

INTERVIEW WITH LESLIE BURL MCLEMORE

by

Pete Daniel

October 26, 1984

Washington, D.C.

Daniel: So, start out talking about Walls.

McLemore: Well, growing up in Walls I had to live in a place that was in Mississippi and also close to Memphis, so in coming up in Walls going to town was going to Memphis. I think that made a difference in one sense in terms of my perceptions of the world. Growing up in Walls, Memphis clearly was the center of the universe! (Laughter.) And with Memphis being the center of the universe, Walls was one of the satellites around Memphis. So it was an experience that was nurtured in part by my mother and my grandfather, my mother's father, who was the chief in the family.

My mother and father separated when I was very young so my grandfather was like the male figure and the role model and the person that my brother Eugene and I in fact called daddy, as opposed to granddaddy. He wouldn't let us call him granddaddy. He insisted that we call him daddy, so it was only the younger kids that never called him daddy. The younger kids distinguished their father from our granddaddy by calling their father daddy Sam; calling my grandfather daddy Les. So nobody ever referred to him as granddaddy. He was either a daddy or daddy Les.

Daniel: Is that the way he wanted it?

McLemore: That's the way he wanted it. I know with the two of us, Eugene and I, he really wanted it like that. He said to us, and I never shall forget this, he often would say, "I am both your daddy and your granddaddy, because your daddy is not here, and so I am both your daddy and granddaddy." And I guess in one sense he was correct. But he had that kind of personality. He didn't like our daddy a whole lot. So what happened there was that because of his dislike for my daddy, I was named for my granddaddy, Leslie Williams, and my father, Burl McLemore, and so when I was growing up, I have always used, in formal ways at least, my full name, Leslie Burl, and my grandfather always referred to me as Leslie McLemore. He did not like me to use my middle name, my daddy's name. He wanted me to be Leslie McLemore and not Leslie Burl McLemore. He despised my daddy so much until he didn't want to even hear his name. So they didn't have a very good relationship. When my daddy would come visit, my daddy was like a non-person, and so that developed, but it was a way of my Grandfather saying he was in charge, and he had a very strong personality. I think he influenced both of us, the older two, Eugene and I, to a great extent, in terms of outlook on the world and politics and the whole bit. But we grew up; grew up in Walls, between Walls and Memphis.

My Mother remarried, and then we moved to Memphis. I went to school in Walls the first couple of years, I guess grades one through three, actually. I started school in a church, Mount Zion CME. Church, which was about a mile and a half from Walls, and

four and I was five. In Mississippi at that time they had something called a soft-backed primer and a hard-backed primer. What they would do, you would start in what would be equivalent to K now, kindergarten, because you would start with the ABCs, and then the soft-backed primer, and then the hard-backed primer. And I discovered years later that this was a system that was not exactly peculiar to Walls, or unique to Walls, but it was one that was used in a number of other counties too. So you would go to school a couple of years before you got in first grade. Theoretically, because you had the ABCs, you spent a year on ABCs and basic arithmetic, you know, 1,2,3,4,5, and beyond that you got in the soft-backed primer and the hard-backed primer. The hard-backed primer was really equivalent to first grade, which was a kind of funny school system. And then we started this school in this church, CME Church, that is now called Christian Methodist Church; it was then called Colored Methodist Church, an off-branch of the African Methodist Church.

Daniel: Was this a public school or private school?

McLemore: This was a public school held in a church, because they had no public school facilities for black folk, or Negroes, in 1945 in De Soto County, Mississippi. The white kids went to school in Lake Cormorant, where Isiah Madison is from, my home boy, who is a lawyer now in Greenville, Mississippi. Isiah lived in Lake Cormorant, and Isiah went to school in another CME church called Bethlehem, in Lake Cormorant. These were public schools supported by the county, by the state, and the white kids went to school in a

then they had a high school in Horn Lake, Mississippi, which is in De Soto County near Highway 51, going down toward Hernando, the county seat. And that was the Horn Lake School. And so they were bussed from Walls and Lake Cormorant and the other little small towns in the area; they were bussed over to Horn Lake. This was 1945.

Daniel: And this was the white children?

McLemore: This was the whites. All the white kids went to either the elementary school at Lake Cormorant, which is three miles south of Walls on Highway 61, or they went to, the high school white kids went to Horn Lake High School in Horn Lake, Mississippi, which is about five miles due east of Walls on Highway 51 in the hills. As you know, Walls is in the Delta, Horn Lake was in the hills, the county seat, Hernando, was in the hills, so they went to school there. We only had grades one through eight that went to school in the church, the Mount Zion CME Church, and there was no high school for blacks in Mississippi.

Daniel: In the whole state?

McLemore: In the whole county.

Daniel: In the county.

McLemore: In some of the larger areas like Jackson and Greenville and Greenwood, they had high schools for blacks. But in north Mississippi, where I'm from, the experience was that there were not public high school buildings for black folk in the early '40s. They went to school in churches. In the late '40s and early '50s the

Baptists, black Baptists, built a high school in Hernando that was

school there. But then they boarded. They lived in other places, but they brought them from all over the state, especially from north Mississippi. They lived in Hernando. They had dormitories on the campus there, which was about a mile or so from the county courthouse in Hernando, and they stayed on the campus and only went home during vacation -- Christmas, and Easter and what have you. So what I'm suggesting is that, when I was growing up in the '40s that the educational facilities were very poor and the educational training was very poor because it was seasonal. We only went to school when we couldn't chop nor pick cotton, so essentially what I'm talking about is that school would start in November. It would go November, December, January, February, March, April, and we're out in May and then we had June and July, and we went to school in August and part of September, when it was waiting for the cotton...

Daniel: Yeah, lay-by time.

McLemore: Lay-by time, that's right, waiting for the cotton to ripen. And after the cotton ripened, then we went back to work in the fields, through that time period. And the only break that we had from that was when we moved to Memphis, after my mother remarried. We moved to Memphis and went to school in Shelby County, Memphis, Tennessee. And I went to school in Memphis my fourth, fifth grade years and we went to school at the regular time. We moved back to Mississippi later on and started school again. So it was kind of a checkered educational career, but one could really tell the difference between the educational system in Desoto County,

Mississippi and in Shelby County, Tennessee.

When we moved back to Mississippi at our own insistence, to go to school with our friends, 'cause we had also moved back to Mississippi, my grandfather had built a house for my mother and her husband next door to his place. My mother worked in Memphis, my grandfather worked in Memphis, and we were commuting to school with them every morning, and then we persuaded our parents to let us go to school in Mississippi because we were everyday with our friends, and, it was, from an educational standpoint, it was a great mistake. Because, when we came back to Mississippi to go to school, we knew as much as some of the students who were two or three grades ahead of us. It was just that kind of difference between the school systems.

I moved from the Mount Zion CME Church School to New Hope Baptist Church, which was in the western part of the county and Mount Zion was in the eastern part of the county, and New Hope was about two and one half miles. We moved there because the teacher, Mrs. Ella Barnes, had a better reputation as a teacher, and she was a woman that really never finished college. She had a high school diploma and had been going to college at Mississippi Industrial College at Holly Springs during the summers. And she taught grades one through eighth again.

They built a school about four years later. They built a two-room school house of cement blocks, a school, four years later, and they had Mrs. Barnes and one of the teachers, and they divided

the grades one through four and five through eight.



Daniel: Was this a part of trying to build equal facilities drive?

McLemore: That's right.

Daniel: So they built a two-room cinderblock school.

McLemore: That's right. And this occurred around 1954. So we had two teachers, and then Mrs. Barnes was transferred. Then they brought in two women that had gone to school at Mississippi Industrial College, who were college graduates; two young women. One handled grades one through four, and the other one five through eight. It was the first time that, in Mississippi, I had had teachers who were college graduates.

After that I went to school in Hernando, and high school in Hernando; and I started school in Hernando in 1956. I went to school in three separate churches, as a ninth grader. We had some classes in a Methodist church, and the rest of the classes were in two different Baptist churches. They were in the city of Hernando, town of Hernando, and we would walk from one side of town to the other changing classes.

Daniel: Was this a new thing? A high school?

McLemore: This was a new thing. This was the first year that they had had a public high school in De Soto County -- 1956. I graduated from elementary school and was the valedictorian of the eighth grade classes. They had combined commencements and I was one of the commencement speakers at the county courthouse in Hernando in 1956, which was the first time that black people had ever used the courthouse as a public facility, when they had not been there for

had the colored and the white water fountains. We used the auditorium. It was a main courtroom observation area, and the courtroom. We spoke from the judge's platform, the judge's bench. And we had all of the different counties. We had five different school districts; all the black folks from the county. De Soto county was a big county. We all met there and had the commencement ceremony.

Daniel: This is in '56?

McLemore: 1956. In May of '56.

Daniel: Well let me ask you a question. By '56 you'd already had ROWN v. Board of Education and the Montgomery Bus Boycott?

McLemore: That's right.

Daniel: So, what were your friends talking about? Did you talk about this? Did you realize something was going on? Did you feel changes?

McLemore: Oh, absolutely! I remember talking with my cousin, Essie Lee Rice, my cousin on my father's side, whose nickname was Tick. I remember she said that she wanted to go to the Catholic school. There was a Catholic school in Walls. And I said I wanted to go to Horn Lake. We discussed it. In fact, as I recall, I remember when ROWN v. Board was handed down, in fact. I remember what I was doing. And when I first heard about it, over the radio, in the field, we were chopping cotton. In the field the next morning we started to talk about the schools we wanted to attend and it was the Catholic school or going to Horn Lake. And we really thought that we would be able to, starting in September. We really thought that



integrate classes. We really figured that. We didn't know, I mean I'm sixteen years old. I mean the court said that and I figured it was the thing to do. And it didn't happen like that, but I really thought that that was what was going to happen. So all of us were making plans to attend one of the white schools -- the Catholic parochial school or the public school, and looked forward to that, and were disappointed once we discovered. I had to go to Hernando to the school. This was the first major push that started talk about buildings and facilities for blacks in De Soto county. Because they hadn't been under any pressure before, and the Brown decision forced them to start looking at that issue because they did not want, of course, blacks and whites to attend school together in 1956.

Daniel: What was your perception of what the white people were thinking during this time?

McLemore: My perception was that white folk did not welcome the Brown decision, that it was something that they were really against. I remember one of the Catholic priests saying that if it could be worked out they would welcome blacks to attend Sacred Heart, the Catholic elementary school in Walls. But that was really more rhetoric than anything else. The closest relationship that we had with whites in Walls was with the Catholic priest and the nuns in Walls, because some of our relatives and parents worked in the cafeteria or worked as maids for the Catholic priests and nuns and they treated us more like equals than any other whites in the community. There was an exception, here and there. One German

woman who had a paper route treated black people as equals, more or

where you could make more per day working than you would make picking cotton or chopping cotton. They would pay you a fairly decent wage, and then they would allow the women who worked in the cafeteria, the women who were maids, they would allow them to bring a certain amount of food home to their families. And this was a big concession. They had some of the black men driving trucks, driving the mail trucks, and that was a fairly plush job. This guy named John D. drove the mail truck for years, and he was the envy of the town because he had a job that he didn't have to pick cotton or chop cotton or drive a tractor. So he would get a chance to drive to Memphis two or three times a day to take the mail, and take the mail to Walls Post Office, and drive up to the Catholic Church right across the state line up in Whitehaven, Tennessee. That was a coveted position in the black community. And my cousin Paul now has that job in Walls. It's still a coveted position in one sense. But you know then it was like a way of getting out of town and being able to wear decent clean clothes without getting them dirty. So John D. would buy him a new car every year or every other year. He was a fairly important man in town.

Daniel: Well now you mentioned tractors, I guess by this time there were tractors anyway, but were there any picking machines when you were growing up? Or were they not used up there?

McLemore: The picking machines did not come until much later. During the formative years when I was working in the fields it was basically by hand.

Daniel: Everything was by hand.

school in 1960, toward the very end, '58, '59, during that interim, after I graduated from elementary school in 1956, around '57 and '58, I worked on a cattle ranch east of Walls in the hills. So I really didn't pick a lot of cotton my first three years in high school. It was only my senior year when the owner of the ranch leased his land out to someone else and he went in to the insurance and brokerage business in Memphis. Then I went back to picking cotton my senior year in high school, which was '59 and '60. Then there were pickers. But they hadn't been perfected, so the pickers left more cotton than they picked up, so there was still a fairly large crew of people picking cotton behind the pickers, what they call scrapping cotton. The arrangement after the second harvest, after the second time the pickers came by, some of the owners would let you scrap cotton, and everything you made was your own. That was the arrangement. And some had a kind of 50/50 arrangement. So some people who had large families like my cousin on my father's side of the family, the Brown family, would pick a couple of bales of cotton from scrapping, and it was their own money. So people did that. It was a part of growing up. I mean in Walls, that was what you did. You picked cotton or chopped cotton. I mean it was just a part of your vacation.

Some people, the older folk, like my mother and father, stepfather, worked in Memphis. My stepfather worked for U.S. Steel, in Memphis, and he worked for the U.A. Hospital as an orderly, pushing patients around and changing patients and what have you.

mother worked in upholstery factories, making couches and chairs and this kind of thing. And there were several other people in town that did that, that worked for Gordon's Truck Line and other upholsterers, and they were the biggest wage earners in the black community, aside from the folk who were in their own private business. My grandfather was one of, I guess, maybe three blacks in that area that owned land, and a couple of the other blacks were farmers.

Daniel: There's one question I really wanted to ask about, that I got into a little bit. Growing up in Walls and having the kind of educational facilities you had, in that environment, what were you taught about why this was so? That is, you knew the white folks had better facilities. The other thing is, if you can weave it in there, what did you learn about the white community? What were you taught? Why were they the way they were?

McLemore: You have to understand now, Walls then, and of course now it's even smaller, is a very small community. The height of our population for Walls, per se, was about 500. So it's a very small town. My grandfather and a man named Sim Elkins were the only two black landowners in the town of Walls. Walls was never incorporated. But they were the only two black landowners that had land in the town of Walls. They were the only two blacks who had land in that Delta section of Walls. The other blacks who owned land, owned land in the hills section of Walls. Johnny Anthony, my friend who is on the music faculty at Jackson State now. Johnny's

Wallace brothers, Jessie and Sing Wallace, owned land in the hills section. But they didn't own any land in the Delta, which was coveted land in terms of rich land, fertile land. So, my grandfather's father, Macon Williams, was the half brother of John Sharp Williams. John Sharp Williams was a U.S. senator from Mississippi during the time, really during the administration of Woodrow Wilson. My grandfather, because his father was Macon Williams who was a mullatto, my grandfather and his father were not treated, because my great grandfather, Macon Williams, owned land, owned Delta land, that was ceded to him by his father, by John Sharp Williams' father, that was purchased for him, and he grew up in Warren County and Tallahatchee County, so when he got of age his father, John Sharp Williams' Father, purchased land for him in De Soto County.

Daniel: That's a long way from Warren County.

McLemore: That's right, a long way from Warren County. So it was a safe thing to do, but according to what my grandfather said, they never disowned Macon Williams. My great grandfather, and Macon's aunt, John Sharp Williams' sister, lived in Charleston, Mississippi, in Tallahatchee County. So my great grandfather spent a lot of his early years in Tallahatchee County. So when I was in elementary school, after my great grandfather had died, my grandfather would go back to Tallahatchee County to visit his aunt. And we would go visit his aunt who lived in this two storey house by the railroad track in Tallahatchee County in Charleston, Mississippi. So, it was like they

relationship, and they purchased the land in De Soto County, away from the family. It clearly was no scandal about that, but my great grandfather's father said this is my son, this is my child. And so we inherited the land that's still in the family through my great grandfather, through his father, that my grandfather had. And that's still in the family, so, on the one hand, the town's people treated my grandfather a bit different from other black folk in Walls because of that arrangement. During the Civil Rights Movement, to jump ahead just a bit here, my brother and I were not arrested, at least in De Soto County, and we didn't go to Vietnam in part because the white folks said, who served on the local boards, because we were Lester Williams' grandchildren. I mean that's the reason we were never sent to jail, didn't have to go to the war. I mean we got that veto because of that. And the guy who was the Justice of the Peace in the town for years, and who was a kind of lieutenant for a number of the land owners, admitted it publicly. And just said, you know, these guys should have gone to jail and ordinarily would have if they had not been the grandchildren of Leslie Williams and the great grandchildren of Macon Williams. It was a small town, and that was just the way it was handled. And even then, in one sense we had a kind of special place within the black community, because my grandfather was like the unofficial leader of black folk in Walls, in the area. But my grandfather was very candid with us. He insisted that we be men, that we be mannerable, but he also insisted that we shouldn't take any flak. I mean he always said, "Don't take no shit from anybody." He meant



with the understanding, because see, my grandfather lived next door to a German refugee, who had come over and who owned a dairy farm, so our next door neighbors were white. We lived north of our neighbors. Everybody that lived on our street was white, on our road were white. The Barkers were white, the Jarrets were white, on down the street.

The other black family, the Elkins, lived on the west side of the railroad track and they lived next to another German refugee family. So what I am suggesting is that there were two black homeowners in the town of Walls, and we were surrounded by whites. I played with, my Mother played with, the Barkers' children. And it was only until later on when she went to separate schools and they went to separate schools, until there was that kind of differential. But what I'm trying to suggest is that clearly we understood what was going on, but we didn't have any notion of how poor we were compared to whites, until later on.

In the context of Walls, we were well off. I mean as blacks, we were well off. And my grandfather owned cars, he owned land, he had a restaurant, he owned a business. So we really didn't have to go without food, didn't have to go without clothes, as some of our classmates and playmates. Because they were renting or living on plantations.

But we were accutely aware of the racial issue. I mean, early on. We played with store owner's nieces and nephews who lived across the railroad track from us for years, the McKayes. And they

were part of the group. It was only, I guess, when we got into



playing with white girls, and it was only after we got in junior high school that that was sort of taboo. It was not them coming over for Sunday, because they would drop their kids off at our house and leave them. On Sundays, we'd play, whatever, and all that, and never thought anything about it.

But on the other hand, our grandfather and mother always told us about the race situation, but with the idea that we didn't have to accept it. You don't have to accept it. These are the facts of life, but you don't have to accept that. You ought to be a man, and you ought to get an education. So within our household education was always stressed. My grandfather was very big on that.

My grandfather spent about four years going to school formally, so he emphasized education. He made his living in spite of whatever, but then he had a head start on most blacks. He had a father who was a landowner, so he didn't grow up in poverty. And he never had a job. He never worked for anybody. And he was the only black person in that town that did not have a job working for somebody else. And nobody ever said anything to him about it. And they didn't say anything to him about it because he was the son of Macon Williams. And he could get away with it. He rode in a new car every two or three years, paid cash for it. Nobody ever questioned the fact that he did not have a regular job. And there were certain people who would come to town in the '40s and early '50s and the white community would raise questions. If there were people who came down from Chicago or St. Louis and stayed in town too long and didn't get a job, they would raise questions about it.

was that way. But my grandfather never experienced that. So, not one day in his life, and he was proud of that, did he work for anybody but Leslie Williams. Went to work when he got ready. And that was the attitude. Had his suits made in Memphis and he purchased Edwin Clapp shoes. I mean he was big on that. And that was important, his sense of independence was very important. And he maintained that.

And he was in business. He sold burial insurance, which was a cover, a front for whatever. And he had the restaurant. And that's what he did. And he would tell you, before he died, he said if he'd have saved just a fraction of the money that he blew, that he threw away, that he'd have died a multi-millionaire.

Daniel: Where'd he throw it?

McLemore: Well, he loved women. He loved to have a good time. He travelled all over the country. He was fair enough on occasion, if he wanted to ride in a white compartment, he could, never be detected. He spent a lot of time in New Orleans, a lot of time in St. Louis, places like that. He really had a good time. It was only when he was in his late forties and his early fifties, well, he was really in his fifties, when he really began to save some money. And he put some money in some trust funds and stuff for us, but he really indicated that he just simply enjoyed living. He loved Vicksburg, he loved New Orleans, and he spent a lot of time there. And, as I say, he loved women. He spent a lot of time and money on them.

his renters, was a guy named Howard. And Mr. Howard was very politically minded, as was my grandfather. Mr. Howard was a reconstruction Republican, Abraham Lincoln Republican. And my father was a Roosevelt Democrat from way back, and so I got these conflicting political ideologies from my grandfather and Mr. Howard. If it had not been for my grandfather I'd probably have become a Republican, because Howard had good arguments about the world wars and the Democrats and wars, and Republicans getting us out of wars. You know, it was that whole bit. But I really, as I reflect, Pete, I really became politicized back then, I mean late forties, early fifties, because my grandfather always envisioned that even then, when we could not vote, he always talked about the day was coming when we could vote again, could run for public office. "One of you boys ought to be governor of Mississippi." I mean he always talked about that in very concrete terms. He was a real visionary. And I often said to myself, this guy doesn't know what he's talking about. He was my granddad and I don't want to call him a liar and tell him he doesn't know what he was talking about. He was a real visionary 'cause he talked, I mean when we were growing up, six or seven years old. "One day you boys are going to be able to vote." I just, I didn't see it. "One day you're going to be able to run for public office." I just did not envision that. He had more foresight than I ever had. And he talked about it, and that really helped to politicize us. He preached the value of being involved. He wanted us to be independent. He pushed that a whole lot. He preached it; education

always preached that. That was one of his main themes. "Get it in your head; they can't take it from your head. You got it." So when I went off after graduating from elementary school, went off to high school in Hernando, I had this high school principal, J. T. McCloun, and J. T. McCloun was a person who really emphasized education, who really preached independence, who really preached involvement in politics. I started to do public speaking in highschool. J.T. had gone to Tougaloo, Morehouse, and been influenced by Benjamin Mays and just simply believed that you could do anything in the world that you wanted to do. It was an extension of my Grandfather, the whole argument about one day you'll be able to run for president, I mean it was that whole kind of motivational thing. And he was just really big on education. He was really big; he would have the chapel programs twice per week on Mondays and Fridays and if you had an assignment he would go through chapel program and just ask questions in general and ask people to respond. So I got to know him when I was in ninth grade and he was asking about Central America, and I was naming the countries of Central America, and the capitols of them. Then I remember about a month later he was asking some questions about biology, about anatomy. And I responded and I got to know him very well, sort of took me under his wings. I got involved in a YMCA and the High-Y and the Tri-Y, and because of that high school experience I was politicized. And you have to understand now that I was in high school between '56 and '60. So this was the beginning of the Civil Rights Era, the Montgomery Bus Boycott had started. And that was an ongoing process.

Daniel: Youall talked about that?

McLemore: We talked about it; I talked about it. We talked about it at school. In fact several of us talked about trying to get something started in Walls and wondering why nothing had occurred in Memphis and we would talk to my mother about how we could join the Freedom Riders. And she was just absolutely scared to death. My grandfather didn't like it too much either, but his final analysis was that, "Do what you have to do." But we talked about it. I talked about it with my brother Eugene frequently, and with Ike, and with Johnny Anthony, some of my classmates in high school.

When I was in highschool, my senior year, I was president of student council, and we led a boycott, in high school, of classes because we thought we had too many advisors on the student council. We thought the food was rotten; we didn't like some of the teachers. And that boycott in 1959 that we orchestrated in high school, at the Delta Center High School in Walls, was based upon, was modeled after what was going on in the Civil Rights Movement. And I picked up my cues from reading newspapers, on how to do it, and how to organize it, and that kind of thing. And went off to college and got involved in boycotts my freshman year, and was one of the leaders of a boycott at Rust College; over teachers, over food, over the segregated movie downtown that had black folk going upstairs and white folk downstairs, and we boycotted the movie and eventually stopped going, my freshman year. And we didn't return until I was a senior in 1964 when they decided to integrate because the business was fairly low after a point in time. 'Cause they had

Mississippi Industrial College, and they made a lot of money off of us, and the towns people and the people from Marshall County, the county where Holly Springs is located. But the experience in high school, at Hernando Central, in that Delta Center, then coming to Rust in 1960, the height of Civil Rights Movement, starting 1962, becoming President of the NAACP college chapter at Rust. Then got involved in SNCC in the later part of 1962, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and then become a fairly close associate of Bob Moses, who led the 1964 Freedom Summer Project in Mississippi, got involved in that. I became very active in voter registration, public accommodations, demonstrations in Mississippi and other places. But the basis really was Rust College, at that level, because we had a president who believed in academic freedom, who preached that, who believed it, who took a lot of abuse. Rust College is a United Methodist Church School, supported by the United Methodist Church. A number of the conferences in Mississippi, the north Mississippi conference, stopped contributing money to the college because some of us were involved in the Civil Rights Movement, voter registration, public accommodations, voter education, the full gamut of activities. We were involved, and Rust was an oasis in north Mississippi where people could come and do that and profess and do things without being penalized. The Methodist Church did not like that. So Rust gave me the opportunity to spread my wings, to inquire, to become inquisitive, and to do these kinds of things without being penalized. From my experience at Rust with the

NAACP chapter, and my involvement with SNCC, and then from my



really got exposure. I travelled here to Washington, D.C., to Howard University to a conference in November of 1963 sponsored by SNCC, and met Stokely Carmichael. Bob Moses I had met the year before, met James Foreman, met Frank Smith, who is on city council here in D.C. now. I met Marion Barry who is mayor of Washington, D.C. now; I met Courtland Cox who is the assistant to Marion Barry here in D.C., I met Ivanhoe Donaldson, who was an assistant to Marion Barry in D.C. I met just a number of people. I met John Lewis who was the executive secretary of SNCC who's now on the city council in Atlanta, Georgia. Met just a number of people. All of these were SNCC people. I was impressed with how articulate they were. I really thought I was up-to-date on world affairs until I came to the SNCC meeting at Howard. I was really impressed and dazzled by the young men and women who were really on top of politics and civil rights and international affairs in general. The Rust and SNCC experience really served as a real foundation for me, in my life, as a point of reference for what I do now. I'm not saying I live in the past, but in terms of a measuring rod, a guide, I rely upon my experiences then as a real frame of reference, because that was really my introduction to politics in a very formal kind of way, starting, of course, with my Grandfather and Mr. Howard and those people in Walls. But going to Rust with the formal education and then being a part of SNCC and being out in the field working in voter registration and other areas, it was a real experience, a real eye-opener, an enlightening experience that I

never shall forget. So it really formed a basis of any kind of



perspective on the world, my frame of reference, to my experience in the Civil Rights Movement. I thought that was very good because to me the Civil Rights Movement was a grand experiment. It was a real effort to make the nation become one; it was a real test of what democracy is supposed to be all about, and that test of democracy was something that I experienced. It was something that I was a part of. It was something that I had a small impact upon, and it was a mission. It was a fulfillment of a kind of missionary zeal that I have. Eric Hoffer, in his book, talked about the true believer, and during the Civil Rights Movement if there were ever a true believer, I was a true believer, going back again to the 1950s, and believing in the impact of the Brown decision, the impact of the Civil Rights Movement. A number of us thought that things would change overnight, and they didn't change overnight. It was part of being naive and it was also, of course, a part of being a true believer. I don't think I was unique in any kind of way. There were several other people, hundreds of people, who believed in that idea, that we could really bring about a real measure of change, and obviously there was some impact. At Rust and in SNCC it afforded me an opportunity in 1964 to get involved in the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party that was a child of SNCC, that grew out of the 1964 Freedom Summer Project in Mississippi, the COFO Project, which was a part of, in '64, the coming of age of Fanny Lou Hammer, her testimony at the Democratic National Convention, her experience prior to '64 in Mississippi, the way she was beaten in Winona in

County Mississippi after having been born in Montgomery County, and how Fanny Lou perceived the world. Even then, growing up in the '20s in Mississippi, the '30s, Fanny Lou Hammer had an urge to be a first class citizen, and a yearning deep in her heart, deep in her breast, as she would say. It was something that she felt very strongly about. Even back then, in those years, there were people who had this great vision of how Mississippi could be, and Fanny Lou Hammer was one of those persons. The Freedom Democratic Party and SNCC were the vehicles that she was able to utilize, because her testimony at Atlantic City in 1964 had an impact upon the entire nation. She was able to, with that one single testimony, convince and to persuade the Democratic Party never to seat a segregated delegation from any state in the Union. She was able to do that because of her eloquence, because of her analytical mind and presence of mind. She was able to do that, to convince people.

The influence of Fannie Lou Hammer upon me, when I first met her in 1962 going to Dorchester, Georgia, to a citizenship education training workshop in Dorchester, south Georgia, fairly close to the South Carolina state line. Fannie Lou Hammer sang on the bus from Cleveland, Mississippi, to Dorchester, Georgia. She sang, literally, all the way there and all the way back! And which was the time, it was my introduction to Andrew Young, who is now the mayor of Atlanta, and Andrew's wife Jean, and Dorothy Cotton. Dorothy Cotton was a field person, a staff person for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, organization started by Martin Luther King, Jr., and Dorothy Cotton and Andrew Young and Jean and

been involved in the Civil Rights Movement way, way before it was very popular. And Septima Clark was the person who was the headmistress of the school; she was the coordinator, she was the director of the citizenship education training sessions at Dorchester, Georgia. Andrew Young worked for Septima Clark. I really count, again, going back to Rust, but these kind of experiences as a part of my whole background, and they really helped to shape my world view in a very real sense. But Fanny Lou Hammer, who was unlettered in a formal way, but who had a big heart and believed very strongly in democracy, was one person that really influenced me tremendously. Because my notion always was that if this woman, who went to school on a limited basis, and who was this articulate, and who was this visionary, and who was this bright -- if she could do this, at least I could do a fraction of what she was doing, and what she stood for. And she stood for integrity and principles, and she was a person of quality. The life of Fannie Lou Hammer, what I've been saying, it influenced a lot of people in the Civil Rights Movement. It influenced me. I think she had a big influence upon the country, because so many women, black and white, identified with this poor, sharecropper of a woman, unlettered, very articulate, very dynamic, very strong and courageous. She was a role model for just so many people. I think, clearly, without a question, she made a difference in this country and made a difference in the Civil Rights Movement. It's important, from my perspective, to document what she did, because then she can also

serve as an inspiration for so many other people in the country. I

is gotten out, and the word is in print, in a visual way people can see what she meant, what she stood for, and what she was able to accomplish.

Daniel: When you were with her though, you felt like you were in a special presence. I mean she was obviously an unusual woman. A gifted woman.

McLemore: Well, you know as well as I do that when you were in a room with her, or when you saw her, there was a glow about her, there was a special something about her that it was evident that she was just not ordinary in the sense of being ordinary, that she was extraordinary. When she opened her mouth to speak or to sing, it was very clear that she was gifted in a very special way. My grandfather would probably characterize it that she was touched in a special way by God, because this was a kind of divine gift that all of us are not endowed with. It's no reflection on us, that some of us were just simply not meant to be Fanny Lou Hammers! It's no weakness, it's nothing except to say that she was fortunate to have those talents and was even more fortunate to have the sense of presence and be able to utilize those talents. Because Fanny Lou Hammer came to the Civil Rights Movement at an old age of forty-four. She was running around the country with all of us who were twenty and twenty-two and nineteen and twenty-three or twenty-four, and she was the mother, but she blended in in a magnificent way. There was really not the generational gap at all. Fanny Lou Hammer was this person who had this mission to fulfill.

effective. Because listening to her and reading her words, but especially listening to her talk about being a sharecropper, the time keeper on the W. D. Marlowe Plantation in Sunflower County, Mississippi, was an experience. On the plantation she was the timekeeper and a sharecropper, and a timekeeper's position is a fairly important position within the context of a plantation society. She was keeping the books for the plantation owner. She was respected by the sharecropper's on the plantation. They would come to her for advice. When their kids got sick she would negotiate getting them to the hospital or to the Doctor. When someone was jailed on a Saturday night she was the person that intervened with the plantation owner and got the person out of jail, so she was a leader already. It was not like, in '62 when she emerged on the scene, that she was an unknown quantity in certain quarters. People on the plantation in Sunflower County, on the Marlowe place, knew about Fannie Lou Hammer. They knew her leadership capabilities. So, to them, it was no surprise. But to all of us who did not know Fannie Lou Hammer, never heard of Fannie Lou Hammer, she was a phenomenal person that emerged out of the soil. But she'd been leading people for twenty years. She'd been in charge. She'd been keeping time! She'd been giving people a little freedom here and there.

The guy who owned the place, Marlowe, had a weighted pea, when she weighed the cotton. His pea was weighted, so they wouldn't get the same value for the cotton, because his pea that weighed the

use her own pea until he came around, so she was giving people their true value for the true measure of work. But Marlowe didn't know that. I mean she was doing these kinds of things years ago. She was looked upon by the plantation people as being a leader, a spokesperson for them. So she had developed her leadership skills on this plantation and in the church; in the Baptist Church. When we would be all excited about the phenominal Fannie Lou Hammer, certain of our townsfolk would say, "Fannie Lou Hammer's been like this all the time." She was just not dealing with Civil Rights, per se. Because she would ask Marlowe about why people treated each other so differently, black and white, and she would ask him why people went off to war to fight and came back and couldn't be first class citizens. You know, she messed with him. She knew what she was doing. When the opportunity came in the form of Marlowe saying "If you don't take your name off of the books in Indianola, because she had gone down to register to vote in Indanola with some other people from Ruleville on this bus owned by this man, a yellow bus that had been used to haul seasonal workers down to Florida to pick fruit, W. D. Marlowe the III told her if she didn't take her name off of the books she had to leave the plantation. And she told W. D. Marlowe the III, she said, "I did not go to Indianola to register for you. I went to register for me. And if you are going to put me off your plantation, you put me off." And she was put off that night, and she left. And her husband Perry Hammer, better know as "Pap" Perry, stayed and had to leave some weeks later. But her mind

was made up that she was not going to stay on that plantation



Then he just simply didn't realize what he was doing by putting her off, 'cause he did her a favor and did the country a favor. He put her off because she was able to share her wisdom and talent with the entire country and the state of Mississippi. So it was a blessing in disguise.

Daniel: How did she get tapped to go to Atlantic City? Who had that stroke of genius?

McLemore: Primarily it was the work of Bob Moses, Charles McLaurin, people who were involved in SNCC. When she went to register to vote, a couple of nights they held a mass rally in Ruleville, Mississippi, her home town, and she was spotted there by James Foreman of SNCC, and by Andrew Young of SCLC, and they saw her. Charles McLaurin, a young college kid from Jackson, dropped out of Tougaloo College, came to the Delta to work for SNCC, saw her, heard her sing, heard her testify and they said, "Oh, this woman is powerful." Because when she moved from the plantation they shot into the home of some folks she was living with, and it so happens that the night they fired into the woman's house, she was not in the place and did not get shot. So they recommended that she go up to Tallahatchee county and she left Sunflower and went to Tallahatchee County to live with some friends and relatives for awhile until the thing died down, cooled off, and come back. What happened was that she went to South Carolina to a voter registration citizenship education workshop, and on her way back stopped in Winona, Mississippi, Montgomery County, the county of her birth, and tried



and people across the country heard that testimony, and Bob Moses and all the folk who were working with the Freedom Summer said "Fannie Lou Hammer has to go." Then she became one of the Freedom Singers, too, so she had to go. She had told that testimony all across the country in different places -- how she was beaten, and how the other folk were beaten, and folk who heard the testimony were simply moved by it. Fannie Lou was the principal witness at the Democratic National Convention before the credentials committee. When they heard it they were just simply astounded and impressed. This woman just overwhelmed them. Bob Moses and other folk who were involved in the Freedom Summer and had Fannie Lou Hammer, and Aaron Henry and people like that, and Victoria Jackson Grey, who had run for public office, had these people as the principal witnesses. It was on Bob Moses' party, really, a stroke of genius.

Daniel: And you were there?

McLemore: And I was there. In fact, I was right there no more than five feet from her as she testified before the credentials committee. I had heard her testimony, I guess by that time, four or five times, and I cried. Every time I heard it I cried. She was just that overwhelming. She was just that dynamic. It was amazing, Pete, on the credentials committee you had white men and white women crying like babies as she described the conditions in Mississippi, how she was beaten in Winona by the black trustees in the jail, who were forced to beat her by the sheriff, county sheriff, and told the trustees, "If you don't beat her you know what we're going to do to

important it was that the FDP was seated as a legitimate, regular delegation from Mississippi. She talked about that. People were convinced that there was something wrong in Mississippi, that this woman clearly was not making this up.

Daniel: And that was juxtaposed against this guy, what was his name, Collins, that was trying to justify the whole thing?

McLemore: E. K. Collins, from Mississippi, he was a state senator, who was trying to justify it, but who turned out to be one of the more decent people in the Mississippi delegation. He was one of the four or five people that did not walk out once the Democratic Party said, "What we'll do is seat two of your members as delegates, and the rest of the delegation as honored guests," and when the party decided to do that, the Mississippi delegation simply walked out, and Senator Collins was one of three or four people that decided to stay from the Mississippi delegation.

Daniel: But he was the one that testified justifying voter registration?

McLemore: Oh, he was one of the ones that testified that justified the Mississippi way of life.

Daniel: Well, I remember seeing that, and it was just so pathetic. He was really a pathetic character, because he couldn't defend it, and he just, you could see him wilt before the questions. Maybe he never thought about, before, what it really meant. I think, at that time, he just wasn't getting anywhere.

McLemore: This past summer he told a crew from CBS that it clearly was a mistake on his part, and the part of Mississippi, that he

to talk about, or would talk about, because so many folk who were part of that same delegation refused to talk to the CBS news people. But he was saying that it was just a blot on Mississippi history, and he was not proud of it. But this was in retrospect. You know, hindsight is 20/20.

Daniel: Well there are a lot of questions about, when you say this Mississippi white delegation walked out, it's almost like right there you can see this racism of white Mississippians going over to the Republican Party. Over a time period you can see that that becomes one of the main issues that revives the Republican Party, and that as they move over, blacks and working class whites and whatever move over into the Democratic Party. How do you see that? Do you see that move from the old line Democrats that excluded the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party over to Republicanism?

Les: Well, the supreme irony is that not only did that serve as an impetus, that is, the conflict between the regular Democratic Party and the Freedom Democratic Party, the irony is that so many of the whites, working class and otherwise, moved to the Republican Party, if not formally but in ideology, in terms of world view. Of course now, the average working class white person in Mississippi would say, "Yes, I am a Democrat." But he or she will vote for Democrats on a local and state level, but vote for a Republican on a national level. And it's a question of ideology. I think, essentially, what developed was that it was the opening round in the development and maturation of the republican party in 1964, because a number of those people who were state legislators, and just

national level. Of course their argument was that the Democratic Party had abandoned the ideas and principals of the Democratic Party, and that they just couldn't imagine that Mississippi would go along with the policies and principles of the national Democratic Party, because they were southern Democrats, and that caused a lot of conflict.

Daniel: And the issue was race.

McLemore: And the issue was race. That's right, the issue was race. The primary issue was race, as a thread, as a theme throughout, and they simply did not want to deal with anything beyond the fact that they were responsible, they were accountable, that they were in charge. There was no room in their sphere of things. There was no room for inclusion of blacks or women or anybody that was not white and male. So that dealt, in one sense, a serious blow to the Democratic Party, but it was really the makings and beginnings of a kind of Republican Party in Mississippi, and you can see it twenty years later. The irony is that what happened in Atlantic City, New Jersey, in 1964, can be recounted in different kinds of ways in San Francisco in 1984, because there were some parallels. The FDP came on the scene twenty years ago and Jessie Jackson came on the scene twenty years later making some of the same kinds of demands. In one sense, the FDP was saying, "We want the right to participate in national and state party affairs." Jessie Jackson comes back twenty years later and says, "Yes, we are still asking for the right to participate on different levels in party affairs." So the more things change the more they remain the same

what happened with the FDP. the FDP was a party so it was more insitutional, Jessie is a person, but then he brought along a lot on institutional ideas with him, so both efforts clearly were designed to increase the level of participation in the decision making process.

Daniel: We ought to go back and talk about your involvement in SNCC and in the things you were doing and what it was like say, in the summer of '64 and voter registration. Give a little insight into that.

McLemore: In 1964, after graduating from college in May of '64, I worked for SNCC, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, in Washington, D.C., primarily. I worked as an organizer for the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, and I travelled from state to state trying to convince state delegations to support the FDP at the Atlantic City National Convention, so I'd make speeches in Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois, places like that, would go to their state conventions and make the case. I would be with a person who was a non-Mississippian, and I was travelling with them primarily because I was a genuine product. We worked out of an office down there on Florida Avenue. About five of us were the FDP staff, in the north, and somebody would get up and talk about the FDP and what it stood for and would talk about Mississippi. Then they would introduce me as Leslie McLemore, straight from Mississippi. So I would get up with my Mississippi accent and talk about Mississippi, and after they heard me for awhile they say, "Yes, he's from Mississippi. The genuine product. No question about it. This

Mississippi, kind of a testimony, and that really got me involved in the Civil Rights Movement in a very concrete way, an institutional kind of way. It also gave me, again, a kind of different perspective on the world. Got a chance to travel around some, meet people, and got a notion about what we had to do in order to bring about some changes. My involvement with SNCC was at a kind of peripheral level, but I was involved in voter registration, voter education, public accommodations, FDP. I was elected vice chairman of the FDP at the first meeting in April of 1964, and was still a college student. So that was a kind of heady experience for me, and enjoyed it, but of course I had been a part of SNCC prior to that point in time. It taught me the real value of hard work, integrity and principles, and being honest. As I matured, I really realized, eventually, that things were not going to turn around overnight. But it took me awhile. Frankly speaking, it took me a good while to realize that. But when I was going through, Pete, when I was going through that experience, it was just simply remarkable to me. Because I had never, ever had that kind of meaningful contact with white people, and this was, as I saw it, genuine, and it clearly was genuine contact. We all meant well. We all were trying to change the world, overnight, and thought we could. But then if you aren't idealistic like that you never will make any change. If I had been as cynical as I am now, I wouldn't have done anything! I was too young and too green and did not have the kind of exposure to make me cynical.

Daniel: Were most of the people you were with about that way too?



real difference, stood a very good chance of having an impact upon the whole world.

Daniel: Of course, you did.

McLemore: Yes, but obviously we thought we were going to have more than we had. We figured we would wipe out racism once and for all.

Daniel: Did you ever get into any positions down there, or anywhere, that you felt was real dangerous, or that there might be some violence? Did you see any?

McLemore: I surely did! When I was a junior in college at Rust, I was the principal person in Marshall County, at that time, 1962-63, for voter registration and education, and the county sheriff, Flick Ash, told several people if I brought any more folk down there to register to vote, this gray headed boy was going to shoot me. That caused me some trepidation, but when he said that, in order to try to see whether or not he was for real or he was playing with me, I got a carload of people and took them down to the county courthouse, in the daytime, of course, and Flick Ash called me into his office and inquired about me. Now he knew everything about me. He knew that I was at Rust and all that kind of stuff. He had called the President. He knew who I was and called me into his office. I was out there, "Who are you and where are you from?" I told him my name, where I was from, DeSoto County, Mississippi, county over. I was really fearful, because my mother was very much concerned about me; about my health. So I called her that night and told her that the county sheriff had called me in and be mindful, be careful, shouldn't have done it. I scared her to death. She thought



her. That really never occurred, but I was fearful, not so much, well, for myself too, but I was much more fearful for my mother and my family, because I figured I'd gotten them into a bad way there, but nothing happened to them.

Then I was in Greenville, Mississippi, a couple of times when some people shot into the Freedom House. Then I went to Ole Miss, just after James Meredith had graduated, with a group of students from Rust, to hear Howard K. Smith speak in the lyceum building at Ole Miss. This had been arranged by some white students at Ole Miss, to get us on campus, and as we entered the building, surrounded by all these white students, rebel yells and catcalls, and niggers and all and we sat through the Howard K. Smith speech, and he tried to smooth it over and tried to talk about tolerance and understanding. On our way out of there I didn't know what was going to happen to us. We waited until everybody got out, and as we walked out of the building, on both sides of the sidewalk were twenty or thirty burly policemen all dressed in blue, white and all red around their necks and big and beefy. I had never, ever in my life been so glad to see some redneck, southern sheriffs! It was the most welcome sight! I think I was most fearful at that time, than at any point in my life.

I was fearful when I went to vote for the first time, in Walls, in the spring of 1962. I had my sister to stand by the window to watch me, gave her the FBI. number. SNCC workers called the FBI in Washington, called the FBI in Jackson, called the FBI in Memphis, to tell them that I was going to vote that day in Walls.

walked from my mother's house down the road to vote, for about, I guess, a fourth of a mile, a couple of blocks or so. Walked into the old post office where we were voting, polling man said, my nickname in Walls is Brother, he said "Come on in Brother and vote." So I came right in and voted. Walked right out. And my grandmother, who worked for him, right next door there, nothing ever happened. But the night before I had serious reservations. What happened, a friend of mine drove me over from Rust, in Holly Springs, at the home, dropped me off and came back to pick me up. I voted and that was it. But in my own mind, I thought it was going to be a major event, but it was uneventful. So the experience at Ole Miss was the one that I realized.

I was in Clarksdale in that church where Martin Luther King spoke in 1963. The policemen were riding on the outside and the townspeople were all up in arms, but I didn't know about that as much. I was in the church and I was inspired by King, so if he'd have told us to walk out and stop bullets with our hands, I'd have probably tried to do that. But I didn't have any idea, and it was later on that I learned the gravity of the situation. I lived and slept in some places like south Mississippi and the Delta, in the Freedom Houses, that I had some serious questions about. I was there with other people, so you sort of, in those days, and of course now too, you pick up a bit of bravery because of the numbers and the people surrounding you. And I think that happened to me. But it was, occasionally, it was frightening.

Daniel: It sounded frightening from the perspective of looking at it on the news and reading about it. I mean it still does. Did you feel like the summer of '64 was a real special time? Did you realize that this was going to be the summer to look back on, I mean, it was historically important.

McLemore: I really did. I realized that it was going to be important, well from the standpoint of all those people coming into the state to work on voter registration and these kind of things. But also from the standpoint of when the FDP was formed in April of '64, and a challenge was mounted, was undertaken, to challenge the regular Democratic Party of Mississippi, I realized then that we were into some heady stuff, because we were talking about going to Atlantic City, New Jersey. We were talking about being on national television. We were talking about having a national forum, and we hadn't had that kind of national forum before, and all those grassroots people involved from different places and different counties of Mississippi. We were selecting the delegates, and the SNCC people, we met in the parsonage of Reverend Johnson, Alan Johnson, who pastored the Pearl Street United Methodist Church in Jackson, in April of '64, and some people were trying to tell me that, well since you're going to New Jersey already. See I had been working the summer, July of '64, I had been working in Atlantic City already as a part of the FDP advance team, as a part of the FDP staff. So I had been driving from D.C. to New Jersey by myself. Twenty three years old then, first time, second time out of

in July of '64. I wanted to be a delegate. I just didn't want to go as a SNCC field person. I wanted to go as a delegate. And since I had been elected vice chair of the party, I wanted to go as a delegate, 'cause I understood that it was important to be a delegate in '64. It was important to be a FDP delegate. So the gravity of it was very clear to me. Hey, I said, this is making history. And I want to be a part of this history. So I understood that. I understood that it was an important moment. And I realized that, and I tried to take advantage of it. So I tried to go to all of those caucuses and all of those meetings where they were having with the politicians to try and work out the compromise. I was in a lot of those sessions because I understood that those sessions, you know, I was in meetings with Dawson from Chicago and Martin Luther King, and Bayard Rustin, and all these people when they was trying to get us to compromise. And we was saying "No, no, no. No way." We wanted the seats or nothing else. We wanted to be the legitimate delegation, as we used the term then, and nothing else. And I understood the import of that and wanted to be a part of it, so I could get some sense of what was going on. Plus, you know, I was vice chair of the party. Twenty-three years old, I mean, you're not politically sophisticated, but Fannie Lou Hammer was vice chair of the delegation, Aaron Henry was chair of the delegation, and Bob Moses was our great leader, unrecognized, not officially. But he was the leader. The whole effort. So I wanted to be a part of that. I remember riding in the car with Ralph Abernathy and Martin

perspective, the grassroots perspective. So that was a heady experience for me, something, obviously, I'll never forget as long as I live. It was a real experience.

Daniel: Now, with all that experience with the great leaders of the nation, you went off to graduate school in the north, but then you went back to Mississippi, and that leads into, the bigger question, why are Mississippians so proud of Mississippi, and return and have this dedication to it?

McLemore: Well, I think, primarily because there is this real nationalistic spirit in Mississippi, and that's an outgrowth of the kind of persecution complex that Mississippians have. If you will, a kind of inferiority complex, because we've been told we are number fifty in every category you can think of. Because of a large number of black people in the population, so a kind of racism that's very thick, a kind of racism that divided the races. But on the other hand, we work together, on an unequal basis, not a peer relationship, but an unequal relationship. And people got to know each other in formal ways and informal ways. And then I think so many of us have this tunnel vision that says, "Mississippi is not as bad as people perceive it is." So the average Mississippian, white or black, in most quarters, when they will admit they are from Mississippi, when Mississippi is being dumped upon, will defend Mississippi. And the irony is to have the sons and daughters of these Mississippians defending Mississippi together. Because, I grew up in a segregated way of life, and they did too. But whites

were privileged, and I was not privileged. But we will end up

understood each other." It's an irony. I don't really know the real answer to it, except the guesses and my own perceptions of it, but it's a part of that feeling because we believe so strongly that we aren't as bad as people say we are, but also part of it is based on hope and based on potential. From my perspective we have such great potential, because of the large number of black people and because white folk and black folk have been working at least in reasonable proximity over the years, that there's some hope that we can eventually get it together. And then on the other hand it's just sheer hope that if you live that close to people you got to like some things about them. And if you buy the whole bit about democracy and participation, you have to believe in that. So it's a combination of factors. But you are correct. To note the kind of fierce loyalty and nationalism is there. And it is perhaps unlike. Because clearly I had choices before I went back to Mississippi to work. I didn't have to go back to Mississippi. But it's something I wanted to do because of that fierce nationalism and that fierce loyalty.

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