

Notes on conversation with Aaron Henry at his Clarksdale home,
Monday, August 3, 1964

Interviewed by Jerry DeMuth

I was born in rural Coahoma County, July 2, '22 and joined the NAACP in 1941 when I was a senior in high school. We had an instructor from Dillard University. He talked the entire senior class into joining the NAACP youth group. At Xavier I was active in the formative days of the NSA and the National Federation of Catholic College Students.

On our ship we had segregated movie showings. One night there would be movies for whites, the next night ^{movies} for Negroes. So the Negroes boycotted the movies.

I recall one day we had a very bad situation with the chaplain in Honolulu. He was preaching away, talking about the rain, and said it was raining pitch forks and nigger babies. Most of us got up and walked out and we didn't go back to this particular church. We went to church in town. The officers understood why and we got free use of cars into town.

In 1950 I got my B.S. in pharmacy from Xavier and came back to Clarksdale. My wife had been a student at Jackson State and had conducted Bible classes--that's how I met her. We got married then. I went into partnership with William Walker in a drugstore. Walker is white but a large part of his business is Negro. We were partners from 1950 to 1954 when he got an opportunity to buy Walgreens. So he could buy it he offered to sell me his share in the drugstore. (Henry bought it and today owns Fourth Street Drugs across the street from the old location.)

Henry--add one

Walker had heard about me through a negro doctor he knew, O G Smith. Walker has supported me in my activities. He tells me to go to it, but be careful, you have a wife and child. Walker is from Goodman, Miss.

In 1952 we organized the local branch of the NAACP. It was the culmination of several activities and frustrations with the white community--rape of Negro women with no convictions, police murders of Negroes with no investigations. The NAACP at our request sent in a couple of workers and within a week we got organized. WE8^ve been raisin' hell ever since.

I've been involved in voter registration activities, a boycott of the downtown community, and pressure against whites for illegal activities. In 1954 I filed a petition askin' the schoolsto desegregate. It was never answered. In September of 1963 I filed another petition. As defendents, we got 17 children so there would be at least one from each grade. The federal district court ordered the school board to ~~xxxxxx~~ submit a plan by July 30.

I was also involved with the Coahoma County Negro Citizens Education League and the Coahoma County Voters League.

It was a crazy thing to join the NAACP then (1952). Everybody was notwilling to take on this kind of activity in 1952. It was highly unpopular. Peoples houses were shot into. In the first ten years, till 1962 there were 600-to 800/^{Negro}voters, there are 1,000 now.

I've been arrested 4 or 5 times on traffic charges, one restraint of trade charge, once for pardaing without a permit and on a morals charge. The boycott worked out swell. We really squeezed them.

Ever since I can remember Negroes participated in the nativity ~~par~~ parade. We got a new mayor, Kincaid, in 1961. He said that Negroes were not to participate. We considered it an affront to Negroes, especially to the children.

Henry -- add two

We said if we can't parade downtown, we won't trade downtown. The police arrested several persons they felt were leaders to break the back of the movement. I was sentenced to six months and appealed. I went to the mayor to talk to him and was arrested in his office. We felt the Chamber of Commerce which had sent the mayor's letter was responsible. The chamber met with us. We asked that Negroes be employed above the menial level and that courtesy titles be used. The boycott was lifted July 2, 1964. WE're observing and studying particular practices and have become involved with separate stores.

We had ~~had~~ serious grievances. No Negroes are employed in the city government above the menial level; complete segregation in the courtroom; and segregated drinking fountains and toilets. (Still seg toilets--Negro toilets unlocked, white toilets locked, whites have to get a key.) We wrote to the mayor to present our grievances but were ignored. So we sat in at City Hall--we were going to sit there till he heard us. Two weeks later, he still had granted us nothing so we decided to let the world know conditions here so we picketed. We could hear voices on the police two-way radios: look at all them niggers coming from down the block. I was arrested and served a week. I worked on the work gang and even hauled garbage. They arrested a lot of us. Sometimes there were so many in the cell, no one could lie down. We were really packed in. But the women had it worse. They ~~it~~ didn't have no privacy. The police would look in on them when they were in the showers. We made out point--conditions in Clarksdale were so bad we were willing to go on the chain gang.

We've been involved as a branch unit with the freedom summer program. We made quarters available--we rented space for the freedom house which was the NAACP office and for the community center. We also found freedom school locations.

Henry -- add three

The greatest result of the freedom vote was the statewide organization that grew out of it--COFO. There are organizations now in 45 communities--before there were organizations in only 20 to 25. It almost doubled the number of communities. And we have a contact in most counties which is a springboard to organizing an area. The freedom vote came about as the result of a survey. In a 4 year period almost 70,000 had gone to their courthouse to register but only 6,000 Negroes got registered. The State Sovereignty ~~in~~ Commission had always said that Negroes don't vote because they're too apathetic. We showed that Negroes would vote if they had the opportunity and the person to vote for. There were a lot of arrests during that campaign. Most every person saw the inside of a jail. In some places, police came and took the poll boxes and the ballots.

The day we met to look for a candidate all four civil rights groups could support, I was chosen. I was proud and honored to be able to accept. The idea for the campaign came when Bob Moses, Dave Dennis and myself kicked around thoughts and got the idea.

Our home was bombed. That happened on Good Friday in 1962. The right front was blown out and burned. It did about \$1500-\$1600 damage. On Easter Sunday I put a sign in our window-- Father Forgive Them. I've had a shot gun guard since then and there hasn't been any more violence.

My store windows were regularly smashed around that time too. Then in August ~~it was~~ my store was bombed. (Insurance on both home and store cancelled--not able to get new policies, considered a bad risk.)

We have to make faster strides and will make them. Mississippi will have to make a greater deviation. Pressure on the state will keep up till the state finally heels.

Henry -- add four

If white people vote for Goldwater because I try to get my freedom, they're going to have to vote for Goldwater.

I'm sadly coming to the opinion there will have to be a confrontation between federal government and the state's power before there can be freedom in Mississippi.

As there are more violations of court orders, the federal government will become more involved in civil rights.

You can't ask Negroes to be quiet while whites are still kicking us down. There's no reason for calling off demonstrations. I'm not letting up on any pressure on the federal government.

The summer volunteers came to work in programs already here. These programs will continue after they leave, only on a smaller scale.