

CLAY CARSON  
INTERVIEW WITH ELLA JO BAKER, FORMER ADVISOR OF SNCC  
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CARSON: I'd like to start with the beginning, and I guess you can define that better than I. I've talked to the Bradens for example and they were involved in the South before 1960. Even though the sit-in movement began in 1960, there was a history before that. I wonder if you can describe from your point of view where you see the roots of that movement.

BAKER: Personally I think it would have to go back to the beginning of all the struggles of the black people. Perhaps in terms of organization, some of the outstanding contributions came from one of the organizations now which most people feel is almost discredited--that is the NAACP. I worked for several years as a field person with the Association and traveled throughout the South. At certain stages, say in the 30's and 40's and early 50's, the one organization that you had of any import was the NAACP. And in various sections of the country what leadership [there was] was provided by persons like Harry T. Moore in Florida. I think of him especially because in 1946, Christmas night, his house was bombed and he and his wife were killed in a little place called Mims, Florida. I knew him very well. I thought of it primary because of all the adulation that has been heaped upon the late Herbert Hoover, FBI Hoover. I think of the fact that never could he find any clues for such an act as that. And so if you ask what was happening before 1960. You mentioned the Bradens. The Bradens are part of an organization called the

Southern Conference Educational Fund. And I'm sure they told you about the beginnings of that, and about what I think was its initial meeting in Birmingham. The same Bull Conner who was famous in the late 50's and 60's, he was a factor in arresting people for having a mixed gathering there. And so if you ask what was there beforehand, you had people I suppose, you can't just say middle class--they came from all classes--but you had a number of the professionals in the leading roles such as Presidents of NAACP branches and the like. I think of Birmingham as an example, where a number of people I could recall who were professionals and who had carried on a struggle in Birmingham against the repressive atmosphere that had prevailed for a long time. I can think of people who were in the labor movement, in the United Mine Workers and the Steel workers in Birmingham. I think of an individual who stood out and was pioneering in such things as insisting upon riding in first-class on trains. He would come from Mobile to go to Atlanta just for the sake of testing. And that's John LaFlore who is still in Mobile. At that time he was in the Post Office and he almost lost his job, because he did take certain stands. In the 50's he was especially persecuted and long before the 50's. So I don't know, when you say what came first.

CARSON: Do you recall any specific examples of student activism during the 50's?

BAKER: No. Student activism was not a force in the 50's. In fact, the thing I remember most is the characterization of the students of the 1950's as the 'silent generation.' And to some extent

that's understandable, because they had been the heirs of the McCarthy period which had silenced large numbers of activists, especially the more radical, and the more radical movements had been driven underground. And so I don't recall much student activity per se, but young people were involved in such things as the work of the NAACP in equalization of teacher's salaries. One of the first persons to test it was a young woman in Norfolk, Virginia. And then there were others in different parts of the country.

CARSON: When?

BAKER: You got me on my dates. I was traveling with the NAACP from 1940 to 1946; it was in the early 1940's. Such persons as whose names you might now know--William Hasty, who I think just retired from a federal judgeship in Philadelphia--he and his cousin Charlie Houston. Charlie Houston had been one of the architects of the NAACP programs on equalization, on developing a program for legal action on the question of equal educational facilities. The Association had challenged the discriminatory practices in various state universities. I think the University of Maryland was about the first, and then they moved into busing facilities, equalization of busing facilities. Which is now of course so hot, but at that stage black children didn't have bus facilities to ride to school, and white children did.

Then the question of equal salaries for black teachers. And you had some heroes in that. I mentioned Moore. He was one of the three black teachers, principals I think, who were fired in Florida over the issue of equalizing black teachers'



salaries to those of whites. So you had that type of thing, but not much student activism.

CARSON: So would I be correct in assuming that when the student movement began in 1960 and caught hold and spread around, you were surprised at this?

BAKER: No, I don't guess I was, because you see it so happened that having worked with young people I knew that there was sensitivity on the part of young people. And then of course the movement in Montgomery, there were young people involved in it. But I suppose all of us were unprepared for the speed with which the sit-ins escalated. I don't know how you analyzed it, but, if I were analyzing it, one of the first things that comes to my mind is the fact that it came at a time when the news media didn't have any great excitement. For instance, if this had occurred at the same time as the Vietnam War or the going to the moon, it wouldn't have received the same attention. And this became a part of the mechanism through which the thing escalated. So from the standpoint of the speed with which the thing spread, it was surprising or it was not predictable. But maybe if I say I was not surprised, but maybe I just don't know how to be surprised when people take action which seems to be normal. Because it was a normal thing for Blair in Greensboro to be walking through the five-and-ten cent store and buying paper and pencils and whatever else he could buy and couldn't buy a soda at the fountain. It's normal for him to be irritated by this, because generations of us have been irritated, and some of us have taken certain action. Sometimes the action may

not have spread beyond that immediate area where you were. So that was normal; but the fact that it caught on, that it spread, was due to a large extent because it came on the scene at a time when a great deal of attention could be given to it. And also that it followed the very historical thing of 50,000 black people in Montgomery, Alabama walking instead of riding on a segregated bus. And yet when you know something about what's in back of that, you would be as surprised either, but you're dealing with students so . . .

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CARSON: What at that time did you feel you should do? What was your reaction to this movement?

BAKER: Well, in the first place I was then in Atlanta for the purpose of, I had been there a couple of years, to set up the office of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. The whole concept of a Southern-based mass membership organization was something that some of us felt was very necessary. So I was in Atlanta. When the sit-ins started, I was familiar enough with the states and the areas where things were happening both in terms of the locations of schools and in terms of persons who were in the area. And when something popped up in Raleigh, in Durham or Greensboro or someplace in Virginia, these were areas that I knew about. And also I happened to have been serving then as the Executive Secretary of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and was booked to end my stay with them in August or at least in the summer. So in February when this happened, I proposed that a meeting should be called of the student leaders from different cities. Primary because it seemed as if there

didn't even seem to be any communication, real communication between one city and the others. There was a certain element of communication which was stimulated the reactions of different campuses. For instance, a brother may have been in school let's say in Greensboro and a sister was in school somewhere else. And he would write and tell her, why shouldn't they do something. This is the way it escalated. So at the point where personal concern began it was to raise the need for at least trying to bring the leadership of the groups that had emerged together to establish basis for communication, and hopefully some viable coordination. That was the original concept. Since I was with the SCLC, I couched it in the idea of a leadership training thing. So it was a rather simple letter that I sent out. It was sent out with the idea of having one hundred to one hundred twenty-five, no more, present as a leadership thing. The assumption being that the SCLC, being an advocate of the nonviolent philosophy--it didn't necessary mean that I believed in the non-violent philosophy as such as a way of life, but it was a tactic that had been successfully employed and the leadership of SCLC were advocates of it. And so I proposed that we have such a meeting. And then I undertook to go to a couple of places. At first through correspondence and through telephone calls I tried to set up a meeting at the site of the beginning of the sit-ins, which would be Greensboro. But, it had a meeting scheduled, so I couldn't get the facilities there. I am not too sure whether A & T turned it down; they probably did. I may have it in papers around. And so then I went to Raleigh. I happened to



have gone to school in Raleigh and also at that time the Dean of the Theological School was a young minister who was very active anyway and had indicated at other meetings at which I had been present a certain kind of drive. And so I got in touch with him, and we secured space at Shaw for holding the meetings and then we sent out these letters specifying how many people we suggested should come from a given place. But what happened was that this became sort of a summit thing and instead of, say, the hundred or the one hundred and twenty-five from the areas where the sit-ins were taking place, you had over two hundred students as I recall from different parts of the South. I think there were nineteen schools that were present from the East and the Middle West and down the Eastern Seaboard, both white and black. And so that's how it was, and the concept was to establish communication and perhaps coordination.

CARSON: After this point, during the summer and the fall of that year, it seemed that at the October conference of that year some decisions were made about whether it would be an on-going organization. During this time, there was only one person in the office.

BAKER: Jane Stembridge, she's somewhere in California now.

CARSON: At what point did the concept of the group that you had brought together change to an organization which would go on and have some on-going function?

BAKER: Even at the Raleigh meeting it became clear that the young people wanted something of their own. There were forces at work to try to attach the young people to on-going organizations. There

were people from CORE and there were people from the SCILC. With the SCILC having sponsored the meeting and with the personality of Dr. King as a lodestone, I suppose, there was an assumption that the young people would just become a part of an existing organization. And the issue was fought out, and they decided not to become a part of any organization. I think whatever resolution finally came out was something to the effect that they would like to feel that they could relate to all other organizations, but they did not want to lose their identity. So the proposal developed for a continuations committee. And even at Raleigh they called them the Temporary Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Anyway, it was a temporary arrangement whereby delegations from the representation there were to meet in Atlanta every month until fall. And out of these meetings in the summer came the October meeting at which the idea of an ongoing organization more or less jelled.

CARSON: What advice did you give during this period? What was your hope?

BAKER: Well my basic hope from the beginning was that it would be an independent organization of young people. I thought they had the right to direct their own affairs and even make their own mistakes. You see I've been around long enough and I suppose seen enough of what can take place. How people and their ideas can be captured by those who have programs of their own and who may not be as sensitive as they should be to what the other group that they are trying to capture is trying to do. And I have always had great respect for people and for ideas and for the rights of young people to have their chance to make their



own mistakes and develop. And so when they met in Raleigh there was effort as I said to capture and I refused to be party to the effort. I also took a position of not permitting the press in on the policy-making meetings. I perhaps could have been in a position to dictate this, because I happened to have been the person coordinating it, but I didn't have to do that. Because the justification of the position taken, namely that rights of the group to make its own decisions and to determine where it wanted to go, it was part of the inner thinking of the young people themselves. And so they were handling that. Out of that meeting you had a very strong sense of direction in terms of identification. Certainly out of the meetings that took place between April and October there was more that came to the surface to show that if they wished to survive and do what they thought was important, they had to maintain an independent distance as against being a part of any other organizations.

