to any decent college, he said because they will not let me into. And he said ...

Zinn: Is that a state college, that must be a state college.

Pilcher: Yes. And he said I going to Tougaloo College. He said that is a college. And he was the head of his basketball team. That is how he got his scholarship.

Zinn: Oh I see.

Mrs. Zinn: Is he a good student?

Pilcher: He is a good student. They sent for him to come down to Tougaloo after school was out and he has been down

there, you know, with them. And they think he is wonderful. After he was out of school _____ (name of person) didn't even send his papers to Tougaloo where he told him to send him. So the way we found out that he hadn't ... was talking with one day and Bob said well I am going to Jackson ... and you give me some of your papers and I will go down there and I will speak. Had him send them in.

So when Bob got down there Bob said that they didn't have anything for him down there. But the principle down there told him that he was just fine, he was just excellent, and he had passed on everything and all that they were waiting on was the letter from his principle here.

Zinn: Oh.

Pilcher: They hadn't received one. So Bob came back. So they got in touch with _____ and talked to him about it, and well he sent it down.

Zinn: What is your son doing this summer?

Pilcher: What is he doing?

Zinn: What is he doing now?

Pilcher: Well, he is not doing anything because there is nothing for him to do here.

Zinn: There is no work for him?

Pilcher: No work for him. With jobs now here, the white boys and the white girls they get the jobs. They all go out there to the country club and caddy or something like that and make a little money, picking up money for them. Or if they (the black kids) don't get up before day and catch a truck and chop cotton, or pick, well chop cotton because school be going on when they are picking, they just don't have a job. And probably, maybe, three or four boys may get a job, something like that.

Zinn: Is he active with the Movement this summer?

Pilcher: Yes, he did. He was with the Movement some this summer. And come up until things just got so rough, well he still go out there, you know, and ... (Arrival of Mr. Pilcher).

Zinn: How are you? My name is Howard Zinn. Mr. Pilcher, this is my wife Rossalyn Zinn. We have been talking to your wife. (Break)

Pilcher: Well, things just got so darn ... so he went to Chicago and worked a little.

Zinn: Why don't you sit down over here (to Mr. Pilcher), there is a comfortable chair for you.

Mr. Pilcher: You taping what they say?

Zinn: Yeah, yeah.

Mr. Pilcher: Oh, I ain't going to say nothing (laughter). Not going to let her say anything ... (laughter)...

Mrs. Pilcher: And so after _____ left and went to Chicago and got a job, the youngsters they slowed down. But still they belonged to it. And our boy, well he likes the Movement, he really likes the Movement.

Zinn: How about the younger ones? How old are your younger kids?

Mrs. Pilcher: Well my youngest, she is seventeen. Well, that is both of my daughters (showing a picture). Both of those girls and both of those boys. Now this is not my boy here.

Zinn: They are good looking children.

Mrs. Zinn: They are beautiful.

Zinn: Now you have two boys and two girls?

Pilcher: That is mine and then that is the oldest boy over there. But my children ben scared out, my youngest children, my girl is seventeen. She has been just scared out, you know, of the Movement, any kind of way. Now she likes it. She said Mama I really like what is going on and I hope it will be one day. And she is kind of nervous too.

Zinn: Did something happen to scare her?

Pilcher: Yes, it did. One day, you know, once the dogs went to biting, they came up there you know to register for voting and they put the dogs on them. A dog bit Reverend Tucker. They have had a time of it up there. And so that incident, and all of that, and the polices that you see, they would ride around here, you know. And they said that they had tear gas in the cars you know. And stopping and arresting peoples, you know. And they could see it you know, and they were just afraid, it scared them you know. They say, "Mama

I wouldn't want to go to jail at all." And right now she still says it is all right but she do not want to go to jail, for them to put her in jail where lice and bedbugs, and all kind of bugs and things to bite them, you know. And I have talked with them you know. "Mama, they say it is just miserable you know when the girls that they had in jail and boys and men and peoples and things like that."

Go to the mass meetings and make those talks you know, and then they could hear it out there. And I would come back and tell them about it, you know be talking about it. And looked like ... (Break)

Zinn: The little ones, do they know what is going on?

Pilcher: Yes, my boy, my baby, he is eight years old, he knows what is going on! (laughter) Well, he used to say, "Well Mom, it is for us to go to school and we will learn more there, so we can have more." The Movement, that brought about food you know, clothes and stuff, come out there with a lot of food you know. And lots of clothes and they would put it all out there, and that was just a big, they thought that was wonderful, all of that food, ooh man, this room wouldn't hold the food and clothes you know (laughter). So they would get out there and jump around, and he says, "Mama," he says, "if freedom means plenty and clothes," he says, "we just be freed all the time." (laughter)

And they just thought it was wonderful you know. Oh freedom brings plenty of food, plenty of clothes you know. He says, "Mama," one morning he had gotten up and he said, "Mama, this is freedom." He says, "Mama, let me go out and get some of that canned food, they have some of the best food, they have clothes out there." He says, "Mama, we are going to have clothes, we aren't going to have to worry about washing clothes at night to have to go to school." He says, "(Sam) Block told us that we were going to have clothes and we could change and have you know, and put on clothes like people and go to school like folks." Block would give him something everytime he would go out. And he was a happiest little soul he could be. I was standing looking out and my girl say, "Mama, it is wonderful to have somebody in the world think enough of us to send food and clothes to us." Say, "We never have had much food and clothes." They would wonder where it would come from and I would too."

Zinn: Oh.

Mrs. Pilcher: I just wonder how they got all the food They would have it in the boxes you know

- Zinn: Was that government surplus food, was that from the government?
- Mr. Pilcher: Some of it was.
- Mrs. Pilcher: I just really don't know because they sent some food in here once.
- Mr. Pilcher: That is what you call commodity.
- Mrs. Pilcher: Commodity.
- Zinn: Oh, yea, commodity credit corporation.
- Mr. Pilcher: Surplus, yea, and some of it was.
- Mrs. Pilcher: The other, I think it was just, I don't know...
- Zinn: Mrs. Pilcher, let me ask you this. When was the first time you got the idea that there were white people in the Movement who were trying for the same things?
- Pilcher: Well ...
- Mr. Pilcher: I reckon you got it from right there off that TV.
- Zinn: Off the TV? (laughter)
- Mrs. Pilcher: But me seeing it, that is what I am saying.
- Mr. Pilcher: When I first see it was out here.
- Mrs. Pilcher: Out here.
- Mr. Pilcher: Everytime they would arrest some, they would have white people in there arrested with them. Then I know they must have been in it, because the way they were going they wouldn't have gotten arrested in there.
- Mrs. Pilcher: ... When they were, that Saturday they started to, after they got in the office, they had people to take pictures, come in and take pictures, and news too. So it was white ladies and white men all around. Oh it was just people that made think that it was going on you know. And I would just sit back and I would go out and I would come back into the house. The white men were talking with the colored ladies and the colored ladies were standing with their hands on the white mens' shoulders (laughter) talking. That is something that never had happened here.
- And the policemen would be riding by, acting you know like they were, they would look so funny and just

- ride, ride. They never would stop talking, you know.
- Mr. Pilcher: Always knew there was some good white folk and there was good colored people.
- Zinn: Did you always know that, Mr. Pilcher, even before this thing happened, before you saw these people on TV getting arrested and things like that, did you always have that feeling?
- Mr. Pilcher: Always just had that feeling. I knew there was some good people in this world.
- Mrs. Pilcher: Yes, I knew there was white people that were ... for us.
- Mr. Pilcher: There are other colored people in the world that are like other white brothers. I knew there was some good white people in the world.
- Zinn: Have you met any of them in Greenwood?
- Mr. Pilcher: Well, I have met a very, very few. He be good in a way, but in one way he wasn't.
- Mrs. Pilcher: But he wasn't good (laughter).
- Zinn: You know the one he is talking about (laughter).
- Mrs. Pilcher: Now here is the way the thing is. If they like your work
- Mr. Pilcher: If some of them like your work and they are good.
- Mrs. Pilcher: That is why I say some of them. If they like your work, it is all right. But don't you ...
- Mr. Pilcher: There is some that is just born good anyway. Always have good heart in them. But there is just such a few until you can't count
- Mrs. Pilcher: And here is what make me think that it wasn't any here that were so good. They built a zipper plant here. Next thing they built a piano plant.
- Mr. Pilcher: Baldwin Piano.
- Mrs. Pilcher: Baldwin Piano plant. Well, they were just hiring white people, just hiring white people to work. Colored men just walked down the streets, looked like they were just begging for a job, just crying you know for jobs. You could just go up there early in the morning and on the streets it was just like somebody going to a

meeting, wanting a job, couldn't get a job.

Mr. Pilcher: Some of them did. Some of them didn't want no jobs.

Mrs. Pilcher: Well, they was up there.

Mr. Pilcher: They were up there looking.

Mrs. Pilcher: Well, they were out there.

Zinn: Some colored men get jobs at Baldwin Piano?

Mr. Pilcher: Yea, they get jobs there.

Mrs. Pilcher: Well, some of them did.

Mr. Pilcher: A good deal of them now.

Mrs. Pilcher: Well, now I am talking about when the pressure was on. Now when the pressure was on, when you really needed something. I am talking when times were hard. When it was first put up. But now this Movement put the people down, the colored people down to the piano plant like they is now. Because there wasn't near as many down there before this started.

Zinn: Do you have any criticism of the movement, Mrs. Pilcher?

Mrs. Pilcher: No, I don't have any criticism of the Movement at all because why I don't have any because I feel like they is doing all they know how, you know, to bring peace and freedom among us colored people and white people. And because they tell us, they don't mean to, they don't hate the white people, they just want to walk along by their side, they just want to be as free as the white man is. They don't mean ... now the white people think that we want to get above them, you know, like that. But they don't want to do anything ... here in Mississippi. Of course you know that. Now colored people can't get too high in Mississippi or you will go to the river over there, or somewhere. You get drug behing a car right quick.

Zinn: Have you thought about leaving Mississippi?

Mrs. Pilcher: Well, I did. I have thought about leaving Mississippi. Why I thought about leaving Mississippi one time-- I had two children and one time my father had this place here, and my father was making crop, I would help him make crop, and looked like there was wasn't much in it you know. If you bought a few clothes, you had to have food, there was little food. I just wasn't getting

anything it looked like. Well, I wasn't the only one, there was other peoples too. But I know about myself.

And I just worried, worried a lot. Sometimes at night I would just worry. I don't why I did. We can't have money enough to buy clothes and food like the white people. Why our children can't have things like they have. ... Sometimes they don't be fit to go to school, you know, like other white children But I never could figure it out. Well, I didn't have a job. So that is what made me marry him (laughter).

Mr. Pilcher: We have moved up along way because this ain't Of course I have to get used to it, I get used to it, but it is all right.

Zinn: Mr. Pilcher, I just want to ask you one question before you leave. Have you registered to vote?

Mr. Pilcher: No.

Zinn: Do you expect to?

Mr. Pilcher: Yes, I just haven't took the time to go up there.

Zinn: But you think you will one of these days?

Mr. Pilcher: Sure, sure, I am ready. Where I am working at they don't care about that, I ain't scared of my job You know when you are going to work they are supposed to let them off and go to work if you wanted to. But I just haven't took the time off to go up there.

Zinn: Your company, you don't think your company would fire you if you registered?

Mr. Pilcher: When they are going to lay me off, they are going to lay me off anyway, if I was voting or anything like that, they don't care.

Zinn: That big construction company?

Mr. Pilcher: U.S. Engineering.

Zinn: U.S. Engineering. Is that the United States, the government? Yes? The government? Oh, well that is why, yeah(laughter).

Mr. Pilcher: They don't care about the vote. I just haven't took the time off to go up there.

Zinn: Yea, well I think we are holding up your dinner and things.

Mrs. Zinn: Yes, we certainly are.

Mr. Pilcher: You aren't holding up my dinner, I just ... till about 12, I just see a fellow over there with some peas, and I am going to see if I can get some peas from him, that's all. You ain't holding up my dinner.

Zinn: I think we have had a nice talk, Mrs. Pilcher.

Mrs. Pilcher: I just love the Movement, so.... Just anything that I can do. Now I didn't know anything about the Movement or anything, but the people seem to be nice people. My husband and I we just liked it, and anything we could do to help the Movement, you know, we thought it is right, and it is right. And we would do that, we would neglect things for ourselves, let them have it, you know, do without. My husband sometimes, he said, "Well no," let them go ahead on and use it I can do without it. And he just do without. And sometimes he says I will just omit taking a bath, let them all go in and take a bath. He said get towels for them, give them what soap we have.

Food, they come in one morning they heard a whisper they said about they was going to bomb the building, you know. So they stayed up out there all night. They didn't have a stove out there, any thing to make coffee you know. And it was so cold that morning, ooh and so-- I went off to sleep and I waken up and just the minute I waken up I went in the kitchen and I pulled the light on. They saw it and all came to the back door knocking (laughing). And I opened the door and I don't know how many pots of coffee I made but I just kept making coffee until they drank it And I just made coffee and they drank coffee and drank coffee 'till they got full.

I said well now-- it got warm up. I said well after I finish make you some coffee I will make some biscuits, make biscuits, lots of them. Lots of them weren't used to biscuits, I think they were used to white bread you know. So I said well now, I told my husband, "I know you have to work for what food you have." And I said, "We don't have very much food but I am willing to do without." He said, "Well, go ahead on and cook it." He said, "I have a dollar in my pocket, that will buy my dinner." He said, "I don't want anything but a coca-cola, just go ahead on and cook it and let them have it." He said I have a little credit built up there at the store, he said go up and get you all some and cook that and let them have it.

So I go ahead on and cook it and let them eat it all up, you know. We just thought it was the wonderfulest thing we have ever heard of in our life, you know. And it is wonderful. And so now I enjoy it

still better because they brought a lot of food in and they said, "Mrs. Pilcher you were so nice to us you just go out and get as much food as you want to."

Zinn: Well, thanks very much Mrs. Pilcher, it has really been nice talking to you.

Mrs. Zinn: Thank you so much.

Mrs. Pilcher: And I really enjoyed this.