

Anne Romaine Interviewing Ivanhoe Donaldson

Anne Romaine: This is an interview with Ivanhoe Donaldson, March 23, 1967

AR:~~How long were you working with SNCC~~

ID:.....Yeah

AR:..... You said.....

ID: Yeah.

AR: How long have you been working with(SNCC?)

ID: Since its inception--1960

AR: Where are you from
(~~Memphis~~)--?

ID: In New York, New York or by _____

AR: How many?

ID: In the State?

AR: Uh-huh.

ID: Well nearly(6 weeks).

AR: How old are you?

ID: How old am I now? 26.

AR: Uh, when you were.

ID: I'd better make a correction. I'm 25. I forget my age sometimes.

AR: When you were...what counties did you work in..when you were down there,
when you were in Mississippi with Bob(Wilkinson)?

ID: Yeah.....in 1964.

AR:.....

ID: Yeah.I was working for SNCC then, now the(crisis?) I went to Mississippi
in 1963 to work full-time.And worked there through '65 and I went to work on
Julian Bond's campaign.

AR: Where in Mississippi did you work most?

(2)

ID: Well, basically the delta. I worked all over the state. In October, I think, of '63, or something like that, we had a Freedom Day in Hattiesburg, the first Freedom Day in the South,...in Mississippi, Voter Registration type build-up campaign. Worked down in Hattiesburg during that period, and uh, worked down in McComb for a while.

AR: Was that in the fall of '63?

ID: Yeah.

AR: And...(~~the democracy~~)?

ID: The March election, yes that is correct. And, at that time in the, let's see, fall of '63 was when SNCC decided to set up a state-wide operation. Previous to that they had a summer state-wide operation (defined) by congressional districts. At that time there were five: the delta's one-- the second congressional district, the east side of the state, North of Meridian being the first congressional district, Meridian and Canton being the fourth, Jackson being the third and Hattiesburg being the fifth. And, the fall of '63, that was firmed up. People went into state-wide action on Voter Registration. An then (Broke) up the campaign for the Aaron Henry gubernatorial race, done as a para political situation. Call it a mock election. ~~When~~ he ran on a Freedom Ballot ticket for governor, we then started an intensified state-wide operation with bases in Greenville, bases in Greenwood, bases in Columbus, base in West Point, base in Jackson, base in Hattiesburg, base down in Biloxi and McComb and in Meridian and Canton, and all over the entire state. Places I just named were the bases in the urban areas, but there were also bases established in rural areas, such as Issaquena County, such as Holmes County, although one might debate whether...true or small little town. Some projects are known by the city name, like Greenwood, and some projects are know by the county name, like Holmes County because Holmes has a number of urban

cities in the county and was a complete county operation, while ^{before} where Greenwood is, the activity was concentrated basically in Greenwood or in Itta Bena where some activity had taken place at the vocational college, or what was then the vocational college and um, that got the campaign around the Aaron Henry election that sort of set up a very tight ~~kn~~ state-wide operation, with a great deal of activity, of course, coming out of ^{Peabody} ~~Cahona~~ County where I was based in Clarksdale, and a lot of activity coming out of Jackson which was set up as the state-wide office. That was sort of a complete cycle because previous to that, Greenville was pretty much the state wide office of the activity because Bob Moses was based there, and then based in Greenwood for a while and of course based later there, he was in McComb which was in 1961, the office covering the South of the state was in Jackson, the Direct Action Project which was run basically by Diane Nash, Bevel and people of the like.

AR:

ID: Well, it ought to have been, but COFO was not existent at that point and people like Diane and SNCC staff.....most of the people who worked in Mississippi worked in SNCC with the exception of Tom.....and Dave Denis who worked for CORE. CORE basically had some form of base in Jackson because of the Freedom Rides and then through '63, '64, '65, they developed what we called a creative influence in the 4th congressional district, or what was the 4th congressional district before re-apportionment, in the Meridian-Canton area, that whole area when Neshoba county was operating under SNCC, maintained a SNCC staff operation in Neshoba, particularly after the killing of Goodman, Chaney, Schwerner.

(4)

AR:.....(mostly SNCC people)up until '64?

ID: No, SNCC, uh , many of us were already deep south, south wide, and before you had, I mean outside of the Freedom Rides, the main focus that _____ Mississippi was the food drive which took place in Mississippi in 62 spring of, uh, Fall of 62, spring of '63, We had thousands of people on the voter registration lines in Greenwood, Mississippi, and previous to that point, you had a major direct action campaign in Albany, Georgia. Now..and besides your program that was in Albany, Georgia, SNCC had direct action projects in Orangeburg, South Carolina, in Raleigh, in Nashville, _____ in Birmingham, in Danville, a project in Virginia which brought thousands of people as a SNCC..... As a matter of fact I directed that. It had programs going on in Arkansas, there was a whole movement over in Milena, and they built the Pine Bluff movement which wasn't to come to light until the fall of '64. Then SNCC also had a project in Louisville, Kentucky in the summer of '62. We formed an organization called the Non-Violent Action Committee based out of the Braden's home. And uh, they had projects all over the deep south and that Mississippi became a focus because it became the first attempt by SNCC into a state-wide project. Because Mississippi is basically a state-wide black belt area at least from the political reference point, a political point of view. Alabama just has that central portion. Speaking of Alabama, you know SNCC has operated in Dallas county ever since the spring of 1962 and had a major direct action project in Dallas, Dallas county Alabama, before it had one in Mississippi which took place in the spring of '63 so uh, it had been around the deep south for quite a while. And every once in a while it started a project in the north, the first school boycott of the 60's took place in Chicago was organized and directed by SNCC. As a matter of fact the head of the school boycott committee was a guy named Larry London

(5)

who was chairman of Chicago SNCC at the time.

AR: Um, when the Mississippi project was b_____ to Louisville,..... recognize it? a coordinator,

ID: Well, there was never any doubt. Bob Moses was ~~verified~~ by SNCC. The director of the SNCC Mississippi project. Now when Bob and Tom _____ put together COFO, which was a brother like operation involving all the civil rights organizations. Basically what that means is that it involved the Mississippi state branch of the NAACP, the SCLC citizenship program in Mississippi, national CORE and national SNCC. Bob was the director of that whole operation with David Dennis who was _____ Tom G. _____ associate director of COFO officially the head of COFO but at the same time maintained his operations as the head of SNCC, but that title as such wasn't very meaningful in some senses because each of the local projects had developed local directors and each of the congressional districts also had its own director. So Bob more helped in coordinating and planning strategy at that particular point in history.

AR: What was actually theCOFO in deciding on summer projects FDP office. How was that interrelated?

ID: I think that is a confusion in history. COFO was formed in 1962, uh, for certain political reasons and COFO was the base for voter registration. The MFDP, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, began to take form and shape in the summer of 1964 which was sort of an outgrowth of the mock elections of the fall and winter of 1963 which involved Dr. Henry and that campaign, the SNCC staff, and COFO. As I remember, COFO as a staff organization was about 90% SNCC and c.2% ^{about 8% CORE} others.

AR: Were you down there in the winter of '63?

ID: Sure. So that I was there that whole period. So that COFO as a voter registration base was designed to deal with the question of voter registration

activity. After the March election, it became clear that people in the south themselves must begin to develop a political organization. Now COFO was set up by staff for different kinds of reasons. The MFDP was an effort by staff to have a community begin to set up its own political forms and its own political shape and something that was run by Mississippi people and not run by a staff. Not by staff from the outside or a staff from the inside. For that matter, so that there were different places and by the time that the MFDP had gotten its ~~birth~~ and had taken shape which was in the summer of '64, COFO had sort of an abstraction. There wasn't really a COFO anymore. Most people considered themselves Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party workers and COFO had served its role. Its role had laid the foundation for the creation of a MFDP. MFDP was a Mississippi based operation run by Mississippi people. So that they represented a progression of events rather than an overlapping or you know, counterforces against each other.

AR:

ID: Oh, yes. In all its glamor.

AR:

AB: Well,

AR:

ID: I don't know if I want to go into all the details of personality conflicts.

I guess to history in some ways both things will be important but I think those things need a more definitive analysis, more than what a tape recorder allows you to give. You know, that's a whole story study in itself. How people related and functioned in Atlanta City. Basically what happened was that a delegation of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Delegation and its staff went to Atlantic City. I was given the assignment the first few days there to run a lobbying operation. What took place was some people on the delegation staff were assigned certain states where we thought that they would support

a friendly overtures by members of the delegations of states like Massachusetts, Michigan, New York and California and we began to lobby to get strong resolutions and to keep these members of the Credentials Committee, you know, in support of our position. Other people have been assigned to lobby with states that had't up till that time taken positions that were very favorable, to present them with our brief, and to answer questions which they raised. Other people on staff took on the role of the activist [hat] They took active support of the MFDP and other forms of direct action in support of the MFDP conquest. Now obviously a number of things began to take place. Initially, a broad range of support was gathered. People like the National Council of Churches, people like CORE, people like SNCC, people like Dr. King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the United Automobile Workers' Union, other prestigious people, you know support the MFDP's challenge. Basically what was up was that the MFDP through [historically] and development of a northern-organizational structure, very democratically together. As democratically as one could put anything together in Mississippi given its historical development and bases within that state. And definitely more constitutional than any of the delegates who were elected by the regular Democrats in the State of Mississippi. And all of this is detailedly outlined in brief. The brief was written by students with the aid of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and was argued by Joe Rauh and they began to lobby and present their legal argument to the Credentials Committee. In the Credentials Committee developed a split, you had strong people like Edith Green from Oregon, arguing in ^[support] ~~want~~ of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and you had contradiction of having to deal with a black congressman named Briggs ^{[Diggs] from Detroit} but retaining the establishment's mind. All that for the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, ~~so~~ and against them. The power plays became very clean. Senator Humphrey at that time acted as the administration's hatchet man, pulling together the forces in the

Credentials Committee to reject the challenge beginning to lobby with other delegates in other state delegations to reject the challenge. And from that a ^[meaningless] a minimum compromise was developed and that was where the Credential Committee was willing to give two seats, you know, to the MFDP, not only were they just going to give 2 seats to the MFDP, but they were going to tell the MFDP who were ~~going to tell the MFDP~~ ^{2 people} who were going to ~~tell the MFDP~~ who were the ~~two people who were going to~~ take the two seats. They named Dr. Aaron Henry and the chaplain at Tougaloo, who, um..

AR: Ed King

OD: Ed King, Reverend Ed King, at that time was to take the seats which was completely contradictory to what the MFDP was about. I mean the MFDP in no way was seeking support of tokenism and they were being told who their leaders were and a token speech with political symbolism gesture, with no political meaning. The MFDP did not come to Atlantic City in any way to sit down with racist forces, they came to challenge the racist forces within the framework of the Democratic Party of the United States. And therefore it was like a blow in the face for them to receive this. Now what eventually took place was that a number of clashes came over the issues of whether or not the MFDP should accept the compromise. Some factions argued that as a symbolic gesture they had won an important political victory and they ought to accept the compromise. Other factions argued that they had made their point, that in fact they had won a political position showing that there was bankruptcy of morality within the Democratic Party and within the country in its inability to accept something outside the establishment being very legitimate and its inability to say that something in the establishment is very sick and therefore should be removed. And that they had made that point very clear in their case and that they ought not to accept that challenge.

~~because~~ that by accepting that compromise they would have negated anything they had struggled for which was the whole question of whether people would accept Tokenism in 1960's and whether people should have to sit down with racists, to discuss their *humanity*, you know, their right to exist, to be, you know, people feel that these are no longer points of discussion but things that must be decided readily and should be accepted readily to any society. So, of course, ^{what} eventually happened to us, of the MFDP led by Mrs. Hamer, who decided to reject the challenge (th compromise) and go back to Mississippi to work even harder to build an operation. Yah, there were personalities within MFDP who wanted to accept the compromise. Doc Henry was one of them. He was very ^(T.D.) ~~feet~~ because he was the symbolic head of the MFDP at Atlantic City but the position always of the MFDP was that it made its decisions collectively and not just sat down leaders in the back room and decide the strategy and the problems of the world but that they would sit down ~~and~~

~~down together in a collective group and decide what kinds of things they wanted to do. Joe *Baker* who argued very beautifully the case of the MFDP initially before the compromise came down..... individuals, who felt the compromise, although not necessarily honorable, maybe should be accepted. And there were many people within this camp. You know, for varying and different reasons, I don't like to name them all together because I have the tendency to say that they're all the same, but they all approach this for entirely different types of reasons. I think possibly one of the most shocking things, of all the people who support the compromise ~~and~~ was James Farmer, you know who was the director of CORE, who sort of, you know here you had many CORE people in the MFDP who worked very hard, ~~was~~ ~~hard~~. And it wasn't that Farmer necessarily~~

ought to take the compromise position, but he took a neutral position at a time when people thought that he had the responsibility to take a more decisive role, one way or the other, so that the people of the delegation could understand what he was saying. But instead he sort of threw his hands up and was unable to deal with the situation. While on the other hand of course, Bob Moses (Bobby M.) took a position that we ought to accept it. But Bob's position basically was that in the final analysis, the decision made was to be made by the Mississippi Freedom Democratic party and it was made by themⁱⁿ a close^d session.

AR:.....You,

ID: It was , Bob though the people should accept or reject it. Excuse^{me}, I didn't mean to say that. Bob's personal position was that the people should reject the compromise. But in the final analysis, that what was decided was the 68 delegates and their alternates met in a closed session and without any of the staff or any of the national civil rights people or anybody else meeting with them and argued it out and hammered it out and decided by a very decisive vote that they would reject the compromise and proceed on and that's what they did. Now what became the issue then with the rejection of compromise was to make it a fight on the floor of the convention. This is very interesting and very important because what happened was that Johnson refused to allow the issue to come to the floor on the convention. I think that it's ^{hard} to be one can look back and say that had the issue come to the floor, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party would have been seated. This is another instance, incident, uh, an example of where Americans are not allowed vote on an issue. You know, it's all controlled for you behind back doors. What happened was the minority...

[report]
 was given the minority ~~court~~ was given and which was ruled up and down by the chairman. And there was no vote, you know, it was all done by acclamation. Of course what eventually developed from under this was the fact that the President himself who wanted to be nominated by a floor vote, had to be nominated by a pure act of acclamation because had he been nominated by the floor vote, it would have allowed the opportunity for other issues that people wanted to have, you know, ~~win~~ by a floor vote or lost by a floor vote or to be brought up to table.

AR:

ID: I haven't much time

AR: After the compromise the people, the community people, that were supposed to back up the compromise met at the back of a church to decide on, to talk about a monopoly (?) ^{white} there ~~were~~ ^{was} suppose to be a closed meeting, but.....was suppose to show.....Were you there? Bill Meads ~~said~~ ^{was} to go around the room, and psuh for a floor fight?

ID: Well you have to understand the power politics and how it developed and around? at that time there was a conference of the UAW. The UAW was backing the MFDP so that ~~was~~ ^{was} also, as history puts _____ about the compromise, it left Joe Rauh hanging out in the middle. He had to move the way his organization moved and it became clear Rauh would not support a minority report And he didn't in the final hour. There were other people there also who folks thought would support a minority report.....I think you have to understand that there was tremendous pressure brought to bear on all the people. I think it took a lot of guts to support the minority report. And a number of people made it very clear that their whole political career was in jeopardy if they would support that and not only their political career, but the perhaps careers of other ^{the} members of that families, in jeopardy on this particular position because Johnson was

driving a very hard point to his hatchet man Hubert Humphrey.

AR:California, the one out in California who,.....

ID: Yeah she was one fo them.....I'm sure you've gotten this information from a lot of people. You talk.....around a bunch of things?

AR: Yeah.

End