AN ORAL HISTORY

with

CLEVELAND SELLERS JR.

This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi, North Mississippi Oral History and Archives Program. The interview is with Cleveland Sellers Jr. and is taking place on September 02, 2003, in Holly Springs, Mississippi. The interviewer is Gloria Clark.

Clark: This is September 20, 2003. I'm Gloria Clark, and I'm here with Cleveland Sellers, Jr. And Cleve—we're going to call him Cleve—would you please tell us a little bit about yourself, where you were born? And I would like your address and telephone number to be on this, too.

Sellers: OK. I was born in South Carolina, small, rural community in the western part of the state, very close to the Georgia border. I was born in 1944, and the addresses for me are (the address of the interviewee has not been included in this transcript in order to protect his privacy). I now reside in Denmark, which is my place of birth, and where I was reared. And I work in Columbia, which is about fifty miles away, which is the state capitol, and I commute daily to and from work.

Like I said, I grew up in a small, rural South Carolina community. Both of my parents were professionals. My mother was an educator. She is one of the students of Hampton, where she got her teacher education training. She did her undergrad work at South Carolina State, and I think it was 1930. Let me see, 1931 is when she graduated from college. My father was a World War II veteran. He was a local of Denmark, South Carolina. He had five siblings, two brothers and three sisters. He was a business person; he did a little farming. He ran a café, and he organized a taxi cab service, and he did some rental properties, a kind of jack-of-all-trades. I think he prided himself on the fact that he was always his own employer. He never worked for anybody else other than himself.

When, during the thirties—and early on he purchased an automobile and used it to assist with transporting folk who were migrating out of South Carolina to New York. And so he would do almost a limousine service; he would take a car full of folk from South Carolina to New York, and then he would bring a car full of folk generally back from New York. But he would bring packages and boxes, like a courier, back, and that was the way he was able to maintain a car and be employed. Later—and this was early in his life—he operated a café. I would think—in fact it would be fair to say that it was a, by African-American standards, it was a middle-class environment, which I grew up in. My mother was the daughter of Edward Taggart in Abbeyville, South Carolina, and she had seven siblings, all female. And they lived in the northern part of South Carolina in the Abbeyville/McCormack(?) area of South Carolina. My grandfather was a, raised—I forget the breed of horses. He raised horses; had a big

farm. And I say "farm" as opposed to plantation. But they used to call him "Captain." And he had a big, white horse that he rode, and he usually wore a kind of white hat, and he managed about a six-hundred-acre farm. And he was, he was white. So that I guess developed a very interesting dynamic early on, even though it has never really manifested itself into having any other reality other than the fact that we knew that he was white, and he married my grandmother, and when he died, his property and all kind went down through the family, as it should. And that was because he did marry her, and they were in fact a family.

He insisted on his children having an education, and so all of my mother's sisters graduated from high school, and then some college. Growing up in a rural community, it was a college town. And when I say that, I think some people have a reference for Tuskegee. We might even, those of us who were in Holly Springs, might understand how a college town kind of operate. The economy and a lot of other things operate around the college because it's one of the larger employers; it has more people, and it has more assets for the community than if it were not there. So college communities are a lot different. Young people exposed to activities and different programs that go on, on the college campus. There is another motivation that permeates the community; most of the students in college campus communities have their sights set on college education as a very basic requirement for success.

Clark: And did you go on this college campus?

Sellers: Well, not only did I go on there, South Carolina was segregated; I went to school entirely in a segregated school. The schools in South Carolina were desegregated some four years after I had graduated from high school. But in my community, being a small, rural community, the state of South Carolina opted not to build a high school for blacks in that community. So they worked out an arrangement with Voorhees College where they would pay the college a tuition, and the college would then make classroom spaces available. So we were all kind of thrown in there together. Our buses for high school would actually go up onto the campus and put us out, and we would have, you know—all of our classes would be—if it were chemistry or biology, it would be in the chemistry lab, the biology lab. If we had auditorium, we'd go in the same auditorium that many of the college students would go in. If there was assembly, we would be expected to be there. If the college had an assembly, we were there. If the college had a lyceum program, we were there. And so most of the activities that were college-wide, we would be involved in those kinds of activities. So it made for a unique situation. And especially a unique situation during this particular period of time because when the sit-ins start in North Carolina, in Greensboro, they almost followed the major thoroughfares. They came out of Greensboro to Salisbury, and Livingston College, to Charlotte, and then on into South Carolina through Rock Hill, Columbia. And I mean, it was like a flash fire. Within two or three days, the other areas were mobilizing and organizing to carry out their portion of the sit-in demonstration. So the sit-ins actually come into Denmark, and the students at Voorhees College became very much interested and had an active campaign of sit-ins.

Clark: Would you just spell Voorhees?

Sellers: V-O-O-R-H-E-E-S, Voorhees. It's named after one of the philanthropists who gave a large, a substantially large contribution to the college in its infancy. The college was founded by a black woman by the name of Elizabeth Evelyn Wright, and she was a protégé of Booker T. Washington. And the legacy is, is that she actually was sent out by Booker T. Washington to organize and to form an educational institution. And she actually comes from Tuskegee, from Alabama, and actually in some instances walked to South Carolina. And she went into an area before she got to Denmark that was very hostile, and she managed to get a couple buildings, and those buildings were burned down. So she came to Denmark, and she started over again, and she found a friendly Senator, Mayfield, who helped her secure properties if she could get the money for the properties to set up the school. So they were able to secure somewhere in the neighborhood of 300 and some odd acres of property. She was a very frail woman, and as a result of that, she suffered with her health. And so I think she was twenty-seven when she actually died. That was a couple years after she had actually founded the school.

So there is that kind of history and tradition and connectedness because now you have a link between Booker T. Washington and the Tuskegee machine, to Denmark. And there were occasions early on in which Booker T. Washington would actually come to Denmark, and then George Washington Carver, who was a scientist, and the person who was responsible for different products from the potato and the peanut, he would come over periodically and talk about new technologies in agriculture. He was one of the people who talked about crop rotation and alternative farming, and that included the dairy farming, which he interjected, I think, in South Carolina, especially in that area, where the college is located, in and around Denmark.

So that's the community in which I came up in. It was a very nurturing community. We had two schools that were—I can't think of the man's name, but these schools were actually funded by a grant from the owner of Sears and Roebucks. And the community would have to pay, raise so many dollars; he would give so many dollars, and the state would provide a minimal amount to build these school buildings. And there were two of those buildings built in Denmark; one is still there. And those were the grammar schools early on. One was torn down during a period of renovation when people were not recognizing the importance of archiving and retaining and preserving the history. But there is one of those institutions left there. So again, you have a tremendous and rich history base.

Most of the teachers that were at Voorhees were trained at Hampton. Hampton was the feeder school for creating the master teachers, the teachers that were going to teach in these schools that were being crafted. Tuskegee would be the institution; Hampton would be the training ground for the teachers who would go into the technical and vocational institutions, and then there was a struggle that goes on, and those schools go beyond just the Tuskegee model. You have church groups that go in,

and they want schools that are built and based on a liberal arts kind of educational experience. And we see that struggle between Booker T. and Dubois over what educational experiences are most valuable to the newly-freed slave or to the blacks at that particular time. So that's, I'm trying to give you the foment, the kind of basis for the community that we grew up in. There was always lyceums; there was always speakers coming.

Clark: Which we know there's an interest. The way you describe it, is an interesting parallel to Holly Springs.

Sellers: Oh, no question about it. There's not a lot of difference between Holly Springs and Denmark and Rust College and Voorhees, other than the fact that Holly Springs is probably a little larger than Denmark.

Clark: Right. But it used to be the high school for people.

Sellers: Absolutely.

Clark: It played a similar role in the community. Did that have anything at all to do with you coming to work in Holly Springs? Did it—

Sellers: Not really, but I guess if you look at how the history unfolds, it would be more likely that I would end up in a place like Holly Springs. And a lot of it has to do with growing up there and having these professional teachers, faculty people, actually providing the knowledge and information and our training. And so I think the first real impact on me as a student, and many of the other students of my age, was Emmett Till, in which Jet magazine published an edition; on the cover is a head shot of Emmett Till. And even though the schools were segregated and teachers were asked not to get involved in any kind of protest activities dealing with the issue of racial segregation, any of those kinds of issues, the teachers would always find the opportunity to try to get us to be conscious of what was going on around us, how to address those kinds of things. And so the Emmett Till magazine cover created quite a bit of discussion at my school. And I think that it became very clear to us that that was something incessant in American society, that racial prejudice and racial segregation that (inaudible) at the moral compass of America, and that it had the potential for killing children. It had the potential for killing almost anybody and destroying a lot of other people in the process.

So the issue for us at that early age was not to develop the kind of "get-back-at." But how do you deal with a system that allows a thirteen-year-old to get killed for allegedly making a comment, that the punishment is disproportionate to the crime? And then the second part of that was, was that a legal system that condones it by finding the guilty party "not guilty." So there are two issues that become very clear, affecting the minds of many young students of my age during that particular period of time. Now, what are we going to do about it? Well, it takes us a little while longer to figure out how and when the attack on this segregation and this prejudice would occur.

And I think that the sit-ins in 1960 was that everybody recognized was something that we could do, and through that process empower oneself to, and actually bring about change. And that everybody could be involved in it. It's just interesting that the students in Nashville at Fisk, and American Baptist Seminary, and Tennessee State, had already during the fall of 1959 implemented the tactics of sit-ins. But they ran so close to the Christmas holidays they put it off until they would come back after Christmas, and get the movement there cranked up and get started. Well, the students at North Carolina A & T State University beat them to the punch. And so, but everybody was primed and waiting. And so when the sit-ins occurred—and this is a period when TV is fledgling, and is shown all over the country. And students in their student unions can actually see these majestic students, male and female, kind of fighting against that injustice, fighting against the kind of segregation and the violence that went along with that, the second-class citizenship. That they knew instantaneously that they had to do that same kind of thing where they were. And many of them, like I say, was already primed. So if you think about the fact that between February first and April, there were some—the historians guess that about 75,000 students had been involved in some kind of civil rights activity. That tells you that they couldn't have just waited until they started in Greensboro, but that obviously students had been trying to decide what method would work in terms of raising those issues that were very important to them, and I think important to the entire country.

So when, with the consciousness around Emmett Till, when the sit-ins come, we are all involved in the planning because the way that the student government association [SGA] worked was that they would have elections, and the student government president would be a college student. And the vice-president would be the president of the high school SGA. So it was arranged such that everything, every activity that the college was involved in, in most instances the high school would in fact be involved in it, too. But because the college was about four miles from town, when they actually selected those individuals who would go on the first demonstration, they were all male and all college. And a lot of that selection was centered around the uncertainty, a kind of southern chivalry—I suspect that's what that is—where you don't put women in harm's way, not knowing. Not that they didn't want women to be involved, but, "Let us go see what's going to happen," because the response was always an unknown quantity. You didn't know what you were going to get. You might get hit in the head. You might get arrested. You might get beat by a mob. Anything could happen. So you ended up with that kind of thing. So while we were in on all of the planning sessions, and we actually were able to get out and see these students, they had to march single-file, and they had to march about four miles, and a lot of this was along a long highway with a sidewalk that you could actually see them. And there was a certain carriage about them; there was a certain, I guess a certain spirit, a certain amount of dignity and respect that went along with these folk that they were marching—

Clark: They had to walk four miles?

Sellers: Four miles to get to the—

Clark: —to the restaurant.

Sellers: They went to a pharmacy.

Clark: OK.

Sellers: That had a counter in it, and had the students, yeah.

Clark: And then they had to—well, what happened when they got there? Did they have to walk back, or were they arrested?

Sellers: Well, when they got there, they said that they were going to arrest them, and what they ended up doing was closing down the place, and saying, "You-all have to leave." And so they left and went back to the campus. Initially they were supposed to get transportation from the school, but the board of trustees were made up of many business people in the community, and they said, "No. Do not under any circumstances allow these students to have this transportation to the pharmacy downtown." So they had to walk. And they said, "OK. You don't want to give us transportation, then we will walk." But, and then the next time they went down, they locked the place up before they even got there. There were some arrests, but generally those arrests were, "We're going to place you under arrest, get you out, and then we're going to turn you kind of over to the, over to the school, over to the college."

And so it was an exciting time, high-energy time, and on the nights after they would have the demonstrations, attempt the demonstrations, everybody would run to the TV and see not only what was going on in other communities with sit-ins, but they would see if they could see themselves. And so that information was being distributed all over. So you had a kind of groundswell of support. And so the administration had a hard time, and so they talked about suspensions; they talked about not encouraging, condoning what the students were doing. And so the students then began to look inwardly in terms of the institution, and they began to raise questions about the composition of the trustees. They began to raise questions about what history was and was not taught in the curriculum. They began to raise all the fundamental questions that college students raise, even the question of the quality of food in the cafeteria. So the protest kinds of shift gear, and that was very good and very healthy because you find that when you're not prepared to, like some of the other institutions, to go forward, that you have to get all your ducks in a row, and obviously the college is not doing all it can. Matter of fact, [it] is acting as a block to any kind of real serious activity around this particular issue.

Clark: And you were in high school.

Sellers: I was in high school. I was a sophomore, junior in high school.

Clark: So you were surrounded by this, around the campus.

Sellers: Surrounded by it every day, yeah.

Clark: But were you allowed to go and sit-in yourself? Did they allow the high school students to go?

Sellers: They wouldn't let the high school students go initially. They weren't getting ready to change that, but the demonstrations then went internal, and that is that now there's a list of grievances with the college, including their efforts to block their efforts to sit-in. And so the students are all involved in this, you know. You're talking about some kind of boycott of the cafeteria. You're talking about rallies and meetings on the campus.

Clark: Same here. It happened here, too, at Rust.

Sellers: Yeah. And so that's, I mean, that's some hard times. And the consciousness of not only the college students, but the high school students is being raised by all of this that's going on.

Clark: Oh! It must have been really exciting to be in that environment as a high school student.

Sellers: It was absolutely. And now there was another thing about the college also that added a dimension to that, and that was that they had students from Liberia and Ghana, and students from Kenya and Tanzania, and there was, you know, there were struggles going on in those communities, also; they were just recently granted independence, and they were actually running stuff. The whole issue and idea about one man, one vote. So there is a high level of energy around the combination of all these factors and all these people coming together. And even having their stories shared about the independent struggles in these African nations. What happened, what the people have to do, how did they organize themselves? And so there's a kind of putting of those things together, and you have a really exciting kind of experience. And then you're talking about shortly after that, it's the end of the school year, and the college saying, "Whew! Thank goodness they're gone. And we won't worry about this till they get back." And when they got back, they started up again, and that was more focused internally around the campus. And they do get back to focusing in on the lunch counters, but it takes a little while to do that kind of thing.

Clark: Do you remember how you felt during this period? What's going on in your mind?

Sellers: That was a tremendous amount of excitement, a tremendous amount of energy. We had so much energy. We weren't allowed to do all those things we really wanted to do. We wanted to carry busloads of students up there and sit-in, and if they're arrested, bring more, and sit-in behind them. So yeah, there was a tremendous amount of excitement. And for a period of time there I was thinking that I was getting

very positive signals from my parents that that was fine. Everything was OK. But what I did at that point was I organized a college chapter of the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People]. And in organizing it, they had a kind of program when they bring in a representative, a field representative from Atlanta to speak. And then she would announce that there is an NAACP youth chapter in that particular community. And we had it all organized and had the program set up, and I was getting ready to go, and that's when my father told me that I couldn't go. And I asked him, "Why not?" And he said, "That's just problematic." And then I had some of my mother's coworkers come by, and they would say, "You know, you probably just need to slow down just a little bit. Your parents have worked hard, and they got themselves in these positions, and you probably shouldn't try to jeopardize that. Let somebody else handle it." That kind of thing.

So that's at the point where the, I guess a kind of real and serious conflict between me and my father began to occur. And that conflict was around my commitment and involvement in civil rights. I was a junior during that particular period of time, and I made an effort to transfer to another high school, to a private high school. And I think it was Stanton Military Academy up in Virginia. And I was able to get through the first wave because I got accepted. But then somebody at Stanton went and looked at the application again and said, "We need to call and see because that person very clearly left off race." And so they called and said, "We were just calling. We were looking over your application again. Are you Negro?" And I said, "Yes." And they said, "We're just so sorry, but you cannot come to this institution."

Clark: They just said that.

Sellers: That's right. And I said, well, you know, my idea and effort to get on out of here was just really shot down. I figured that if I could get into some other area and out of this movement activity that's going on, that I could find that community. So it didn't happen, and the protests dissipated, and there was still a high level of consciousness. Then the freedom rides come through, and again, with our NAACP unit I was able to go up and when Ruby Doris Robinson and some of the other SNCCers [members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] were locked up in Rock Hill as a result of the freedom rides, and that's where the whole jail-no-bail actually grew out of that movement. And so I went along with a group of students up there, and there was a big rally, and there was still some protest activities and a kind of conference built around that. So we went up for two days and began to engage with other students, and so that was good.

But it kind of, the interest on my part to get more involved was, I mean it was just very, very ripe. And it didn't seem like I was going to have that opportunity as long as I stayed at home. So I bided my time and got an opportunity to go to Howard University. And I said, "Well, I'm very happy to have this opportunity to go to Howard University because when I get there, I know I'm going to find all these protesters and rabble-rousers, and I'm going to be right in the thick of this protest." So I went off to Howard University to be an engineer, mechanical engineer. And I got

to Howard, and it was a much larger campus than I could ever imagine, more students, about 11,000 students. And I was looking for that community. I mean, I would go out every day. I got a scholarship there, so I figured I was taking care of a large portion of my expenses for going to school, so I was kind of like still trying to get control over my own life. And you can't do that if your parents are paying your tuition and all your schoolwork. I mean, you just can't say you're going to do this or you're going to do that without this. I said, "Well, with a scholarship I can in fact say that."

But I looked for that community; could not find it. I mean, Howard University was the, I guess, a beacon for middle-class bourgeoisie. I mean, young men who were freshmen and sophomores, they would change shirts during lunch. Young ladies would wear stockings and heels, and there was this, antithetical to what it was that I was thinking that I was getting myself into. And so I kept searching around for this community, and I began to find that there were people who were talking about protest and having meetings and that kind of thing, and I found that out through Canterbury House, which I was a member of the Canterbury Society, that they would have meetings of these, of this small group of protesters. And so I decided to go by and see who that was, and that's where I met folk who was in the organization called the Nonviolent Action Group. And it was kind of a subsidiary of SNCC. And in that group, that NAG group, I found Charlie Cobb, and I found Stokely Carmichael, and I found Courtland Cox, and Ed Brown, and Muriel Tillinghast and there, Karen House, Karen Spellman, and there was just a whole host of students that I said, "Boy!" You know? "Finally! With all this isolation and frustration I've finally found that particular community."

So I became very much involved in that. And then we began to take on campaigns to gain control of those vehicles at the university, like the student government association, the student newspaper, the lyceum committee, anything that would have some influence on students, we made a point of going into those. We just, each one of us had that responsibility. And then once we got in and got control, we could make a difference. Like we had wanted Bayard Rustin—and this is before the march on Washington; before the march on Washington, I think it was—speak at Howard University. Well, Howard was saying no. And they were saying no because he has this socialist background, and people might assume that he's Communist. And, you know, we're a federal institution. And then we asked for Malcolm and got the same response, "Oh, no. You can't. He's too controversial. You can't bring him in." So we got Mike Thelwell and Bill Mahoney and a couple of other people who became a part of the student representatives of the advisory committee to this lyceum program. And so we were able to get both Bayard and Malcolm to speak at Howard University.

But that's the kind of thing that we were very much involved in. And Howard, even though the attitudes of many of the students was like I described, there was another kind of thing that was going on that kind of nourished us to some extent and pushed us along, certainly some advocates we found on the faculty there at Howard University. The other thing was Donnie Hathaway was there during that time, and Debbie Allen. And they were, I mean, they were superb, creative artists, and that's the

way they carried themselves. And they would give you some encouragement. You know? You know, "Things are going to be all right. We all have to do our thing." And the more they did, and performed, and acted out, the more we were supportive of them, and they were supportive of what we were doing. So next thing you find is that we—the bus system in DC was segregated, and so we got a campaign of boycotts against the bus. And the city was run by the federal government, and we talked about home rule.

And then we found that there was a graduate of Howard University, Gloria Richardson up in Cambridge, Maryland, and we found out that she needed some organizers over there. And so we would go and spend weekends and then weeks over in Cambridge, Maryland, organizing the Cambridge Nonviolent Action Group, which was a protest group that was operating while Cambridge was a year under martial law. So we went to Cambridge, and I think that's the place, Gloria, through her training, that we began to develop our skills as organizers. And 1963 rolls around, and Bayard Rustin, who knows that we exist, asked us if we would work as volunteers on the March on Washington. Work as volunteers, you do the cannon fodder. You know what you did; we were volunteers here. You do everything else that somebody else don't want to do. That's what. So that's what we did, and so that put me in Washington for the March on Washington.

So my credentials and my experiences are building. Certainly after the March on Washington, there was a euphoria, and probably within twenty-eight days, the Sixteenth Street [Baptist] Church bombing occurred, and we began to talk more about hands-on, making larger commitments, and making choices about whether or not we needed to be in college, or whether or not we needed to be in the field working. And so we made a commitment to organize students to come into the Mississippi Summer Project. And so I end up going up. We drove up; we got a couple of automobiles. I think we got about three that were donated. We recruited from the University of Maryland. We recruited from George Washington, Georgetown, Howard University. And we all went out to Oxford probably about thirty-three or thirty-four strong. And with that group, we had the largest African-American contingency. And so we were in Oxford; we were talking about where to go, and it was decided that we would come to the Second Congressional District. And we were looking at those, I guess, districts and those areas that kind of matched up with some of the experiences that people would have. And so Ivanhoe [Donaldson] I had known because he was in Washington often. The idea was for me to come to Holly Springs with Ivanhoe. I had known the history of it; I had known the history of Ivanhoe and Holly Springs. And so it was almost like a predestined thing. I mean, you can make the connection. I don't know whether or not it would stand the test of all the kind of scrutiny historians and other social scientists would give it, but between Denmark and Holly Springs, but they thought that was a good match.

Clark: That's a question here. How did you know Ivanhoe?

Sellers: We had a SNCC office in Washington, D.C., and that office had the responsibility for providing support. And that support ended up being demonstrations at the Justice Department, demonstrations at the White House. When the issue of protection of civil rights workers in the South came up, they said, "Go to the Justice Department. Go to the FBI." And we'd be out there with our signs, "Protect the civil rights workers in the South." Go to the White House. Go raise hell over here. So that office was a major SNCC office in Washington, and it was the area where they talked with the politicians, and they made those kinds of connections. So when people were coming out of the South, for whatever reason, they would have a reason to come through Washington DC. So Ivanhoe used to come there a lot. And we were able to meet him, and Judy Richardson.

And then we had a conference in 1963, a SNCC conference in Washington. And so all, everybody came to that particular conference. We had it at Rankin Chapel, which is the chapel at Howard University. So that's how we ended up with all of these relationships being built and developed. And at this point, I guess you probably need to understand that SNCC was probably about no more than forty people, all told. So once you started dealing with somebody, if they were in another state, that relationship would stay up, stay going for long periods of time.

Clark: This is [19]63.

Sellers: Um-hm, '63. And so we made the decision. We had, most of us had our veteran stripes from both in DC where we organized rent strikes, and oh, we had all kinds of the bus desegregation, home rule, all kinds of things were going on in Washington DC, and we were spearheading a lot of that kind of stuff. So we had our stripes, and it was time to go off to Mississippi Summer Project. We got the cars and the personnel, and we went on out to [Miami University in] Oxford, [Ohio], to the training site for the Mississippi Summer Project. And we got there, and we were going through the process when [Mickey] Schwerner, who I had met when I got—and [James] Chaney, were saying that they were planning to leave, and they were looking for a volunteer, and they got [Andrew] Goodman. So I had actually had a chance to see and meet all of them. And they were saying, "We're going up a little bit earlier because we have to go and investigate this church bombing, church burning. And when you-all get in and get settled, you-all come on to see us, and we'll come see you." So when we got the report that they were missing, that's when the staff of SNCC all got together and decided that it was important for us to get some SNCCers into Neshoba County, particularly Philadelphia, and see if we could find out what had happened, what was going on. So Ivanhoe and I were together, and Stokely and Charlie Cobb were together. And I think Gwen and Donna, and there were two other people; I can't think of who they were right now. I'll have to think of it. We were all assigned to go to Philadelphia, Mississippi. Featherstone was one of the other ones; I think it might have been Judy Richardson, the eighth person. There were eight of us.

And we made a contact with somebody who lived out in the outer areas of Philadelphia. We went to Philadelphia. During the day we'd stay inside in the loft of

the barn and that kind of thing. And at night, once the blacks had gone out pretending to hunt, they would come back and tell us about ravines, river beds, likely places where two things would happen: either you bury bodies, or you hold people hostage. And then at night around twelve o'clock a truck would come down the road, pick us up, and take us out, and drop us off. And we'd be in that place for four or five hours.

Clark: Looking.

Sellers: Looking all over the place. I mean, it was incredible, that particular experience because I remember: Featherstone, we were out there, and we were talking about going in these houses, and the houses were empty, appeared to be empty, but we had to get inside. We didn't have any flashlights or anything. Flashlights would have given you away to the fire towers, and you couldn't wear buckles and all that kind of stuff. And so we would synchronize the watches, and when the hand hits twelve, I want Featherstone, "I want you coming through the front door and somebody else coming through the windows and somebody coming through the back door, and we'll just get in there. We have to fight, we fight. But we can't come out here and not look in this building. And we can't go in this building without attacking the building." So we did that. We looked in ravines, and we looked in wells.

Clark: Did you run into any people?

Sellers: Nobody out there but us. (end of tape one, side one; beginning of tape one, side two) And we were trying not to run into people. Matter of fact, that's why we had to abort the operation, because we began to get the feeling, the sense that somebody knew we were out there, and rather than jeopardize the family we were living with, we packed it in and left after about three or four days out there. But no. We didn't see any—there wasn't anybody out there, nothing but those snakes and lizards and possums and coons and all that kind of stuff. That didn't really faze us at all. We weren't concerned about them. We had to wear dark clothing, and you get out—we didn't come up with anything, so we decided to break down. We wanted to get the head of the Second Congressional District, Stokely, back into Greenwood, and we wanted to get back to our places, and so Charlie and I and Featherstone rode back up to Holly Springs. That's not Charlie; that's Ivanhoe and I, and Featherstone rode back to, rode back to Holly Springs. And we got in, I think almost simultaneous; it might have been a day or two after the rest of the volunteers came in, and started setting up shop.

Ivanhoe was a kind of taskmaster; he had some very clear ideas about organizing, how that would be done. He also had a number of policies that he introduced and implemented on how we were going to operate and how we were going to navigate Holly Springs and what was expected. So we came back and jumped on that and then began to develop strategies on the ground in terms of going out and organizing and mobilizing the community, and setting up the freedom schools, and who will be in charge of what, and how we were going to proceed. So that's where we come into Holly Springs. But the community was fairly familiar in that it

was very much like Voorhees. So you know what it is that you need to be doing, in order for you to get the programs off the ground and just organizing techniques. You know that you need to find those sources of power in the community. You know? Power and authority, I'm not just talking about preachers, people that the status quo, the regular community see; I'm talking about those people who, when they say, "This is going to happen," it happens. And so we began to draw it out and decide on the counties and who would be assigned to the counties and who would be assigned to the freedom schools. And we all took on a portion of that assignment, getting our security in place and learning the county and the backwoods and the back roads and driving and all that other kind of stuff. So we were ready to come in, and it took some short period to kind of get up and going and get coordinated. But we were up and going and coordinated, and I imagine that [Sheriff] Flick Ash and his people kind of stepped up that whole process. Had it not been for him and his very rude introduction, it might have taken us a little bit longer to get up.

Clark: What do you mean?

Sellers: I'm just saying that we began to experience the ticketing and the surveillances and the high trafficking of police around, the following of people in various and sundry places, that that created a sense of reality and urgency automatically. So while we might have been just naïve and said, "Oh, well, ain't nothin' happenin' over here," that presence and that reaction, that response actually sped up our orientation much, much more, and the seriousness of what it was that we were in fact involved in. I think that coming in, we always recognized that we were trying to work ourselves out of a job. So we recognized that it was important to reach out to the local community here in Holly Springs and bring out those people who would in fact make a commitment to the movement, and we'd provide a lot of the manpower and the foot-soldiering that would go along with that. So that's where we started.

Clark: How did you find them? How did you find those folks?

Sellers: Well, you just, you go out into the community. You go to the high schools, and you find high school students. You go to families that were interested in the movement, and they would have children, and you would get those children involved. There's just a kind of traditional process of trial and error that you just go out. But now, when you found somebody, you had to know intuitively that that individual was going to be important to the project. And you also had to be willing to dissolve yourself with some of that authority so you could bring them in and develop those skills, and kind of turn someone, empower them to kind of take over and do some of that stuff that you might, that though you were so smart and cute and all those other kind of things, that you couldn't impart that kind of information, that kind of knowledge, that kind of wisdom. So I think that that was very critical.

I think that I have always had the ability to deal with young African-American males. And so in terms of doing the empowerment part of it, in terms of, let's say

Roy: I think Roy was recruited through the freedom schools, and the freedom school teachers actually identified him. But we'd go in, and we'd say, "Roy, we want to take you beyond the freedom school. You're going to be, you're a senior; it's almost time for you to go off. There's some things you need to do, and there's some skills you need to learn in order for you to be able to make the kind of impact and change that's so necessary." And so that's the way that—and then people began to find out that we were here, that we were serious about being here, and that was an important message and lesson to get out to the community because some people would just come in and knock on the door and say, "Hey, I'm here. Put me to work." And then you would go through the process of trying to find out how that would in fact happen. I think that—

Clark: People would come and knock on the door of the Freedom House.

Sellers: Yeah. Annanias McGee is one who came to us. He came to us, wanted to do something, wanted to be involved, and said, "You got something for me to do, I'll be glad to do it. You-all just tell me what I need to do." And so that was another part of it, that they knew that the freedom riders were in town, and they wanted to be a freedom rider. So you bring them in; you embrace them; you nurture them, and you put them into a mode where they are empowered, and then you train them on what needs to be done. And once that happens, you have to be willing to—ego will trip you up every time, but you have to be willing to share some of that and kind of take a chance on them going out and doing certain kinds of things. That's how they get stronger and empowered. So you put them on assignments; you give them additional responsibility, and you have to kind of go with the flow and have enough faith in them that they would try to do the best thing, and if not the best, it would be the best that they can do.

Clark: And you were the assistant project director in the summer when you were doing this?

Sellers: Um-hm.

Clark: Did you go out into the field with some people?

Sellers: All the time.

Clark: And what were the messages you were giving when you did that?

Sellers: Well, the message was more organizing skills, what we learned, how you go up, what you want to talk to people about. Our introduction to people was to get them registered for the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. And the other thing was we wanted to find out what their feelings were about civil rights and the community, and what we could do to help that situation along.

Clark: Would you bring up the topic of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party before you talked to them about registering to vote? Were these two distinct messages, or did you tie them together?

Sellers: They were tied together because if you got in the door, you wanted to come out with them as a member of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. Now, you'd talk to them about the importance of registering to vote, and, "Are you interested in registering to vote?" And, "Well, I don't know." And you kind of leave that door open. But you wanted to have that form filled out for the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party because we were trying to build the party. So we knew that you would have to schedule some mass meetings, and bring people together so that they could discuss those issues and discuss them in public because we had to find the vehicles by which we got the information about goals and objectives out to the larger community.

Clark: What did you tell them that the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party was?

Sellers: "The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party is a party that is going to challenge at the National Democratic Party's Convention, the seating of the regular Democratic Party that has not and will not represent the interests of African-Americans, and we can get the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party set at the convention, we would be able to"—(brief interruption)

Clark: So you were describing right away, even on your first visit. Now, as far as you could tell, because I have not been able to determine for sure, was there a 1963 freedom vote in Marshall County?

Sellers: There was a 1963 freedom vote, and I'm almost sure it was in Marshall County. And they used volunteers for that. So some of the groundwork had already been done. I mean, at least people knew what to expect, to some degree, from the freedom riders. And one of the things was to register to vote; the other was to register for the Freedom Democratic Party. And what I was explaining was how you tell them about what the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party was. And you talked about the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party wanted to be seated so that it could in fact make a, provide an opportunity for people to gain control over their own lives, to register to vote, to make the Democratic Party be responsible to the interests and concerns and get rid of those folk who were racist and not allowing us to have voice in the Democratic Party. "What does that mean for you? That means that we can talk about school board elections. We can talk about elections of mayors. We can talk about changing the order so that those people who are in office as a result of our not being able to vote can be dumped out of office if we get the Democratic Party to recognize the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, and that we can go forward and begin to get, secure the right to vote." Those things were tied hand in hand.

And so you would have the, I think, the meat-and-potato issues, those issues; say, "Well, haven't you had difficulty sometimes getting appropriate health care?

Well, maybe what we need to do is have on the city council people who would recognize that as an important item, and so that it's discussed and dissected and critiqued, and then there's some kind of strategy made to impact on that kind of issue." So that's what you would be telling people; as you would say that, "In order for us to get there, we need members, and we need signatures that people are interested in the seating of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party." So it would be two-fold, but I don't think I had any illusions about going out the first time, knocking on somebody's door, and asking them if they want to register to vote that they were going to just say, "Yes. Come back and pick me up to tomorrow." I mean, so you didn't want to go out and do that and then have to come back and talk about the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. So you had to do those things at the same time.

And I think that sometimes it was critiquing; it also was helping to build confidence. It was also, I guess, working with some of the volunteers to make sure that they understood the kind of responses that they were getting, and what works and what doesn't work. We spent a lot of time with that; sometimes that was on-the-job training, and sometimes that was just sitting in on sessions where people talked about how you approach this family, and what you do and what you don't do, and all that kind of stuff that, be sensitive to those kinds of things that you see and you don't understand. Don't keep pushing; just stop where you are if it's not making any sense to you, and somebody will be able to explain it to you. So that was a part of it. You'd walk up with somebody, and you'd say, "OK. Now, this one is yours. Go ahead and do all the work and see how we end up.' We came back with a signed blank(?) that gave the person more confidence and obviously meant that you wouldn't have to do that. You could go down one side of the street; they could go down the other side of the street and get the job done.

Clark: Let me ask you: talking about finding something you're maybe not expecting to find because I certainly did. What did you do when you found a family that was clearly starving?

Sellers: Well, what you would do is you would put a kind of check by that, and you'd come back in, and you'd talk about that kind of issue here with the staff and with others so that you could begin to look at, "What can we do," pretty quickly, that we have a church. And who is our contact at that church? Do they have any food available? What about the surplus? What's the criteria? What has to happen? Sometimes it was a matter of them going and signing up. So then could we go and take the car and pick them up and take them. They didn't have to—we could put them off a block from the place, let them go in and sign up, then we'd take them back home. But those are the kinds of things that you're looking for. The other is, is that people generally would have too much pride, so you would have to figure that one out while you were talking to them. They might be making the inference, but they won't go out and say, "Look, I really, we just need something to eat."

Clark: No. They wouldn't say that.

Sellers: That's right. But I'm saying that you would hope that the person can pick that up. They're saying, "But if I go out there, I'm just not going, I can't survive. I mean, what am I going to do? I'm not doing real well right now. What can I do?' And you, "Is everybody in the house working? Is anybody in the house working? Well, how you-all making it from week to week with your food?" And that kind of thing. Well, that's how you get that information. And you're not prying.

Clark: I felt that, that running into families like that motivated us with the food and clothing drives that we had.

Sellers: Absolutely. Absolutely. Plus, plus the other part of that is, is that you go and you knock on somebody's door, and they say, "OK. I'm going to sign the MFDP form as a member." And then something happens to them. They call back and say, "Somebody came by, and I lost my supplements. I lost my job," or whatever it is. And then you'd have that readily available. But I'm saying if in fact you don't have that—because see, we had to build that up, and one time we got so much stuff that we had it housed over here in another house. And that was good; that was during the Christmas holidays. We gave out gifts. We looked like the North Pole.

Clark: Um-hm. I remember that. Yes.

Sellers: And that was tremendously important. But there were other times when we didn't have any things, but we could call up somebody. We could call down to Jackson if it was an urgency kind of thing, or if somebody got burned out of a home, and we could call the minister; we could call the mother of the church or whatever it is and say, "Look, these people don't have anything. Can you-all do anything?" They might say, "Well if you want to get something, you can get something." And that's the way that was done. But it was a, the package was complete; it wasn't that you were leaving anything out. You had it in its entirety. And that is, how do you listen to what people are telling you? How do you dissect that? And how you distinguish customs and traits and what it is that they're telling you. Sometimes they might be telling you, "Well, look, I can't talk right now. But if you come back at another time, we might be able to do some business." And so you have to be able to pick up on that kind of thing. It might not make no sense what they're saying, but that might be exactly what they're saying. And so you would have to pick it back up and come back at another time, and say, "Well, look, I know that I'm out here in the daylight. Would you prefer me coming back at seven o'clock at night, when it's cover of darkness?' And they might say, "That's better. Do that for me. Come on back." And you'd just do that. You'd put that down and say, "OK. I'm coming back to get you to become a member of the MFDP. You know that; I know that. Nobody else will know that." And so that's what I'm talking about in terms of knocking on those doors.

Clark: And you trained people in that kind of a method.

Sellers: Trained them in that kind of method. We trained them on these back streets. Trained them on how to get out of there, and how to go from the community

representative, to escaping out of a dangerous situation. How do you shift gears that quickly? I think it was David Trimble was talking about, we went somewhere at night, and we had to kind of leave urgently, and put him in the car behind the wheel; he couldn't drive a daggone stick [shift]. So we had to hurry up and get him from back there because that just wasn't going to work. And it's, "Come on now. We should have known this before now. I mean, come on now. What's going on here?" So you had that kind of thing and reacting to stuff. And then you start talking about organizing voter registration days, freedom days, where you got people together and took them down there, and you had to get people ready and prepared. That's almost like a medical operation. You know? You have to reassure them. You have to hold their hands, and you got to go with them. And *you* got to deal with all that. You know? It's not like you're going to be able to say, "OK. You-all just go ahead on." You got to go all the way through the process. And you have to bring them back. And you had to be willing to wait

Clark: And you went with them—

Sellers: Oh, yeah.

Clark: —to the courthouse. Did they let you in the courthouse with them?

Sellers: Sometimes they did. Sometimes we didn't push that issue. We just took them there, and then said, "OK. Well, you got it from here. OK. We'll be right here waiting on you, and we'll go back." And so you'd bring them, and you'd take them up there, and you'd have to go and look at these folks staring you down, and trying to break your heart by just penetrating with their eyes. And so that you had happen, and you just learning those things on the grounds and other things. So the first couple weeks is going out there and doing all these kinds of things, and going out, and you stay out all day. And where are you going to get a sandwich from? How you're going to set your time up? You can't just go out and come back, go out, come back, go out, come back. You're going to have to go out and move around the county. How do you map that out: where you've been; where you've got to go back; who you saw, and who you didn't see? So there was a lot of that kind of management kind of thing that also went into getting it done because you didn't want to go back to the same place over and over and over again because you had missed three or four voters. And you didn't want to go back to somebody's house you've already been to because you didn't have it mapped down somewhere. So they'd look at you and say, "But you were just here yesterday." "Oh, yeah." "Give me my paper back. Shoot! You ain't, no! I don't trust you with my paper now. I mean, you been down here, and you came back? Mm-mm. I want my stuff back because you, don't tell me where it might end up."

Clark: Did that happen to you?

Sellers: No. I didn't go back to those people, but one time. And the other thing is, sometimes you go in there, children are there. And you might see something that looked kind of different or strange, and you just check on it.

Clark: This is true.

Sellers: But you always wanted to be able to get that ear, so you could hear what was going on and maybe provide some kind of assistance.

Clark: Right. And we addressed basically what you found. And I think that's something that people don't always realize, that in some respects when you had to rent a house to put all the food and clothing in it—

Sellers: Right. There was certainly a need, and especially during the Christmas holidays of [19]64.

Clark: And so it had a social service aspect to it, not just a political organizing.

Sellers: Yeah. But our thing was always to shift that burden off because we knew we couldn't do it long-term. And so we would work through the churches to make sure that if we did it this time, next time around, you'd have to take this on.

Clark: Right.

Sellers: And so that was always there, even with the books, and the library, even the food, and any other kind of surplus of reserves that we might have. And the other thing was, we could give it all away. You know that there are people who will do the other kinds of things. And people find out about that, they'd pick through the litter and get what they want, and then half of the stuff that came in to be distributed to the community, we could very easily be wearing. And so that's those kind of sensitive kinds of things that you want people to know that you act as a conduit. That stuff passes straight through; you're not in there for yourself. And we were able to do that. We convinced people of that. And so when we, when they knew those toys were there, and we gave all those toys to all those kids, and we did it the night before and the morning of, that made a difference.

Clark: Right.

Sellers: And they knew the house was empty then.

Clark: Um-hm. Now you became the project director when?

Sellers: It was somewhere the end of June, because Ivanhoe goes to Jackson. And he is going to Jackson because he is going to deal with the strategic plan for moving and getting everybody to Atlantic City.

Clark: Are you sure you got that right? Because I came here in July, and he was the project director. He was still here in July.

Sellers: Well, it was sometime right after that because he goes to—

Clark: August, I think.

Sellers: He goes, he goes early on. I can't say it was June 30.

Clark: He was here in July when the teachers came.

Sellers: OK.

Clark: So it was a little later.

Sellers: He goes; he goes. I know he goes in time because what his responsibility is, is to coordinate the logistics for getting the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party out of the state of Mississippi to Atlantic City, with all of the—

Clark: I think it was more like the end of July.

Sellers: All of the registration forms for the party, having all that coordinated. Some of the artifacts that were taken up, the automobile, the bells, the trucks, the whistles, all that kind of stuff. He was the person who moved into that kind of—

Clark: Oh, I see. And how long were you the project director?

Sellers: I stayed until I was elected program director of SNCC, and that was, what, February? Maybe March of [19]65.

Clark: Now, how was the fall different than the summer?

Sellers: Well, the fall was different from the summer because we had been around, and we had a direct impact on many of the students. I remember football and all that kind of stuff that was going on, and basketball, and we would kind of show up, and we had some of the players on those teams were involved with us. And they were kind of getting kind of antsy about stuff, protest activities in the schools. So it was different in that sense. It was also different in that you stepped away somewhat from the applications for the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. We were talking then more about straight voter registration, and we were talking about organizing, but then those few people that actually were able to vote. And at the same time we were talking about the other kinds of areas that we could talk about, getting African-Americans elected and what is it? AFSC?

Clark: ACS, Agricultural Stabilization Committees [ASCS, Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service].

Sellers: Right. [That] became an area, which we saw as a great possibility for us getting some clout and power in that, if we organized that properly.

Clark: And in fact you did.

Sellers: Yes. But we also got involved with that hod carriers union, which I didn't even know what a hod was before those folk came in and said that, "We're just not getting treated right. We want to get some organizers in." And we'd go out and bounce around with trade unions. [Editor's note: from *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, Eleventh Edition*: a hod is "a tray or trough that has a pole handle and that is borne on the should for carrying loads (as of mortar or brick)."

Clark: Is this the brick and tile?

Sellers: Yeah.

Clark: Yeah, the brick and tile. Right. Um-hm.

Sellers: Um-hm. That's what a hod is. A brick.

Clark: H-A-R-D.

Sellers: Unh-uh. H-O-D. H-O, H-O. It's H-O-D-D, I think.

Clark: H-O-D-D, hodd.

Sellers: Yeah, [hod] carriers
.
Clark: OK, good. OK. Someone has to transcribe this.

Sellers: Yes. I think it's H-O-D-D.

Clark: OK.

Sellers: But anyhow, in calling, we asked some of the volunteers who had some labor connections to explore who that is. And we found a local that did that kind of organizing, and we asked them to come in, and we kind of nurtured that along. We made every effort to keep it from appearing as if we were the ones who had pushed that along. I think later on, Flick and those discovered that we had some role there, but they went down kicking and screaming. But those were the kind of success stories, and those were the other areas that were so important to us because I think they showed up. These folks just showed up and said, "Look, (inaudible) pay and fire people without any kind of legitimate excuse." And so there were a number of things. So then shifting down, now, we're not—because we were really trying to get those

numbers up on the number of applications. I think, if I'm not mistaken, we were around [14,000] or 15,000 of MFDP memberships.

Clark: Where? What territory?

Sellers: This, Holly Springs.

Clark: Out of just Marshall County, or are you talking Benton and Tippah and DeSoto?

Sellers: I think we ended up—I have to revisit that one. I thought we ended up with a total of about 70,000, a total.

Clark: That must have been in all the counties, then.

Sellers: I think it was our total. I think for these areas we ended up with about [14,000], 15,000, which is substantial.

Clark: Yeah, because we signed—I mean, maybe you weren't signing up people in Marshall County in the fall, but the fall was the first time that—

Sellers: No, no, no, no. I'm not talking about the fall.

Clark: What are you talking about?

Sellers: I'm talking about during the summer.

Clark: Oh, during the summer.

Sellers: During the summer. When we went to the convention, the question was the strength of the MFDP. And we said, the strength of the MFDP is 70,000, of which Benton—which Holly Springs collected 15,000. We had the largest of any project, the largest number. But there were other places out there, Jackson and all them. Jackson came in with maybe 10,000. But we were—

Clark: We had the best number. And that would be actually Benton. Benton had a huge number.

Sellers: Yes.

Clark: And Marshall, and DeSoto.

Sellers: Right.

Clark: Because I believe in the summer those three counties were worked, and maybe Tate?

Sellers: We had Tate, and we had what, Union?

Clark: Well, we didn't go into Union and Tippah until after the summer.

Sellers: I think we had already begun to try to get some of those applications out there.

Clark: Tried, but it was not successful.

Sellers: No. We couldn't get in, but I think we got some applications signed for the MFDP. You know, people just knocking on people's doors and saying, "This is what we want to do." But having an organization and bringing people together, and conventions and all, that, we just didn't have enough time. But I think we got some applications out of those areas. So that was tremendously successful, to get that many.

Clark: Yes, right.

Sellers: Because we'd bring them back every night, and go over them and make sure all the information was there and put them together, and then file them. And so that's—and then we had to take them down to Jackson, those homes. But that's, that's what, that would be what the difference was. I think when, after the convention was over, and people kind of got back, there was that level of resignation and frustration, and everybody had to take a deep sigh and then begin to chart other courses. Now what do you do at this time that you're not going to be just focusing in on getting applications? So that's when those other kinds of programs we brought in and made those a kind of center point of what we were doing. And now we got this strength in the freedom schools and the libraries and the community programs and the community centers, and working with these young kids, and they're in the schools now. And it's 1994 going on 1995 [sic]; there's probably going to be some movement toward desegregation.

Clark: Sixty-five.

Sellers: Um-hm.

Clark: Um-hm. Yes, actually Alva Beck, who spoke, was the first boy to graduate from Holly Springs High School. He went to the 1965-66 year.

Sellers: Um-hm.

Clark: Yeah.

Sellers: But in the meantime, now, we had all of our youngsters who had decided to close down—what was the name of the school? The black high school?

Clark: Simms.

Sellers: Simms. So they were coming over. They're telling us that, "Look, y'all help us out here. We're getting put out." And all that kind of stuff. U.Z. and all of them were part of that whole thing. There were others, too, that were coming in. So there was just shifting gears, shifting priorities, and going to the plan B, and that is building the kind of organization that MFDP wanted to be and reaching beyond there and talking about institutionalizing some of the concepts in terms of community centers. Where do you have them? Where do you not have them? What do we need in those communities? Basic kinds of things like shoes, maybe, pencils and pens and all that kind of stuff. So it just shifted a little bit from what we were doing the summer.

And we lost some people who left at the end of the summer, so you have to realign and reassign people. So that all of this is, all of this is happening after you come back. In the next, in the spring you're looking at [ASCS] I think is what it was, and that kind of got going real good in Benton County. Benton County began to, itself just as an entity, began to kind of step it up. The people started talking about mass meetings, and "Where do we go from here?" And that kind of thing. So there was a lot of things that were coming down the pike that would replace some of the activities that we were involved in during the summer that were kind of one-time kind of shot. We never stopped completely registering people for the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, but we stopped with the kind of—because we were pushing. I mean, I was every day, had to recount—

Clark: We had a goal in the summer. Yeah. A specific goal.

Sellers: Um-hm. Yeah. We went out, and we wanted twenty a day.

Clark: We were still signing them up.

Sellers: That's what I'm saying.

Clark: We were creating precincts, precinct meetings.

Sellers: Yeah. I'm saying, I'm agreeing with you in terms of that. I'm saying that during the summer, that was every day. Every time you left for out there, you had twenty—

Clark: Yeah, right.

Sellers: —that you had to come back with.

Clark: Um-hm. Right. (laughter)

Sellers: And now when you get past the convention, you'd go out, and you'd bring some back, but you weren't still pressing on that twenty because what happens then is

once you get the memberships in the party, then your job becomes "Let's go to church. Let's have a meeting." And then, "Let's organize so we can do the precinct meetings and the county meetings and all that kind of stuff." So it's, during the summer it's compacted, and so that would be the next step, level that you go to. How do you get people to organize to get all those kinds of activities together? And actually get the kind of results out of it that you're trying to get, and that is get people ready to go to the state convention, elect delegates. We had to talk to people, find out whether or not they were willing and able to make a trip if they were selected as a delegate. All that was a part of that process.

So you had to be on the ground; you had to be able to be on the ground and running. You had to be succinct. You had to be coordinated so that you weren't saying two different things to the same people. It required a lot of synchronization, and that's the bottom line on that because it wasn't just a script that we saw. I mean, the script would change. We knew where we were going, but there were times when we had to change up and do something other than what we had initially decided that we were going to do.

Clark: And we had a freedom vote in November of [19]64. And also, wasn't Fannie Lou Hamer trying to get on the ballot for the second congressional district, the regular Democratic ballot. So we were going around collecting signatures of registered voters.

Sellers: That's right.

Clark: To get her on the Democratic ballot. I can't remember whether we were successful or not. Did she get on it?

Sellers: I think she got on it, but there was a congressional challenge that came up next in [19]65.

Clark: Yes, '65.

Sellers: In the summer. But we had to also work on that because we had to also take delegates up to Washington to lobby Congress.

Clark: Were there two challenges? Because I thought I remembered a challenge in January of [19]65 on the seating, when the new, when people took their seats. And then there was another one later.

Sellers: I have to go back and get those—but the one other thing—

Clark: I've been working with people to determine this.

Sellers: Yeah. I thought, I thought that because I went up to DC for that one.

Clark: Was it cold?

Sellers: I don't remember being cold.

Clark: Um-hm. Yeah, I think there were two.

Sellers: But I thought it was later than January.

Clark: Right. I think there was one later than January.

Sellers: I think this one was around the summer, spring or summer.

Clark: Of '65.

Sellers: Um-hm because we took, I think it was a bus and a whole bunch of cars.

Clark: Were you still the project director?

Sellers: In '65 I was. I mean, it—the one I'm thinking about, no.

Clark: Right. You mean you were not the project director at the time of this challenge, is what you're saying.

Sellers: Right.

Clark: The one you're talking about is after you were project director.

Sellers: Right, because I left out of Atlanta and went to DC.

Clark: You became program director of SNCC.

Sellers: Right. And we went up, yeah. And I had to do the logistical thing in—well, I along with I think it was Mike Thelwell who was in the SNCC office in Washington, DC. And what we did was, we organized so that we could bring up representatives from the various and sundry congressional districts. And we actually sent them out to Congress, and they went to the different offices to get—Congress was going to vote on the seating, the challenge.

Clark: Yes, it was. Um-hm.

Sellers: Yes. And so that's what we were working on.

Clark: Because we were working on—

Sellers: And folks came in, and we had them all set up because they had to lobby here and lobby there, and we had to move people around. And it was one big thing because

we had a church headquarters in Washington where we dumped everybody out and then divided them up and got them into the Senate offices and the Congressional offices on the hill.

Clark: Yes. We actually got into the lunchroom because the Speaker of the House was from Massachusetts at the time. It was John McCormack. And somehow I got into the lunchroom with my congressman and people from Mississippi. And we sat down at the lunch table.

Sellers: That's right. That's right. I don't think that was January, though.

Clark: No, it wasn't. I guess it wasn't.

Sellers: I think it was—I think it was—

Clark: Later.

Sellers: Yeah, it was later in the spring. I want to say June, but I don't know when it was.

Clark: Yeah, I think it was.

Sellers: Because we had to—first I think that January would have been too quick.

Clark: Too soon.

Sellers: Yeah, because we had to take a deep breath after the challenge.

Clark: Right.

Sellers: And then after the challenge, then the SNCC folk went off to Africa. Then we had a couple meetings, and there was some level of chaos and confusion, not that we couldn't get it straight, but it was just that so many things were happening at that time.

Clark: Yeah.

Sellers: The transition in SNCC. Prior to the Mississippi summer project, SNCC was probably in its relationship about 55/45 or even 60/40 black to white. After the summer project, it went in the opposite direction. I think it was about 60/40 white to black.

Clark: On paid staff, are you talking about? Really?

Sellers: Um-hm, because see, SNCC was the only group that picked up volunteers. And most of the volunteers were white, so in Mississippi we picked up a substantial

number of staff. We probably picked up forty people or more. So yeah, you deal with the tensions that go along with that kind of thing. People were saying, "Well, you know, you can't—we started out with this. We were going; we were looking one kind of way, and after this is over, we're looking another kind of way." So all these issues are issues that keep bubbling up, and you keep addressing these issues as you go along. And you still have to provide your service to the projects. So we still have to go to Congress, and we still have to do all these other kinds of things, and we still have to rationalize and justify what it is that we're doing. We had the budget go up, probably during the summer the highest ever been, and after the challenge and after the rejection of the compromise, you began to see the funding levels go down. And that was steady. It went down with the rejection of the challenge. It went down with Vietnam. And it went down again with black power. So it just—

Clark: And how long did you stay in SNCC?

Sellers: I did not leave until the fall of 1967. And that's when I went to Orangeburg. And I hadn't left SNCC per se. I hadn't left SNCC per se, but things were beginning to shut down somewhat. I think that Jim mentioned that by [19]69 people kind of stepped away. They were already moving away before that time.

Clark: And what did you do at Orangeburg?

Sellers: Well, I went to Orangeburg because like most of us leaving SNCC, I wanted to begin to reenter the real world, so to say. And I went to Orangeburg with the purpose of finishing school. I had withdrawn from Howard University in 1964 after two years. And so I figured I'd go home and do that. That's what got me in Orangeburg. And shortly after that, I got there in November, by February the eighth the incident in Orangeburg had occurred in which I was shot. Thirty-five other people were shot. Three were killed.

Clark: Over what?

Sellers: The students, the NAACP youth chapter discovered that the bowling alley, which was a couple of blocks from the campus, had up signs saying, "White only." And so they went to the bowling alley to protest. And during the protest, I was brought in by the students. I was asked to come and see what they were doing. They knew that I had been in SNCC and been around for a minute, so they wanted to make sure that they were doing the appropriate kinds of things. My contribution to them was basically moral support. In 1968, I really wasn't terribly interested in trying to create a desegregated bowling lane. And I never liked bowling anyhow, so. But in the meantime as the tensions began to escalate, it became very obvious to me that they were creating an environment in which whatever happened, I was going to be the fall. I saw that. I articulated that to the press. I even asked through the media for other leaders from across the state of South Carolina to intervene because it looked like they were just on a tear to create this kind of confrontation in which they could make a statement about, you know, "If you get out of hand, we will handle it." And that

happened. The students were on their campus. The State said that they were off their campus. They were shot by state troopers. The State said that they were shot in an exchange with state troopers. The majority, 80 percent, were shot in the back, in the back of the head. (end of tape one, side two; beginning of tape two, side one) And the State of South Carolina put a lid on top of it, just shut it down. "We're not going to discuss it. We've given you all the facts, and if you need any more facts, look at the FBI, and they'll be able to tell you what happened." And with that position, they initially said that they were going to have an investigation. But there was never any kind of investigation or autopsy, no inquiry, nothing. And that stayed that way for a long period of time. I was—

Clark: The year was?

Sellers: 1968, February. And I was charged with five felonies, including assault on a police officer with intent to kill, arson, grand larceny, breaking and entering, and something else. I can't remember what it was. But I was looking at about eighty-five—

Clark: Eighty-five years?

Sellers: Yeah.

Clark: Other people charged?

Sellers: I was the only one.

Clark: You were the only one charged.

Sellers: Only one. When they got to court, what they did was very convenient. What they did was, when I was arrested, I was arrested on the night of the eighth. And the charges were for the night of the eighth. But they didn't have any evidence. So what they did was, they switched the date of the indictment, and said that I should have been indicted for committing the crime on the night of the sixth. And so that's when they came in with the three, incitement—(brief interruption) I was talking about the State and how they treated the Orangeburg Massacre. Matter of fact, the first news stories that went out were distortions and outright lies, and the State stuck with that. And many of the news media folk actually retracted, but that was two or three days later, and that was on the back page, so you didn't get it. I'm talking about the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* and places like that. I was arrested. I was at the hospital that night. I actually ended up in the infirmary at South Carolina State, where many of the other students were who were wounded. I saw one of the students that later died. Some of the other students were pretty severely injured. One young man had a bullet go through his cheek and through his jawbone, and he had corrective surgery to replace that, and only now is he out of the woods in terms of having to have reconstructive surgery and the like.

So it was, and this is, this event happened before Kent State. I often say that, had we learned the lesson at Orangeburg, we might have been able to prevent what happened at Kent State. They charged me with the full charges. When I go to court, when I was getting ready to go to court, they changed the indictment to read that the charges that I should be tried on were on the night of the sixth. I told you what those charges were. The testimony of the chief of police and the sheriff was that they saw me on the night of the sixth, but they didn't see me commit any crime. So the judge called the State and said that he was going to direct the verdict, which meant that he was going to throw it out, of the conspiracy and incitement, because there was nobody else involved. I was the only person arrested. He said he would leave the incitement, but the state had to put me doing something that was criminal, at which time the state asked for an adjournment because they had an officer that they were going to have testify, and he had to go to Columbia to get his notes.

They adjourned the court for about three hours. The officer came back; he said he could not find his notes, but he remembered verbatim that he saw me on the back of a fire truck in the parking area, and I flicked the Bic and said, "Burn, baby, burn." Now nothing burned that night. But that was sufficient to talk about raucous behavior, and that I had been involved in it. But I always argue that after being in Mississippi and all those other places, the last place you want to be with police who are out of control and overzealous police is on the top of a fire truck at night, flicking a Bic. Makes absolutely no damn sense in the world. But nobody got that but me, so. So the judge charged the jury, and the jury came back and said that I was guilty, and the judge said that that would be one year hard labor and a fine.

I left the state again because it was virtually impossible to stay in the state of South Carolina. There were some elements in the state of South Carolina that would probably be interested in seeing some harm come to me. My parents were very concerned about safety, and so I went back to North Carolina. And I was, after two years, some of the politicians decided that I needed to come do my time. They applied pressure, and I actually came to South Carolina and the penitentiary in February. My daughter was born in May, and I was released in October. So I did the time for the state of South Carolina.

Clark: How did you do it?

Sellers: I did it like any person who is detained does it if they want to do it and not have any other repercussions from it. And that is, you do it one day at a time. You just do straight time. I was placed in a prison that was a prison especially for elderly inmates and for "special detainees." So I was away from the general population. I was kept out of the general population. I think I had a tooth that the filling went out of, and I had to go to the main prison unit. And I remember so distinctly that when I went in I had six guards around me, and they just kind of paraded me right down the middle of the prison, and I went to where I was supposed to go, and then they paraded me back out, and I was back into the other unit. So it was pretty interesting.

Clark: You did a year?

Sellers: Yup. Did a year. And at this facility they had fairly liberal visitation. I worked as a clerk, typing up releases and forms and that kind of thing. And had many of the old SNCCers come in to see me. I think Stokely came a couple times. They didn't know who he was, but he would come out, and we'd sit out and chat. And the prison that I was in was not in a fenced area, so you visit; you visit around the prison, so you could actually go out and sit on the steps, and all these other kinds of things. And most of the other prisoners were older. And they were just amazed. They would go behind and meet Stokely and said, "Oh my goodness! Here you are. You're at the prison!" The prison officials, they never figured that one out. All colored folk look alike.

So I did the time, and then I came back. And when I came back to North Carolina, I had a family. So I began to kind of focus in on that. Employment was extremely difficult because now the FBI was taking around the jacket about Orangeburg. And I was still on the COINTELPRO [Counter Intelligence Program). There were some restrictions earlier that I could not, because of the conviction on draft evasion, that I had to check into the U.S. Marshal's office once a month. I couldn't leave the jurisdiction without reporting, and I had to get permission to leave those areas. And that lasted from about 1968 up until about 1974 or '75. So when I moved down to North Carolina from Boston, which is where I went to get my masters, I had to change my check-in from Boston to Greensboro, North Carolina. And so every Thursday, third Thursday of the month, I would have to go in, see the U.S. Marshal and said, "Hey." And he said, "Hi." I'd be gone till another month.

But that's the way that was. I mean, it was a tough time. And it was—and you're starting a family; it's extremely difficult to get employment. And the interesting thing that happened that changed that was that in Greensboro, North Carolina, the home of the sit-ins, there were a number of folk up there who had been involved in the sit-ins and other kind of protest activity, and so there was a community there that was very supportive and nurturing. And then I found a woman who, whose brother was the head of the largest industry insurance company in Greensboro, and she was the personnel director for the city. And she was, she was just a, she was a feminist, but not a feminist. She didn't call herself a feminist. Maybe she was an activist and didn't call herself an activist. But she was always interested in equity in employment opportunities, equity in terms of women and minorities. And they were operating a CETA [Comprehensive Employment and Training Act] program, and there was a position for a person in personnel; I'd actually be working for her. And she interviewed me. And after she interviewed me, she sent to the police department for a police background. And they sent the FBI report.

And she called me back in, and she was upset. She said, "I want you to know what they sent me." And she showed me the report. And it had all of the charges that I've ever gotten charged with, wherever it was. Most of them were civil rights charges that got dropped or wiped out, but it also had the five felony charges, and it says

somewhere else on there that these charges were dropped. And there were some more. But they're there. And so she said, "Now, you were involved in civil rights protest." And I said, "Yes." She said, "I thought so." And she said, "I don't need this report." And she said, "I just wanted you to know." And she said, "I don't care what they say. I'm going to go ahead and hire you." It was a white woman, and she had connections in Orangeburg, some relatives in Orangeburg. And she said, "I called down there, and they told me they had the civil rights protest going on down there." And I said, "Oh, my goodness. You mean to tell me they're still trying to use this?"

Well she felt offended because they would come to her and suggest that she needed some more information to make a judgment about somebody she was interviewing. And so she said, "Well, go ahead on, and we're going to get started." So I worked for the city as an employment interviewer for a period of time. I worked my way up to a planning supervisor in that area of the city. So I worked my way up to a professional position, and then in 1980 I resigned because I ran for city council. And the irony here is that I got beaten by the NAACP. They used my Mississippi experience and what they called my relationship to characters in the Panthers as clear evidence that I would not be able to work in a multiracial environment. So I won in the primaries, but I didn't get the 50 percent, and I got beat in the general election by, I think, 200 votes.

And then after that I went to work for, in 1984, the Jackson for President Campaign with responsibility for Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, West Virginia. We won in South Carolina. We ran a very good campaign in North Carolina, Virginia, and we actually won votes in West Virginia that we didn't think we could win. So those things turned out very successful. And after that, I decided to go into, again, public administration, as well as working in Greensboro. They didn't seem to mind. I mean, there would be newspaper articles and they'd say Orangeburg and protests, and civil rights, and all that kind of stuff, that he's working here with the City, and things are going well. But the folk in South Carolina and the FBI just would not turn it loose. I mean they were determined to see me end up without anything. So I went with the Greensboro Housing Authority and worked there for another period of time. And as my parents got older, I thought it was time for me to move on back. I didn't get back in time to take care of them. My mother died in August; my father died in February. My mother died in August, and I moved back at the end of August. But one of the reasons why it took me so long—

Clark: What year?

Sellers: 1990.

Clark: Ninety.

Sellers: And one of the reasons why it took me so long is I went through, all over the state of South Carolina, and could not find a job, period, university, Voorhees, the black colleges, nobody. I mean, it was just that kind of way. The irony is, is that in

1993 I applied for a pardon from the state of South Carolina, and some of the old moderates from the fifties and sixties in South Carolina had managed to get themselves on the parole board, pardon and parole board. And so in 1993 I was granted a pardon. By this time I was on the state board of education and working on educational issues, and they made it a big thing. I mean the press came in, and we were in a meeting, and they wanted to stop the meeting. And, oh, it was a big, big, big, big, big to-do. And I guess it was a big to-do because now the veil is being raised just a little bit, and people are beginning to go back and revisit Orangeburg. "What was that all about? Why was," I mean, you know, "Why did they go to jail?" And all those other kinds of things.

And so shortly after that, the pressure to stigmatize and deny employment went off, and the first job that opened up was at the University of South Carolina. There are some ironies there. I'll go along with the ironies. And I think that those things are connected. I don't ever want to make you think that I all of a sudden got to the point where I could make the University of South Carolina hire me. I think that with the pardon, they went on and did that kind of thing, and so working with the University of South Carolina since that time. I think during the hardest part of that, that is where you would go and apply for jobs and people who were last in terms of educational qualifications or skills would always get the job; would probably make some people go mad. But I decided it was important to address the issue of trying to develop the kind of attitude and the stature that would continue to help build positive relationships. And I had three children, that I thought it was important that I not dump all that luggage on them, baggage on them. And they had no reason to be sinister or feel like somebody owed them anything. And I wanted them to be able to embrace the movement and all those kinds of things and not see it as being something that caused us to have any hardships or pains.

And so I really worked hard on trying to transcend some of that and not get caught in all that anger and bitter and frustration. So I just learned how to take it in stride. "I'm not going to get this job. I don't care how hard I try; I'm going to apply, and when they say no, I'm going to keep on going. And we'll do what we have to do." Obviously you have to do what you have to do if you're trying to raise children. So you do that kind of thing.

Clark: Right. And you didn't blame yourself.

Sellers: Oh, no.

Clark: You knew you were not at fault.

Sellers: No. I never got caught in that. But sometimes it was: you were applying for a job as a laborer, and then somebody else that can't see straight, and they get the job. And you say, "Well, what's the deal?" And they say, "You weren't qualified." You can very easily go off the deep end and say, "Oh, God, this has to stop." But I internalized it. I think it had a lot to do with the family. The family, the kids in

particular kind of rallied around. They understood the movement much better than a lot of other people. And they learned the people in the movement, and they learned that struggle, and so they were very helpful in reinforcing, and I think that's what makes, made—

Clark: And how did this affect your wife?

Sellers: She had some of the same kinds of levels of frustration that I figured that if I didn't get it, then, she's insulated from having those kinds of things. I'd just put in an application, say, "OK. I'm applying for this. Didn't happen. We go to the next thing and just keep going."

Clark: She understood.

Sellers: Yeah. I don't think it was probably as painless for her as it was for me because she understood, but at a distance. I mean, she was a younger person and so did not have the kind of indoctrination and the kind of movement experience and history that I had. So there was some pain and anguish, I would imagine, because of these turn-downs and rejections and deflections. I think the one that was probably as painful was the one in running for the city council of Greensboro and having the NAACP as the organization that does the undercutting. I mean, they intimidated people on the polling, in the polling places. They argued with folks, poll workers. They went out and got folk who ordinarily would not vote. They did everything they could to keep me from winning that election, and so I just said, "Well, we ran a good case. We had programs that were looking good, goals and objectives, and that's all you can have." And so, but that was disappointing. But I got over that.

And the rest of it was just: you move from there to do your next thing, and you keep doing things. And there were efforts to do some writing. I did some of that and went on to the university and tried to keep moving at the university, and now have become the director of African-American Studies. And we'll have a segment on civil rights and hopefully we can begin to archive and cultivate and research and write that story that's been left out of the history books about the civil rights movement in South Carolina and the larger civil rights books that talk about civil rights in the nation. So we're working on that kind of development right now.

Clark: But you have published at least one book.

Sellers: Yeah. We have a couple of articles here and there.

Clark: And the name of your book?

Sellers: *The River of No Return*, which is probably in need of being updated, and we'll look at it. It's very interesting when you do an autobiography at twenty-something.

Clark: It was 1973.

Sellers: Um-hm. Yes. So that's not the way you're supposed to do autobiographies, but since we did it that way, then that means that obviously you have to do it—

Clark: Yeah, but it captures something right then that's great.

Sellers: It captures something right then, yeah, but it doesn't talk about—well, the question is, "Well, what happened?" Yeah. And so now we have to go back and start that whole process over again. I think that would be an interesting challenge, and I'll probably try to take that on sometime soon.

Clark: Thank you.

Sellers: You're welcome.

(end of interview)

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