

**GREENSBORO VOICES/GREENSBORO CIVIL RIGHTS ORAL HISTORY  
COLLECTION**

INTERVIEWEE: Cleveland Sellers

INTERVIEWER: William Link

DATE: April 26, 1989

[Begin Tape 1, Side A]

WILLIAM LINK: This is William Link and the date is April 26, 1989, and I'm here in the office of Mr. Cleveland Sellers. I'd like to begin by talking a little bit about your background: where you were born and your early memories of how a segregated system worked in your, in your hometown.

CLEVELAND SELLERS: I was born in Denmark, South Carolina, which is in Bamberg County, and this is about fifty miles southeast of Columbia, South Carolina. It's about ninety miles from Savannah, to the north of Savannah, and about seventy miles to the west of Charleston. So it's in, it's very close to the Georgia line and about, and it's no more than about thirty miles from Augusta, Georgia. And in that area is the Savannah River Plant, which I remember from the point of--when it was first put in there, it was first called the Atomic Bomb Plant. So that's the general area of where I'm from. It's one of the "Black Belt" areas of South Carolina. The counties in that area have a very high percentage of blacks.

WL: Was it a--

CS: Surrounding counties--

WL: --plantation region in particular, or--

CS: No, it wasn't. [phone rings] In the town that I grew up in, it was a little different from the other towns in that community because it had two colleges. One was a privately--a private school that was kind of under the auspices of the Episcopal Church, Voorhees College. It was founded by a black woman, Elizabeth Evelyn Wright, and it was tied into the Tuskegee [University, Alabama] and Hampton [University, Virginia]. As a matter of fact, it was a school that grew out of the idea of Booker T. Washington.

Elizabeth Evelyn Wright was a disciple of Booker T. Washington. The story is, is that he was supposed to come to the school, and prior to his coming he passed. But at that point they had a hospital there named after him at the school. It was basically an agricultural and technical kind of institution, originally. Later, it became purely liberal arts.

The other school is a state-supported trade school, which was for blacks in South Carolina. It provided basic trades--the plastering and home economics and barbering--and had a large enrollment and was a pretty reliable institution for providing trades for many of the black children across the state of South Carolina. So you had a kind of college town there, especially for blacks. I'm not sure if whites had the same kind of perception of the town--because both the institutions were black--as, as blacks did.

The arrangement that the state had, and the city, for providing public education to the black population in Denmark was to have, to provide to the college tuition for each of the students who were in from the eighth through the twelfth grade. Voorhees College was a junior college at that time, and it had a private high school. And rather than providing a separate public facility for blacks in Denmark, the county utilized, and the city utilized, a tuition payback plan with the school. So all of the black students in the city were, had the luxury of having a fairly private school education. So the educational level was fairly high. Plus, we had the opportunity of being in high school with a number of students that were from outside of the area. We had a number from Africa, Kenya, Nigeria. We had a number of students who were a part of the private high school who came from the Washington, D.C. area; Philadelphia area; New York; Savannah, Georgia; and even the West Indies. So we had a fairly good mix.

And if we talk about the kind of Booker T. Washington philosophy and orientation, it's more cast down the bucket and learn skills and, and make a commitment to the larger community--and being a good example, and taking on the mission of providing something to society, and producing something that your community and your institution can be very proud of. So we had that kind of orientation kind of instilled in us as, as young, as young people.

The city was rigidly segregated. We had busing at that time. All of the black schools were located primarily in the black community. The, there were a number of black businesses in the community. As a matter of fact, my father was a businessperson who ran a restaurant and a taxi service, and he had some rental properties.

And most of our time and attention was spent primarily on the black side of town. I think we were probably shielded away from really coming to question at an early age the differences, because we were at an institution that was accredited by the Southern Association [of Colleges and Schools]. Many of our graduates went on to graduate schools and to professions, and we always held them up as examples. So we didn't initially have the kind of questioning process in place that raised any serious question about living in a segregated society, a segregated community.

As we moved more and more, I guess, after the 1954 [*Brown v. Board of Education*] decision and after the Montgomery bus boycott, which we were made aware of through our classes and through our teachers, they would target things like this for us to discuss. And we would discuss them not during black history week or Negro history week or during social studies. It would be something that the teacher would, kind of undercover, talk about in the class. So we would have those discussions about Rosa Parks, and we would have discussions about the Montgomery bus boycott.

Now it wasn't a part of the subject matter, and we have to understand that the pressures that were applied to make sure that teachers followed the mandates was intense. And there was always the effort to keep certain social issues from creeping into the classrooms. But I think that the number of teachers--because of their commitment and because of their orientation during that period--went beyond the call of duty to provide the extra nurturing, and the extra information, and the extra assistance to help us develop and become mature people who could make choices, and could make the commitment, and would dedicate ourselves to the effort.

WL: This was a kind of a mentoring process whereby teachers would consciously attempt to provide a role model or provide a--

CS: It was a conscious effort on the part of teachers to provide that role model. Matter of fact, I can't remember a case when any student was ever put out of school. There was always a method for keeping the person in school and working with them and working with their parents and trying to correct whatever would be considered a behavioral kind of problem.

During that time, they did spank. And you would--if you got in trouble at school, by the time you got home, if there was a telephone, the teacher would probably have called or the principal would call to notify your parents that you had kind of acted up in school. And it would be a kind of reinforcement on the part of the teacher. The teacher would tell them, "I spanked him." When you got home, you'd probably get another spanking. If there wasn't a telephone available, generally the teacher would go by the house or the home and let the parent know exactly what had transpired and what had taken place.

So it was kind of a reinforcement. But even the students who did not do very well, let's say a student who was not a particularly good learner, there was always an activity that that student could participate in to keep them active and keep them involved in the educational process. Many times these students would act as special couriers in the office of the principals, or special couriers for the teachers--something that kind of gave them a little self-esteem and to integrate them fully into the entire educational community there. And to get students not to look at them as some kind of distraction or some kind of obstacle or something that they did not want to associate with, [but] to see that they could be a valuable asset and everybody had a role to play. So I think in that sense it was a

nurturing and a more mentoring privilege to the educational process.

The other thing is, is that we had a number of periodicals--the *Jet* magazine, the *Ebony* magazine, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the *Journal and Guide*, the *Baltimore Afro-American*--that teachers would use and bring into the class and let us kind of focus in on various kinds of activities that were going on in the black community. And they would use that to reinforce. They would find a person, a Jesse Owens, a person who had been a successful schoolteacher that was being featured in the magazine or in the newspaper, and they would make every effort to kind of use that as a, as an enticement to encourage us to aspire to whatever heights we could aspire to.

In fact, the incident that probably for me crystallized in my mind the problems of race and racism and violence in America was the murder of Emmett Till, who in Mississippi was roughly the same age that I was. And the magazines, specifically the *Jet* magazine, did a story on Emmett Till which we were able to discuss in our class. You could see the young man's face all bloated and distorted. And the crime that he had committed was whistling, allegedly whistling at a white woman.

And that was the, I mean that was just so farfetched, in terms of understanding that you could be killed for something that would be so trivial, and it wasn't even verified whether or not he had actually done that. So many of us began to identify with that as, as a kind of motivating piece that said that we had to do something about that kind of atrocity.

And then later on it was the lynching of Max Parker, and there were several other lynchings that occurred, I think it was about 1957, '58, in Mississippi, where vigilantes went into the, into the jails and took people out and lynched them for allegedly, for crimes they allegedly committed. And we began to focus more and more on the viciousness and the brutality that existed in the Alabamas and in the Mississippis, not dealing specifically with our particular areas.

After, after that, you began to see the--get news and reports about this new leader that emerged from the, from the Montgomery bus boycott. That new leader was none other than Martin Luther King. And shortly after the Montgomery bus boycott, which was tremendously successful, and it kind of broke down many of the stereotypes that existed up to that point. And some of those stereotypes where that black people could not get themselves together. They were more like crabs in a barrel, and every time one succeeded the other would pull it down. And in Montgomery we saw a united effort. The other was, was that we had no strategy to overcome segregation. And in Alabama, in Montgomery, there was a strategy. So that was another incentive.

And then the whole question of leadership, that leadership was corrupt and it did not, wasn't socially oriented and was not concerned about social change at all. And we saw a difference in the leadership. In Martin King being a minister, we began to see that the role of the church was not just to save souls, but it could have another orientation, and it could be about the business of changing the way we lived, not just in terms of our inner

growth and health.

And I think the other idea was that there needed to be a new tactic. Many people had grown disenchanted with the effort to address the problems of segregation through a legalistic approach. And we could see that a coming together of community and developing a strategy--be it boycott or civil disobedience or whatever--had some validity, and it could work.

So all these messages kind of grew out of that period, and it made us, who were aspiring to be these--to take on the challenge of being the new leaders in our community, and the new doctors and the new professionals and the new schoolteachers and what have you. We wanted more. I mean, we saw that there was an opportunity that we could aspire and we could gain. We didn't feel like we were inferior at all. And as these things open up, the whole notion of "Let's open it up some more" kind of took over.

And then we saw with a great amount of glee the sit-ins here in Greensboro. And by that time, you know, we're talking about 1958 through 1960, we had the advent of the TV. Prior to that time, you know, we were probably looking at the new shows and the newness of this new technology. But by the time you get to 1960, you begin to see sit-ins, and you begin to see black students that were a lot like yourself demonstrating and making the commitment and saying that, "Yes, I want to be successful, but there is a higher commitment that I have to make. There are things that I have to change in order for that success to have some meaning."

We began to, on our campus, [phone ringing] we would assemble almost every night around the time for the national news. And we'd all sit around and watch as these well-dressed, articulate black students would march very distinctly and very profoundly into the sit--into the restaurants and be willing to take the abuse to make the issue that their fight was a moral fight. It was a fight of a higher order and that they were willing to make the sacrifice. And I think that was the kind of thing that kind of sent me off and began [to cause] me to be more concerned about civil rights. [phone ringing]

WL: There might be a suggestion here--I wonder what your reactions would be to this--of important generational differences and maybe a generation gap. The late 1950s generation was coming of age, and part of that coming of age was a new--but were there big differences, do you think, between your age group and your parent's age group?

CS: Well, yeah, there was. I mean, certainly in terms of my own family, I was--I guess I would be considered a knee baby. I'm--my parents were in their late thirties, early forties before I was even born. Many blacks had, for reasons of--professional blacks who had gone through the school, the educational process--many of the professional blacks who went to school and went from school onto graduate school, then went into a profession, a number of them had put off marriage and that whole thing, as a result of having to make a commitment to go through school and other kinds of things. So there were a number of

the professionals who were late in marrying and having children and that kind of thing.

Now for, for the, for the old group, there was a kind of commitment to the, the NAACP's effort at litigating and litigation. And I think that the generation gap may be more so in terms of a commitment to certain strategies and ideas, ideals, and the younger group coming in saying that that was fine, that that process is too slow, it's antiquated, it's outdated, we want to move faster. More things are happening. You're talking about more developed technology coming onto the scene. You're talking about the advent of TV, telephone. I mean, a number of things are beginning to happen around us.

Many people who have moved to the North have seen a kind of opening up and a mechanization of the workforce and workplace. That, you know, it's time for us to make that effort to open all that up. You're talking about after the war, and a number of things were happening with veterans who had come back during the fifties, the Korean conflict in particular. That they were beginning to say, "If I can go around the world fighting for democracy, then I should be able to have democracy in the Mississippi, Alabamas, and other places. And I should also have the opportunities--I should be able to register to vote, I should be able to vote, I should be able to have a job, decent education."

And these kinds of questions were certainly on the minds of the younger generation. They had kind of separated themselves from the "go slow and let's go to court and let's litigate it." And there was a, there was an effort on the part of the younger people, and all these forces kind of motivated that.

Certainly did not hurt--and many people dismiss it--but the coming to the front of, let's say, Ghana and the whole independence. People began to see themselves in another whole light as, as a person who is actually running a country, a person of color who is in charge. I mean, they're in charge of the police, they're in charge of the firefighters, they're in charge of the schools, they're in charge of everything. So there is no reason why we should continue to believe that there is something innately inferior about being black, and we should aspire to those heights.

And so these, all these factors played a role impacting on, I guess, that new generation. And then the Emmett Till thing. I think the Emmett Till thing, probably more than any other murder, for young people had the most dramatic impact. And just looking at that--they had a picture of him and then a pic[ture], I mean of him when he was alive and a picture of him when he was dead.

[recorder paused]

CS: Okay, so you do have a noticeable generation, generational gap there, between the thinking and the ideals and aspirations of people. And like I said, it's age and it's ideas, more than it is just strictly age, that you see that gap occur.

WL: You mentioned the impact of the sit-ins and the kind of television coverage it received.

What sort of specific repercussions did the sit-ins have in, in your community?

CS: Well, first, you know, we were not able to witness in the same manner the Montgomery bus boycott, but everybody knew about it. I mean, it was kind of like the black press made an effort to pass that information down the line, up and down the line. And there was a networking process that was going on in the black community, which news about successes and news about achievements would pass up and down that, that kind of line.

But now, with the sit-ins, I, you know, the news media kind of jumped on top of that and began to focus it. Now you could almost sit down and see history and see success. I mean, you could--when the sit-ins were on, it was, you know, it'd be sixty, seventy students. I mean, it would just be all around the TV. It would all be--I mean, it'd be real quiet and there would be, you know, you could see and feel the pride in the effort, [phone ringing] and the pride in the dignity, and the pride in the self esteem, and the pride in all these things that were, were going on and happening around.

So, immediately, people said that, you know, we have the same things that the students in Greensboro or the students in Durham have, and that we also have a problem in our community. And immediately after that, we saw the sit-ins kind of catch a hold in Denmark, and the college students began to organize and began to, to assemble and train and develop a strategy for going downtown. And they did. I mean, they followed a couple weeks after that.

Now what happened is, is that now you had internal contradiction, in the sense that you had seen this on TV, and it made you feel good, and you knew it was something very positive, but the administration resisted it. So now the question is, is turned inwardly. And that is, now we're in the educational institution, where you are supposed to be helping us to develop our skills to be the best that we can be and to support our community. What better way can we support our community [than] by demonstrating against public accommodation segregation? And the administration said, "No, you know, you'll hurt the school, it's not going to help," and that kind of thing.

So now what begins to happen is the group that's trying to go downtown and demonstrate, which has the support of all the students on campus, now has to turn that energy and focus in on the administration and begin to raise basic kinds of questions that we see later on with the, with the free speech movement in Berkeley. But a lot of the issues that are raised through the free speech movement in Berkeley are raised at many of the black institutions.

WL: What do you, what do you think their motives are? What are their concerns, this--?

CS: Their concerns are a relationship to the community. Their concerns [are] about the quality of the educational process. Their concerns [are] about the basic kind of concerns the students have--that would be certain liberties and accesses to certain kinds of

opportunities. The liberties would probably be certain curfews; the institutions were very rigidly controlled. There were a list of demands, which included food and curfews and probably class attendance and the support of the institution to further the cause of civil rights, even to the point of raising questions about the trustees and who they were and what they represented, and those kinds of--those issues were the kinds of issues that were raised.

And the issues of--at some point, it would be a question of the students who were involved in leading the sit-ins would be suspended, or the threat of suspension. So you would ask for a kind of amnesty for those individuals. You would ask for a reprieve on those individuals.

Many of these students who were involved in the sit-ins, which is a story that's lost in and of itself, were probably some of the sharpest, most articulate students on the campus. They were very good students. And there is myth, as a result of some manipulating history, that makes you think that the people didn't have anything else to do, and what they did in their free time was to go down and try to start trouble.

But many of these students were very, very, very good students and were very, very popular students, and many of them were very active. For example, the person who was spearheading the group at my, at Voorhees College was a gentleman by the name of Churchill Graham, who was a star football player as a fullback. And he was also president of the Student Government Association. And he was a very, very, very good student. So that's the, that's the kind of background you find in many of these persons who were involved in the sit-ins--at least in, in its beginning stage.

Now it always opened up, and more and more people became involved. And then you--if you look at other institutions, for an example, when the sit-ins went to Southern University [Louisiana], they closed the school down, period. They brought in about forty buses and they took kids to their respective communities. They just took them home. And many of the students, once they were all taken home, what they called the ringleaders were summarily expelled from those institutions.

Now you have difference of opinions in terms of how people view the sit-ins. Some administrators were more accommodating and understood. Others felt more pressure or perceived more pressure. And some, in many instances, felt more pressure from the legislators and the governments or whoever they worked for. [phone ringing] Some of the institutions were state-run institutions and they felt compelled to suspend or expel the leadership.

One of the things that happened was that some of the institutions like Howard University [Washington, D.C.] began to make available educational opportunities for students who were expelled from like Southern University. So some of the students from Southern did have an opportunity go to school at Howard. Tougaloo College in Mississippi also had a similar kind of referral program and project.

But you know, you had, you had so many schools involved, and most of the sit-



ins were in and around communities where the predominantly black colleges were. So you had so many incidents happening that there was some difficulty in terms of coordinating and passing information around. Because people were picking it up--“I heard about North Carolina College,” which was in Durham, “We need to go next.” And then they would go. And then somebody would say, “Well, I heard about Voorhees College.” Then, “What about Benedict College,” and “What about Clapton? I’m at Clapton. It’s time for me to go and join the movement,” is what people referred to that as.

Later on you see SCLC [Southern Christian Leadership Conference] and Ella Baker deciding to call the conference at Shaw [University, in Raleigh] where they wanted to develop some kind of network and some kind of coordination of student activities. And from that grew SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee].

So shortly thereafter, I mean, we’re talking about no later than a year after that, people were beginning to sit down and began to raise even more fundamental and basic kinds of questions about not just getting a soda, but what does it mean. I mean, what are we doing here? Is it deeper than just having a hamburger served? And the question was that it was deeper, that you had to talk about black people moving into the mainstream of the American system. And you had to talk about that in the context of the political, social, and economic--in the political, social, and economic arena. So, that whole discussion began to take place.

Now with the sit-ins and all, it was a tactic, and tactics are usable as long as the condition--

[End Tape 1, Side A--Begin Tape 1, Side B]

CS: --the facilities, then the tactic was no longer viable. And then, in a place like Denmark, what they did was--there wasn’t a major corporation, because Denmark is a very small rural community. It was a drugstore, and it was a drugstore that had stools in it. And so what the druggist did was he took the stools out and took all the seating apparatuses out of the place altogether. And that was his way of dealing with, with the sit-ins. Plus there was a tremendous amount of pressure applied through the school and through the school administration to stop sit-ins.

WL: Pressure from the downtown community?

CS: Downtown community, yes. Basically the white community. Now for the black community, it was, it was almost like everybody knew that the sit-ins were going to take place. And for the kids to get down there, they had to walk from the campus, and from the campus to the drugstore was an area of about, probably about three to three and a half miles.

And you could see people coming to see these groups of students. They would be

marching in single file, and they would be going along and everybody would be standing around on the side, just watching them and looking with anticipation. It was almost, you know, "These are the warriors going, going off to battle, and we have to see who they are and see what they look like. Are they different from us?" And there was a tremendous amount of excitement about and around the demonstrators.

By the time they got there, well, everybody would know. [phone rings] The police would be there, and they knew what they would coming for, so they never actually got into the, into the store. But it had an impact on the entire community. And I think it was a renewal of a sense of, again, pride and accomplishment. And the fact was, it was beginning to break down a number of the myths about blacks not being able to do anything, they were not skilled, they were lazy and all those other kinds of myths, were just getting eaten away by, by this action.

And the thing that you saw was that many of the young, young men--and generally they were all young men; they, they did have, initially--did open up to women as it went along--and the reason why it was all young men was because of that tendency to believe that if there's going to be violence, then women would suffer more, and subsequently men were more physically able to withstand the brutality. And so in that--under those kinds of conditions, it could be seen as a chivalry, and it could be seen as a kind of chauvinistic attitude.

But in any event, many of the first ones were, were young men in Denmark. Now that varied in communities. And I think that there was no restriction after the initial engagement, because shortly after the sit-ins in Greensboro took place, they did have the schools like Bennett College which participated, and then it kind of opened up to both male and female. I think what I'm saying is, initially, people were kind of reluctant about whether or not they wanted women to be on the lines because of that attitude about them getting hurt and having to protect, that kind of thing.

WL: Was there, was there much possibility of violence in Denmark, or was there violence?

CS: Did not know whether or not there was going to be a possibility of violence. We always anticipated that if you were involved in any of those kinds of activities, you were susceptible to some violent reaction. What they did was they turned them back the first time. At one point they did put some of them under arrest, but they turned them over to the, to the college.

There was no confrontation, because usually the police would intercept them prior to them getting into the pharmacy. And, you know, they would just lock the place up when they knew they were coming. So you didn't have that kind of violence in Denmark. You did have violence in other places, where people would get hit by some flying object, or they would get sugar poured all on their head, or they would get soup poured on their head or something other than that poured on their head.

And on, on, at several occasions, people were actually beaten for, you know, during the period of the sit-ins. A mob would overtake them and they would get knocked down and kicked around, that kind of thing. Those, those things did happen. So it wasn't, it wasn't like walking into a corporate headquarters. I mean, this was, this was real, live, and there was a potential for, for violence. And there was a potential for severe physical violence perpetrated upon the person who was actually carrying out the activity.

WL: What about the decision-making structure that was emerging here, or the leadership structure--men and women? Were women--to what extent did women participate in that? If they weren't on the front lines, were they participating in--

CS: Well, I think that immediately after the initial sit-in at a particular school or institution, the whole thing opened up. Because then it became a question of how many people you could gather, and so it did not restrict. Plus you knew something about the terrain. You knew whether or not it was going to be violence, you knew whether or not--how the response, what the response was going to be. And so the ranks opened up, and you needed to have other people, and other people made the commitment.

And so you did have, if you look at it, you do have a number of, of women who were involved, in Nashville, at Fisk [University], at American--what is it--American Baptist Seminary [sic-College, in Nashville], Meharry [Medical College, Nashville]. Many of the institutions down in Atlanta--the Morehouse, Clark, Spelman [Atlanta University System], Morris Brown [College], and Atlanta University. So it was fully integrated.

And what you find is, is that because of the nature of the demonstrations, that most people called on as much of the reliable and supportive input that they could get, and that, that crossed, crossed lines. It crossed race lines and it crossed gender lines. For an example, what you'd find is, is that from, at that point, the Woman's College in Greensboro [now The University of North Carolina at Greensboro], you began to have participation on the lines here, and from Bennett College, which is all-female. You begin to have those persons involved. And in terms of developing the tactics and making sure that you had a line each day, that coordination did take place.

But now, you know, you're talking about a kind of concept, that nonviolent concept, and there was a kind of dress code that was expected of you. And, you know, people would do different kinds of things to, to, to help their cause. If you figured that you were going to be in a situation where there was going to be some physical violence, where there would probably be goons or people out of control, sometimes the student group would try to solicit members of the football team, for an example, to kind of cover up and keep the person from being harmed, or keep other people from being harmed. So that was, that was a, that was a consideration.

But it was open, and the decision-making process was pretty democratic in the

sense that anybody who had an idea that might work were allowed to express that idea and to be involved. And you see that much clearer when you get to the point of who represented the various organizations when they came to the conference at Shaw University. Many of those individuals were, were female. And the person who called the conference was Ella Baker. So that kind of--take that upon--hold on just a second.

[recorder paused]

WL: We were talking about the structure of the movement, and this would be, at this point we're talking about SNCC or maybe right before SNCC, the organization--

CS: We were talking about just before SNCC. And then when you have the conference in, [phone ringing] in Raleigh, at Shaw, you have the students from various student organizations that had participated in sit-ins and other public accommodation testing coming together to talk about coordinating their efforts and sharing of information and trying to keep in touch with one another. And so that's where you come with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

Originally, it was a temporary committee. And the question that I raised was a question about, about the Coke. Once you had access to it, had you solved any of your basic kinds of problems? And the answer was always no. And so the idea was to move from a temporary organization to a more permanent organization. And then, I think, Jayne Stenbridge [first secretary of SNCC] came from Virginia--was it Virginia Seminary or was it Union Theological? There was one in Virginia, I can't think of the name of it. But she made herself available to, to act as the head of that coordinating effort originally. And then the organization took on a more permanent kind of form and began to raise the question and issue of spreading public accommodations testing and then the whole area of registration and voting.

And so later on in the organization, you have a struggle over the question of which is the predominant program of the organization and strategy of the organization, whether or not it's voter registration, whether or not it's public accommodation testing. Voter registration kind of takes--wins out, and then the organization began to talk about going into communities, primarily southwest Georgia, Albany, and later on into Mississippi to begin to do voter registration work.

And there were some foundations that were involved in that whole process that made monies available. The voter education project in Blanton c[a]me about shortly after that. And there were monies available for voter registration efforts. So some of these monies were used to defer some of the costs, and using the same basic kind of network that had existed with the sit-ins.

What happens through that process is, is that students graduate and they leave, and if you're not providing the same social kind of atmosphere and training ground, then

the new generation has to be brought up to date. So that--once people leave, you lose the consistency. So then SNCC, at that point, takes on a whole form in and of itself, and began to, to move on, trying to maintain some contacts with the campuses. But by that time, that whole generation that had been involved in the sit-ins had moved off of the campus. And so you had another generation there who were basically supporters of the civil rights movement that continued to be supportive and feed resources in terms of money and personnel into the civil rights movement.

WL: But it wasn't a student movement anymore, in terms of the way it had been.

CS: Yeah, it, it had taken on another character, yes. And it had, it kept providing the training ground for those persons who would eventually launch another student movement. I used to be in the free speech movement and then later on sat in with Rennie Davis [prominent anti-Vietnam War protest leader] and [Tom] Hayden [social and political activist] to do the Port Huron declaration and then the Students for a Democratic [Society]--SDS.

So it kept that, but the focus changed. Because now, on voter registration, you're talking about basically a peasantry group that, that's across the South, and the character of that organizing was different from anything that you'd experienced on the campus. And there were more risks involved, and the stakes were much higher. You weren't just dealing with your own safety and security, but now you were, in fact, having a direct impact on the safety and the survival of any person you came in contact with in those areas where you worked. So that, that the nature of the work changed significantly.

WL: When did you, when did you first come in contact with SNCC?

CS: My first contact with SNCC was--we had a very active priest at Voorhees, Father Grant, who would always be supportive of our efforts to get more and more information. We began to, after the sit-ins started, we began to crave information. We began the process of trying to set up a NAACP chapter. We got enthusiastic and we were out on the streets--this is as a high school student--knocking on doors, trying to get people to sign up. And we got the doors slammed right in our face. Bam. Nobody--the adult community was very hesitant and reluctant. And so they put screws to us and said that we didn't need to have an NAACP chapter.

WL: Was it considered too radical or--

CS: Yes, it was considered too radical and it brought too much attention. And, you know, we didn't understand the nature of the political powers-to-be in our community, and they were applying a lot of pressure on us. But we still tried, made an effort to maintain contact and communication.

So we had an opportunity to go to a conference up in Rock Hill, South Carolina, [at] Friendship Junior College. During that conference, some of the “SNCCers” who were involved with the, I think it was the freedom rides, had stopped off in Rock Hill. They were testing the public accommodation facility and they got arrested. And during that period they decided to employ a new tactic, which was called “jail without bail.”

While they were there--and when they said “jail with no bail,” that they were not prepared to place their bail, but they wanted to generate support from the entire community--the whole community in Rock Hill kind of like opened up. And people were bringing food, and they had rallies at night, and, I mean, there was just a certain amount of electricity that was in the air.

So when we were going up for the conference, we--the conference happened to be in Rock Hill. So we went up, and we were able to make contact with Ruby Doris Robinson and Diane Nash [prominent SNCC members] and a couple of the other SNCCers. And that kind of stayed in my mind until 1962, when I went off to Howard.

And when I got to Howard, I began to--on the Howard campus, many of the SNCCers that we know now were there, and I was able to join the NAG group, the Nonviolent Action Group, which was a SNCC affiliate, at Howard University. And from there I moved on to, to Mississippi.

But at Howard, we had Courtland Cox, who was a special assistant to the mayor now in Washington, D.C. We had--Stokely Carmichael was there, was one of my roommates for a period of a year while I was there. And we had a number of persons who became figures inside of SNCC--Stanley Wise, and Ivanhoe Donaldson was in the Washington area, and Judy Richardson. There’s a long list of persons who were, became very active in SNCC.

Matter of fact, people talk about the, Albany [Georgia] and its impact on the movement, and they talk about “the Albany Nashville.” And then they talk about certain significant changes that take place inside the organization. There was a significant change inside of SNCC with the Washington group, which was more of an urban kind of group that moved into SNCC in a political capacity in 1964.

And Ed Brown was at, was at Howard at that point. And he is the brother of Rap Brown. Rap was kicked out of Southern [University] and he was one of the people who got a scholarship to come to Howard University. And you had Bill Hall and a number of people who were at Howard University when I was there--Mike Thelwell, who heads up the Afro-American Studies program at Amherst. It’s supposed to be one of the gems. And a number of other people were in that, in that Washington area.

WL: They were all--

CS: They were all students at Howard.

WL: And all involved in NAG?

CS: All involved in NAG.

WL: Yeah.

CS: So it was, it was, the NAG group was probably about forty strong. We had, we had some affiliation with people like at Princess Anne [College, also known as] Maryland State [University], Johnny Wilson, who's now a city councilperson in Washington. And we had some from the University of Maryland, which is [known as] College Park. So we, we did take in some affiliations from that general area, from Morgan [State University, Maryland] [like] Pam Jones, who is now an actress out in Hollywood.

But we, we, we had a pretty, pretty good group, pretty large group, real close knit group. And like I said, we had a number of activities that we were supposed to be involved in, in the Washington, D.C. area specifically, most of which were tied directly to actions and activities that were taking place in Mississippi and Alabama. And as a result of that, we ended up on a many day and a many nights in front of the White House and Congress, lobbying the Congress.

We became very familiar with the, with [black congressman] Adam Clayton Powell and other handfuls of black congresspersons that were there. And we also were involved actively in doing things on the campus to make people more aware of the needs and the nature of the civil rights movement. We invited--well, we were in charge of, because of our involvement with the lyceum program, we helped get people like Bayard Rustin [black activist] and Malcolm X to speak to large numbers of people at Howard University. And Mike Thelwell, at that point, was the editor of the newspaper, so we could get stuff in on Mississippi into the newspaper. So we were very actively involved in a lot of campus activities there at Howard University.

WL: What sort of attitude did the, did the government have, the federal government? Did you--to what extent did you find being there in Washington successful? Did you have--was there [an] attitude of cooperation, non-cooperation?

CS: Well, the attitude of the federal government always--well, primarily, if you're talking about the Justice Department and the FBI, was always ambivalent at best. At worst, on the side of the opposition. We would picket and we would try to educate the general populace of Washington, [phone ringing] both the local population and, and the federal, congressional population. That's the Senate, the Congress people and all. We, we made every effort to make a case for the activities that were going on in Mississippi.

And see, we were very close to many of those people who were in Mississippi at that time. They would come up--we would provide them an opportunity to come to

Washington and maybe talk to a Congressperson about their experiences in Mississippi, what was going on in Mississippi, to try to get federal intervention, try to get protection for civil rights workers. We had cases in Mississippi where people were actually killed. So we, we knew that. And so that was the level of our commitment; we knew that we had people on the front lines, and if we weren't successful in Washington, then they could very easily get completely wiped out.

So we were vigilant in that we would, we would go to the, we would go to the Congress or the Justice Department and we'd be willing to stay there for almost twenty-four hours, for long periods of time with the picket signs, making the case, trying to generate interest in the news media and the *Washington Post*, and that kind of thing.

So, so basically, their attitude was almost as if we didn't exist. But we did make inroads, and that was just through the diligent and painstaking work of being vigilant in, in Washington. But for a lot, a long period of time, people gave the appearance that, you know, Mississippi didn't exist. And many of the people who were getting killed were black and that wasn't even significant to bring about the kind of relief that we were looking for. And up until, up until probably 1964, the summer of 1964, when a large number of white recruits were brought into Mississippi, there were, there were no deterrents. I mean, you just had to, at risk, take your chances in surviving whatever happened in Mississippi and Alabama and Georgia.

WL: The FBI, of course, has had a--well, there's been considerable controversy about the FBI's role in all of this, from extensive surveillance to Martin Luther King. What, what's your impression of the FBI? How, what was their attitude toward the civil rights movement?

CS: The attitude of the FBI toward the civil rights movement was one of, I'd say, at best ambivalence. And even in that ambivalence there was a certain resentment. They--during my tenure in Mississippi, they did absolutely nothing to curtail any of the violence that was going on. They, they did nothing as a tactical deterrent. It was just hard to get them to do, to do anything at all. At some points we just did--we, we would do it for the sake of having a legal trail. We would contact the FBI because the attorneys for the various Constitutional Defense League and the NAACP Ink Fund and the Guild attorneys that were working in Mississippi would tell us to make that contact, even though we knew there wasn't going to be any response. Hold on just a second, please.

[recording paused]

CS: At no point could I consider the FBI to be a friend of the movement. Some of the things that the FBI did, you know, the wiretappings, and the information dissemination, bad information, the harassing of civil rights workers, even after the movement, even up



through the seventies and probably even now, to make it virtually impossible for people to get jobs. You could be literally beat to death in front of a FBI agent in Mississippi, and the only thing they would do would [be] to take notes. We've had cases where people were beaten. I think Hayden was down in McComb--in Natchez, Mississippi, and the FBI agents observed, but the only thing they did was take notes.

So there is no great love for the FBI and its efforts. [J. Edgar] Hoover, as the head of the FBI, was probably, the only term is overtly racist. And we never could rely on the FBI to assist in any manner. When the first call went up about the missing civil rights workers, they assisted in a lot of the confusion about whether or not it was actually a kidnap/murder, by saying that, you know, they didn't really believe, that they thought it was a staged kind of thing. They supported the efforts of the police to, to disguise it. Only at the point where the country kind of got behind it and certain Congress people got behind it was there any effort made to really look into that murder.

And I know that for a fact, because the first team that actually went out to search for the bodies--and at that point we were pretty convinced that there was a very slim chance that we were going to find them alive--was from the orientation session. And SNCC and CORE put together a team of about nine to ten people that it sent into Philadelphia, [Mississippi,] under the, under the guise of darkness to search that area for a period of, I guess we stayed out there close to three or four days. We were on the wrong side of the county, but we did look in wells and trenches and places where farmers would, would go out as hunters during the day, and they would look at a place that could be a burial place, or could be a place where people were being held. And they would come back and report it, and then we would go out there.

But the FBI, for an example, in the movie *Mississippi Burning*, gets much, much, much too much credit. And they were, they did a number of other kinds of things to disrupt families and create a lot of confusion. And that's the FBI that I know, and I know that FBI very well. And so I don't have any, any real enthusiasm about Hoover or any other efforts that people tell me about that the FBI took. I knew what their role was, and I knew how they played their role. And probably from the period of about 1966 straight on through, the FBI was no longer passive in the civil rights movement. They took a very activist role in terms of doing everything they could to crush the civil rights movement and the people who were in it.

WL: Such as surveillance and disinformation?

CS: They did more than surveillance. They did disinformation. They did, you know, calling people up and not only giving them bad information, but they would, they would call if, if a person decided that it was time for them to get some rest or rehabilitation and go to a school, and they applied to institutions, the FBI would go to the institution and raise the red flag--"Do you know who you're getting?" People would go out and try to find a job,

and try to do some things that would take them away from the civil rights movement.

We have to understand that during the period from probably about 1960 through about 1966-67, working in Mississippi [recorder malfunction--not on tape: was not a cup of tea. It was almost like being on a battlefield. There were a number of things that people] encountered. One is what most of the psychologists would call a war neurosis. You know, it's just a tremendous amount of pressure.

I mean, during the summer of '64, when I was in Holly Springs, [Mississippi,] during that summer alone, we saw I would imagine somewhere in the neighborhood of six to seven murders. We saw at least fifty, probably about fifty-seven, fifty-eight churches burned down to the ground or blown up. We saw three thousand arrests. We saw beatings. Every conceivable thing--we're talking about a three month period of time. So it was, it was like almost being on the front line. You never knew whether or not you'd be there the next day. You travel up and down the highway, you get stopped and people would take you away.

So you had a number of things that you always had to be confronted with, death being one of them. And you had to deal with fear, because you couldn't become immobilized. And so when you're under that kind of pressure--

[End Tape 1, Side B--Begin Tape 2, Side A]

CS: And then from the, supposedly the police department, the United States Government [recorder malfunction] police department to come along behind that, and then try to disrupt lives, and try to, to use information. Maybe a person wanted to get a tape cleaned. All I'm saying is that they--under all that pressure, you know, you dealt with the fear and you dealt with the agony of death and people dying around you and all those kinds of things. You might seek some kind of assistance, some kind of therapy or something like that. Well, the FBI would take that information and make it available to anybody and everybody in the world. If you were getting ready to get married, they would call up your wife and say, "Hey"--your future wife--and say, "Hello. Did you know that this person is in therapy?"

So it was, it was all those kinds of things. It made it extremely difficult for people to, to have any kind of opportunities after, after, after their experiences. And that included jobs, that included encouraging police to have false arrests, encouraging police to be concerned about an individual that there might not have been any concern necessary. And what that does is that gets somebody else involved in the process, and you don't know how much anxiety is built up in that particular police force or police group. So you had to be real careful about whether or not--where you lived, and what kind of groundswell was built up by the FBI.

I was in Orangeburg [South Carolina] and the FBI were on the scene. And they couldn't even report to the Justice Department what had happened in Orangeburg. So I

mean, I just, I just think that if at, at a point where people go back and look at that very closely--that FBI during that period--we will find that the FBI was probably on the verge of being the Gestapo. I mean, that's, that's the way they operated. Especially in regards to black civil rights workers.

Now others might have been able to get, get by with that. Now I don't think so, because I knew that they had a long dossier and they have just files and files of records, which I haven't had an opportunity or the money to acquire. But I don't think that's the way you operate in a democratic society. And I don't think there was ever a crime that I had committed that was tantamount to treason or espionage or any of that kind of thing.

I mean, the only thing that we were working for was basic, democratic rights of black people, primarily, and poor people across this country, and trying to re-enfranchise many people who were disenfranchised, you know, and, and being involved in social change. And, you know, to have all that kind of dumped down on you is, raises a question about the integrity of the agency and the integrity of those people who support that kind of, that kind of gangland kind of, kind of activity.

So I had a lot of occasions to see over the past what we knew was going on. We raised that issue, back as early as, even before I went to Mississippi, that we had civil rights workers down who were being killed, who could not get the protection of the FBI. And we kept raising that issue, we kept raising that issue, and we raised that issue, until it became a moot point. I mean, you knew what they were about, and they were definitely about corrupting, distorting, of playing major roles. And that's the way Hoover had it. He had it designed in that manner.

WL: Of course, he did the same thing with--the FBI did the same thing with white student radicals.

CS: Absolutely.

WL: The same kind of tactics.

CS: Absolutely. That's what I'm saying. I don't want to frame it in that--because I know that that happened. But you feel it and you talk about it more, and you have a tendency to recognize that your lot has been even more difficult because of--the fact is that the opportunities, coming out of the sixties the opportunities were great for people who went on and finished school and did all the appropriate kinds of things, because, you know, society opened up and gave some people a chance.

But if, if you decided that you wanted to pursue a career as a schoolteacher, it was pretty difficult because they would go in and dangle this thing, and so that it made it--so and what that does is that just makes it extremely difficult for you to operate and survive. And so you, you end up having to second guess and go back through all the mindset of,

“Was I actually doing the right kinds of things? What have I done to my life?” And those kinds of, those kinds of issues. It makes it difficult to come to grips with it.

I’m saying that I agree that everybody who was involved at that point was targeted, and there was a certain amount of subversion. But I think that to the extent that there was a kind of racist attitude, that the focal point, I mean they--it just, you’re hit harder, that’s all. It’s not that you don’t get hit, but I mean, you feel like you got hit much harder than anybody else. And that might be very subjective and I would be willing to concede that. But I just feel like many of those people that were really involved had a lot of adversity as a result of their involvement.

I have never in my life heard of people who would find it important and necessary to put a microphone in a bedroom. I mean, that just doesn’t make any kind of sense to me at all. I mean, that doesn’t have anything to do with any criminality at all. And if you’re talking about a law enforcement [recorder malfunction--not on tape: agency, they’re supposed to be working within the constraints of legal and illegal activities. They get into all kinds of weird kind of things. They’ll come visit you, they’d come and talk to] all the people in your neighborhood if you lived in a particular neighborhood and you were renting from somebody. They’d come and they’d talk to everybody on one side of your house and everybody on the other side of your house, and then the information would get out, the FBI’s trying to--

WL: They were obviously FBI?

CS: Oh yeah. Then somebody would go back to the person you’re renting from and say, “You know, the FBI’s looking for something with those folks over there.” You go, you don’t know what happened. So, I mean, so those are the stories, those are the tales that, you know, haven’t been told. Not that there’s any significance other than suggesting to America that we don’t go back to that, we stay away from that. We can’t--that, that’s wrong. That’s a violation of all the human principles thereof--peeking in windows, breaking in homes and houses, searching without warrants and all that, all that, the whole nine yards. They did it all. I don’t think they missed a stroke. In order for them to put a wire on, most times they’d have to go in the unit to hook up your phone. So I mean they’d--

WL: Break in?

CS: Yeah. So I mean, that’s the way they were. They were like gangbusters. And the problem with that is, is that after we got to the, after the rebellions and all of 1968, the attitude of America kind of turned and it was more law and order, so then it became really legitimate. I mean, I couldn’t--wasn’t anything I could say. I mean, I was a--people bought into what was being said, and it made it very difficult for you to have any redress.

So you had to go along with it, because now it was all these lawless elements and you were one of them. And so you got, you were guilty by association, tied right into everything else that was going on. You became a causal factor, nothing else. Certainly nothing in society could have been a causal factor.

And then we, we head off again to a, to a situation where we distort history and reality and we suffer the consequences. But that's, that's pretty much my attitude and feeling toward that big agency called the FBI, and it's probably no better now.

[End of Interview]