

**Narrator: John Zippert**  
**Interviewer: Greta de Jong**  
**Transcriber: Janna Robinson**

**4700.1030 Tapes 1517-1518**  
**Session I**  
**28 June 1998**

**[Begin Tape 1517, Side A. Begin Session I.]**

**Greta de Jong:** Okay, this is Greta de Jong. I'm talking to Mr. John Zippert. The date is twenty-eighth of June 1998, and we're at the offices of the Greene County Democrat in Eutaw, Alabama. Could you start by giving us your date of birth and saying where you were born, please.

**John Zippert:** I was born November 13, 1945, in New York City.

**de Jong:** Okay. And what kind of family did you grow up in? What was it like?

**Zippert:** I would say that I grew up in a middle class family in New York City. My father was a mechanical engineer and my mother was a housewife. She didn't work. I'm an only child. I went to public schools in New York City. Also, I went to the Bronx High School of Science, which is a school you have to take a test to get into. And I attended the City College of New York for, I guess, about three years until I went to Louisiana in 1965, and I ultimately did work out a program under which I graduated from the City College of New York.

**de Jong:** [014] Okay. Was your work with CORE part of the program that you worked out to graduate?

**Zippert:** It became a part of that. Yes.

**de Jong:** Right. I think I read something about that in the papers that are at . . .

**Zippert:** Well, actually, I was an honor student in history at the time that I left, and so I had about twenty hours left and they gave me some credits for some materials I sent them . . .

**de Jong:** Right.

**Zippert:** [018] . . . on my work in Louisiana. I took two courses at USL [University of Southern Louisiana] in history, two history electives which they accepted. And so, the combination of those things they worked out and gave me a degree, which was very nice of them since it says in their catalog that they would not. You couldn't graduate unless you took your last thirty or fifty credits right there. So somebody waved that and, you know, it was helpful to me, also, because for a period of time, it allowed me to keep a draft deferment status as a student which was beneficial. But I did ultimately finish, and my parents really wanted me to have a college degree. I suppose it's beneficial and it's been useful, and I'm glad I did it; although, at the time, it was somewhat bothersome to do that along with everything else I was doing.

**de Jong:** Were your parents college educated at all?

**Zippert:** Well, yes, and I think you know that my parents were Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany, and my father, of course, had an engineering degree. And he had actually come to this

country in 1929, which was probably not the most auspicious time to come as he really arrived shortly before the Great Depression began. And he was originally supposed to have some kind of engineering job in Flint, Michigan with General Motors. By the time he got there, he wound up working on the assembly line for a while, and then he went to Texas and did things that were not related to engineering. And then, he applied for citizenship in the United States. And he went back to Germany in 1931 because his father died, but he already had some papers saying that he was attempting to be a U.S. citizen so that he was able to leave again. And he did, and I guess he came back and started working in New Jersey in engineering. And ultimately, of course, after awhile, he worked in the defense industry as an engineer in the forties and, I guess, most of my lifetime. And most of the stuff he worked on, he never could talk about.

**de Jong:** [045] It's top secret?

**Zippert:** Well, I don't know if it was top secret, but it was . . . basically, he couldn't talk about the things he was engaged in. I mean he said he was working on things related to defense and weapons and so on and so. We never . . . I mean he never really explained to us in much detail what he was working on.

**de Jong:** All right.

**Zippert:** So I couldn't fully tell you. My mother had had . . . I guess in the German system, you wind up with the equivalent of two years of junior high school anyway . . . I mean junior college level beyond high school. So that was the level she attained.

**de Jong:** [053] Okay.

**Zippert:** Some members of the family had come to the United States and she was able to immigrate to this country based on their sponsorship. And my grandfather on my mother's side was a doctor.

**de Jong:** An actor?

**Zippert:** A doctor.

**de Jong:** Oh, doctor. Okay.

**Zippert:** A pediatrician. And so, he was sort of at the end of . . . he was in his sixties when he came to this country and really started over again and practiced medicine for another twenty, twenty-five years in New York City. He died at the age of eighty-six, and he pretty much practiced medicine until a couple of weeks before he died. So I would say I was brought up in a very middle class background and environment on the upper west side of New York City.

**de Jong:** Okay. With your family, did they talk about political issues or were they activists or did you gain any . . . ?

**Zippert:** [066] Well, I would say that my parents themselves . . . I would say they certainly were liberal to left in their philosophy and in their leaning. They were not in any sense active in anything.

**de Jong:** Okay.

**Zippert:** No, no, no political activities, no organizations of any kind, so to my recollection, they were not.

**de Jong:** But you gained kind of liberal ideas from them and those were the kinds of values you grew up with?

**Zippert:** Well, I guess so. You're not the first person who's asked me this, and I would say that was probably a part of it, but I think concern for other people in general was imparted to me. But my parents were not in any sense active in anything.

**de Jong:** Okay.

**Zippert:** Didn't participate in organized religious activities. They were not involved in any kind of civic or community activities beyond voting. They did vote.

**de Jong:** [079] And how did you become involved in CORE?

**Zippert:** Well, growing up in that period of time, I watched the sit-ins and other demonstrations in the South on television. And we had a Woolworth's store two blocks down the street from where I lived, and there were, at the time in the sixties, early sixties, there were sympathetic picket lines and demonstrations in front of Woolworth's in New York City to protest what they were doing in the South in terms of segregated lunch counters. And that was one of the earliest participation that I had personally, that I participated in a march and picketing at Woolworth's. At my high school, I was active in organized students to support the teachers when they went on strike. There was a strike in New York City in the early sixties of the AFT as a union, teacher's union, and I was involved with students that actively supported that. When I got to City College of New York, I became active in a number of student organizations, and that's where I really joined the CORE chapter at the City College of New York.

**de Jong:** Okay.

**Zippert:** [096] But I was active there in the student government. I was active there in a number of other student organizations at the time. I was a member of S.D.S., and fairly early on, there was a group there called the W.E.B. Dubois Society, which was kind of a talking about the issues of color, people of color issues, even then. So I was active with the CORE chapter in New York, and I participated in some of the demonstrations in '64. There were some demonstrations against the World's Fair in New York, and I was active. I actively participated in those. I really wanted to come to participate in the Mississippi Freedom Summer of '64, and my parents really dissuaded me and said that I was too young.

**de Jong:** [109] How old were you then?

**Zippert:** I guess I was eighteen. Because my birthday is in November, so . . . And I really had some reluctance. They say you have to, need to finish school. You shouldn't do this. It's very dangerous, et cetera. So I really deferred to them in '64. And then, of course, after that in '65, I was the president of the student government between September of '64 through September of '65. I was the president of the student government at the City College of New York. And we were very active then. City College actually had no tuition. You didn't have to pay tuition when I went. It was free. Tuition free.

**de Jong:** Free, wow.

**Zippert:** You had to pay a fee, a student fee, which was the first . . . it was like twenty-seven dollars. It was a real fee. And at that time, Nelson Rockefeller was the governor of New York and we really spent most of the fall of '64 and '65 picketing, demonstrating, working in state legislative campaigns on the issue of free tuition, maintaining free tuition. And we were very active. There are five colleges in the New York City area that are part of the city university.

**de Jong:** [126] Right. You mean they're run by the city?

**Zippert:** Yes. And there're more now, but there were five four-year colleges then: Queens College, Hunter College, Brooklyn College, City College, and I don't remember exactly. It was four or five. Anyway, we had pulled people together from all of those schools to work on that

issue and I was very much involved in that. And that was also the time of the whole free speech movement in California at Berkeley and raising issues of what students were doing. And then, of course, we did get word of the “Bloody Sunday” and the whole situation of the Civil Rights Movement—the beating of the people on the bridge in Selma in the initial march. And our student government received a telegram from Martin Luther King saying to send people to march in Selma after Lyndon Johnson sent troops and made it possible for the march to go forward. So I did go to Selma and I did participate, not in “Bloody Sunday” but in the successful march that took place about three or four weeks later. And I was in Selma pretty much that week of the march. Attended some of the . . . I was there for the first day, which was Sunday. I guess I went down on a bus with two or three other people who were involved in the student government at City College. And I believe this would have been March or very early April 1965. And I did march the first day out of Selma, and then they brought us back into Selma and then . . . because only three hundred people could march the whole distance. And then, on that Thursday, we rode on the truck. I remember riding on a truck down to Montgomery and we participated in the last day of the march and Dr. King . . . there were about twenty five thousand people there, and Dr. King addressed that group from the steps of the State Capitol in Montgomery. And then there had been a whole busload of people from City College who came for that last day, and I rode back on the bus to New York with them. So I had already been in Selma and I had pretty much resolved to either work with CORE or SNCC [158] or somebody during the summer of '65. So basically, some of the people in the New York CORE chapter, who I had worked with in various demonstrations, got me an application to participate as a summer volunteer in the summer of '65, and so I basically went for the summer of '65. I took another Greyhound bus and I went to a place called Waveland, Mississippi and there was a—and there still is today—a Methodist



Church facility there. At that time, I guess it was part of the CME church, and it was partially destroyed later by hurricane Camille, but it still is in Waveland today. I believe it's called the Gulf Side Assembly. I've been there two or three times. I've actually been there within the last year or two to a meeting recently. But I've been there several times since. But anyway, I went to Waveland, Mississippi. It must have been sixteenth, seventeenth of June 1965. And we went to a CORE training and there were about a hundred people there—volunteers for the summer and some of the long time CORE staff were also there participating in the training. And James Farmer came and spoke briefly on one of the days and there were different people there. And it was basically a training. I know you will ask a little about it, so I'll just go on. You ask about it in there. What I recall of that training—first of all, a big part of it was kind of the whole spirit of singing and kind of that whole aspect of the movement—the songs and getting people kind of psychologically and spiritually prepared. There was some training on nonviolence and how to cover your head and so on. Some of the more experienced CORE people were throwing chairs at people. I don't know if the name Spiver Gordon . . . he lives in this community, too now. He lives here in Greene County. Anyway, I always kid with Spiver and say, "Well, the first time I met you, you threw a chair at me in June of 1965 during the nonviolence training."

**de Jong:** [laughs]

**Zippert:** [188] They tried to make it realistic and they tried to prepare us in some ways for what we would experience in various places. There were about a hundred people there. CORE had three states. Spiver actually was in Florida at the time as the director, and ten people were assigned to him. And I don't know how that happened, but I think he picked his ten people

somehow—some way already before everything else happened. So then, the remaining people, two-thirds of the remaining people were going to be assigned to Louisiana and a third to South Carolina. And I remember we had to pull out of a hat. If you got an “L,” you went to Louisiana. If you got an “S,” you went to South Carolina. So I pulled an “L” obviously. It was three to one chance to do that. And then, all of the people that were going to Louisiana went to one room and we sat there and there was a [ring] . . . It’s the fax machine. There was a more detailed introduction to what CORE was doing in Louisiana. And then, somehow there was a process and they said, “You, you, you, and you—Bogalusa. You, you, you, and you—Shreveport.” So I got sent with three other people—three guys. So three of us were white. One was black. Although I’m told now they thought I was a light skinned . . . they didn’t know if I was black or white and they didn’t ask me.

**de Jong:**        [208] Oh, I see. [laughs]

**Zippert:**        So, subsequently, I was told by Ronnie Moore, who was the state director at that time—said, “Well, we kind of thought you were black or you were black enough to fit in with the people we were sending you to work with.” [laughs] And they picked the four of us and sent us. They said, “You will go to Opelousas, Louisiana, St. Landry Parish. And I will always say and I say this often when I talk about this—that’s an example where you really don’t control everything that happens to you in your life and meant that was entirely determined by fate. I had no real choice in any of that. It wasn’t a conscious choice by me, right. Somebody decided that and it really wasn’t decided . . . that was fate or perhaps God working in mysterious ways or whatever.

**de Jong:** Yes.

**Zippert:** I mean that. Sometimes you say you're always in control of everything you do in your life and here was probably what turned out to be one of the most important decisions affecting my life that was really determined by fate or chance or something that I had no control over. I'll go back for a second and say that at that training they gave . . . I guess maybe after that, they gave us some basic census information on the place we were going to, St. Landry Parish. And they said, "Really, three things we want you to do. We want you to go there and we want you to register as many people to vote as you can because the 1965 Voting Rights Act had just passed. So we want you to . . . if there are places that have not been tested and desegregated—public accommodations, restaurants, hotels, and other public places—we want you to go with local people and test those places and see that those places are following the law on public accommodations—the '64 law." And then, they said, "We want you to go and talk to the people and organize them around the things that they are concerned and interested in." So to do community organizing . . . and that was basically the gist . . . that and perhaps being nonviolent and carry out CORE's philosophy in the . . . They sent us. Now, the four of . . . one of the guys had a car. I didn't have a driver's license. And you must remember that I was coming as a summer volunteer to spend whatever it was—ten weeks, twelve weeks—in doing this and I didn't realize that that the only way you'd ever be able to get around was in a car.

**de Jong:** [laughs]

**Zippert:** [249] I'm coming out of a culture where you get on a subway or a bus and get where you want to go.

**de Jong:** Right.

**Zippert:** So we had one . . . and perhaps there was somebody who knew this and I didn't know this—but anyway, one of the guys who was from California, he had a car. I can't tell you today what kind of car it was, but it wasn't a brand new car. But he had a car. And they had another guy from the Bronx in New York City. He had already been in Louisiana for six weeks. So he had already been doing something with CORE for a while, so he was the experienced person. And then, they had a black guy who was from Orange, New Jersey, and me. And they sent us to Opelousas, Louisiana, June 21, 1965 . . . so thirty-three, almost thirty-three years ago to now. The other thing . . . about the only information . . . I guess, perhaps, they gave information to the guy who was more experienced. Anyway, in Opelousas at the time, the group we were going to work with and help was an NAACP chapter in Opelousas.

**de Jong:** Yes.

**Zippert:** [267] And so, we had the contact people for that. We had the contact . . . we were given the name of the priest—the Catholic priest at the black church in Opelousas . . . Holy Ghost Church, which is one of the largest black Catholic churches in the country it turned out. All of this I didn't know on June 21, 1965. So, we go. We more or less left Waveland, which is fairly close to New Orleans, and so within about three hours, we were in Opelousas. And we

went to talk to some of the people. Well, I guess the main NAACP people that we had to contact, they weren't there. They had gone to some NAACP meeting somewhere else, and the other people were very worried. They didn't know we were coming and they didn't have any place for us to stay, and they were apprehensive.

**de Jong:** So these were NAACP people but not the main leaders of the NAACP there?

**Zippert:** Yes, these were.

**de Jong:** Okay, okay.

**Zippert:** [283] So then, we went to see the . . . I don't know if that first day, we went to see the priest. Anyway, those people found us a place to stay, but they made it sort of clear that this was very temporary and this wasn't the final accommodation and don't count on this. Then we went. I guess maybe the next day, we went to see the priest at Holy Ghost Church. And this was a white priest and he proceeded to explain to us that the Holy Ghost fathers were a missionary order, and they were deeply concerned about Africa and so on and so forth. And this is why they were here in Opelousas and so on. But there really was no need or necessity for any CORE workers in this community. [cough] And that the people weren't seeking CORE people and didn't need CORE people and so on and so forth. I think by then, at some point shortly after that, the major NAACP people eventually showed up. So I think they had made a request like two or three months earlier, right, and they had absolutely no idea that we were coming, that there would be four of us. They didn't know anything about it. They were glad to see us, but

now we have to find you a place to stay. Well, I really don't know exactly, but anyway, they sent us to Eunice, Louisiana, which I don't know if you've looked at a map, but there's about twenty miles between . . . Opelousas is on kind of the western end, eastern end . . .

**de Jong:** [310] Yes.

**Zippert:** . . . and Eunice is on the western end of St. Landry Parish.

**de Jong:** Okay.

**Zippert:** So they sent us to Eunice, and they sent us to this man who had some kind of auto mechanic shop in Eunice. His name was Adam Rainey, and Mr. Rainey said, yes, we could stay in this . . . he had a garage where he worked and next to it, he had another little . . . it was like a one bedroom situation. Well, the four of us had to stay there and there was a bathroom. So he said we could stay there and we could work with the people. Changes were needed in Eunice and St. Landry Parish et cetera, et cetera, and we could stay there. So we wound up with a place to stay. So the initial couple of weeks, we worked in Eunice and we started finding people who wanted to register to vote. We started finding people who wanted to go and integrate some of the restaurants. And periodically, we went and attended the . . . the NAACP people in Opelousas met once a week on Tuesday or Wednesday, and we'd go into Opelousas to those meetings. And then, we met a lot of other people from surrounding communities. And so after a while, the guy with a car and I, we started kind of systematically visiting people in rural communities of St.

Landry parish. The people who were most receptive to talk to us were small farmers and people who had some degree of independence.

**de Jong:** Right.

**Zippert:** [336] There were some sharecroppers, who a lot of people . . . and even though some of those people would talk to us because even though they were working on shares . . . although they had somebody, some “bossman”—quote, unquote—somewhere who was kind of supervising them, basically, on a day to day basis, they had some degree of independence in deciding what they could do. They didn’t work in a plant somewhere. Or they didn’t work in some white person’s house so there really were a lot of people who worked in a domestic way or women or people who cut grass or people who were janitors. And I think we’re talking about, not everybody, but the bulk of black people in St. Landry Parish at that time were in those kind of jobs and occupations. And the people who were most receptive to talk to us were farmers and people who had some land of their own—some kind of independent destiny and judgment. And, of course, I found out several years later after doing some research that actually St. Landry Parish had the largest number of black farmers, independent black farmers of any parish in Louisiana. Again, I didn’t go there for that reason. But when we went there, that sort of became apparent empirically or out of the practice of working with people. So we began talking and working with farmers quite a bit and got to know many of them. In one, the Palmetto community, there were people who were actively involved in the lawsuit to integrate the schools of St. Landry Parish and they were all farming people, and we spent a lot of time talking with

them. And in differing communities, there were people talking about problems with the part of the government that deals with agriculture.

**de Jong:** [373] The Extension Service and the FHA.

**Zippert:** And even more so in this case, the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service, ASCS. And so, we actually started working. We started that summer working with people to participate in the ASCS election that was to take place that fall in . . . it took place everywhere. But this was an election of people to community committees and different communities, and then from those community committees, there was an indirect election of the county committee. And this committee controlled the government price support on cotton and other benefits to farmers. Also in talking to farmers, there was a discussion about the price of sweet potatoes and the difficulty people had in getting a fair price in the market for their sweet potatoes and their concerns about those issues. So I would say by the end of the summer, we had touched base with maybe fifteen agricultural communities. St. Landry Parish is a big place geographically.

**de Jong:** Yes.

**Zippert:** [393] And we had touched base with a lot of different people in that regard. We had gone with people to integrate half a dozen different restaurants, and even like in Eunice, they had a Dairy Queen type place. These kind of places, they had a separate window or a back door



type window for black people. So I remember going in Eunice to the front door of this Dairy Queen type. It wasn't a Dairy Queen, but it was that . . . it wasn't a national chain place.

**de Jong:** Right.

**Zippert:** It was a place like that.

**de Jong:** Okay.

**Zippert:** Locally owned. And we went with some young people, of course, to the front. We went to the front and I remember standing there, and the man came out of the . . . "Well, what do you want? What do you want?" And we said, "Well, we want service. We want to get an ice cream." "Well, what do you want?" And then he reached under the counter and pulled out a pistol and said, "How much do you want this ice cream?" And so we stepped back from that and we reported that. And we had a picket line for a while around the place and we did . . . after about two weeks, we wouldn't let anybody . . . I mean his business dwindled to nothing. And anyway, we won that fight. I don't believe we beat that guy. I think he turned the business over to one of his relatives and his relative sort of decided to obey the law and stop dealing through the back door. In other places, we encountered less difficulty and in one or two places, they were not anxious to serve us. But they eventually served us because I think they realized that it was going to cause them too much of a problem if they didn't. So we did that. Some of that we did with the NAACP people in Opelousas. It was a long time ago. I don't remember exactly, but that was some of what happened. And I guess we began registering people to vote.

We began this whole effort to get people . . . you had to have a petition with ten other farmers' names or something to get on the ballot for this ASCS . . .

**de Jong:** [437] Okay.

**Zippert:** And we tried to get a lot of people involved in that because we thought this was a good . . . get people involved in this, maybe they'd want to register to vote overall. And there was kind of . . . St. Landry Parish . . . there was a sheriff in St. Landry Parish. His name was Cat Doucette. I don't know what his real name was. Maybe, that was his real name. Anyway, he had registered a certain number of black people in the fifties who voted for him. So he had this block of people that he had registered to keep him in office and vote for him, and so there was some confusion about whether you could register to vote in St. Landry Parish or you couldn't. So we did start registering people to vote and they were . . . I mean we really didn't encounter . . . and this was after the Voting Rights Act. So we really, by and large, did not encounter a lot of opposition. I eventually went to some other places in Louisiana where even after the '65 Voting Rights Act . . . in St. Francisville, Louisiana . . . in Tallulah, Louisiana . . . I was arrested in both of those places. This is subsequent to this when CORE sent me there to participate in some larger efforts to register people where we were still arrested for registering people to vote which was 1965, early 1966. But in St. Landry Parish, we never did encounter that kind of opposition. They did allow people to register, and subsequently, I registered two thousand people in Opelousas not that summer, but I'll go into that later. So the summer passed pretty quickly and we had gotten a lot of things started. We had met a lot of people and made a lot of friends. And a lot of people said this . . . because the summer was coming to an end and some of our own

volunteers were going to be gone . . . and a number of people expressed to me that this was really their problem with CORE and the Civil Rights Movement—that people came; they never stayed very long. People got inspired and interested and motivated to do things, but then the CORE people would go on somewhere else. So people really . . . that was some of their uneasiness in participating.

**de Jong:** [487] Right.

**Zippert:** So that had been expressed to me. I guess we went to Plaquemine, which is across the river from Baton Rouge. And we had a meeting there. It was toward the end of August. It was like a final meeting of the summer people and some kind of an evaluation, and most people were going to be going home from there including . . . I had packed up my things and went to Plaquemine. Well, different groups made different reports. And I should say to you that absolutely no one higher up in CORE came to Opelousas that summer. No one. Okay, there was some kind of a thing where we called into the state office once a week.

**de Jong:** Right.

**Zippert:** [511] And then, when things were more problematical more often . . . But there were places where considerably more was going on than . . . in a sense. There were more difficulties and more problems in other places, so we were quietly doing the things that they asked us to do in Opelousas. And at this final session, we . . . I guess I don't know. I don't even remember if all four of us were there. I know I was there, and I think some of the people had

already gone home of the four volunteers. And there were maybe fifty people there at this meeting, and some of the staff people and different people reported on what they were doing. And so, I did report fairly extensively on what I was doing.

**[End Tape 1517, Side A. Begin Tape 1517, Side B.]**

**de Jong:** We're talking about—it was coming up to the end of the summer and you were attending that meeting.

**Zippert:** [004] So I went to this evaluation meeting and the different people sort of gave a report on what they were doing, and I think there were at least two of us from St. Landry Parish. Anyway, we gave our report and we talked a lot about the farmers and the ASCS election preparations and interests of people and being organized on these farming issues, and that was really in the category of—in addition to voter registration and testing public accommodations—this whole area of organizing people around the things they were concerned about. And I think, hearing the other reports that we had actually done a really good job in that area, perhaps, more than some other people had gotten to. They might have been in more difficult situations to get people registered or whatever. At some point in this two or three day meeting, Ronnie Moore, who was the state director of CORE in Louisiana at the time, came to me and said, “Well, you know, I thought you gave a really good report and we're interested in seeing if you want to go back to Opelousas. We can put you on the staff and send you back to Opelousas and you can continue working. We would like you to do that.” Well, I was not really . . . I mean that was a surprise to me in a way. And also, it was sort of in line with what the people were saying, that

they wanted to continue working on this and people to come back and so on. So I called home and said that they had asked me to stay and we were doing some important things with people, and it was a good idea for me to stay at least until Christmas, the end of the year. And that's what I was thinking of doing. They didn't think that was such a good idea, but if that's what I wanted to do, what could they do? And I had been writing home and calling home at some points, so I honestly don't know what they thought but they didn't have. . . So they said, "I guess we got to let him decide what he wants to do." So then, I talked with Ronnie Moore again. He said, "Well, look, we're going to send you back there. We'll get you a bus ticket." So I said, "Where am I going to stay? What am I going to do" because we had left Eunice and all this. He said, "Well, talk to some of the people who told you they wanted you to come back. Work something out with them." So I called a few people from Plaquemine and said the CORE people had asked me to come back and would they be able to make some arrangements. And they said, they would work on it. [041] So anyway, I got back to Opelousas and I was met actually by half a dozen people, and they said, "Well, we're so glad you came back and we really want . . . this will give us a chance to really do some of the things we've been talking about" and so on. I said, "Well then, so where am I going to stay now?" They said, "Well, it will be more convenient for everybody if we got a place for you to stay in Opelousas." And by then, actually, there was a—and I didn't mention this—demonstration going on in Opelousas, a picket line at a supermarket to get black people hired as cashiers. So that was ongoing. So some of the NAACP people, they got me a place to stay with a family in Opelousas, the Courville family. And those people took me in and they treated me like a member of the family from that point on. And, at that point, I was then staying in Opelousas. And I was actually staying about four or five blocks from attorney Marion Overton White's office. He was the lawyer and he wasn't the president of the

NAACP people, but he was one of the main movers in the St. Landry NAACP at that time. And he said, "Well you can . . . I have an extra little room here in my office. You can work out of my office and have an office. And I want you to help with this demonstration." I can't even remember what it was. It was some local . . .

**de Jong:**        [056] Right.

**Zippert:**        It wasn't a chain supermarket, but some supermarket there in Opelousas. So there I was in Opelousas. No transportation. No car. No driver's license [laughs] and contacts with people throughout St. . . . Anyway, basically, what I had to do is if people were having a meeting in Palmetto or a meeting in Sunset or a meeting in whatever community, they had to make arrangements to come and get me and bring me to the meeting and bring me back. Well, actually, that was very effective because it meant people really wanted me to participate in things so they had to provide some of the transportation to get me around. And we went back to working on the ASCS elections. We began to have more discussion about the whole problems of sweet potatoes. There were some students then that integrated school in Palmetto, Louisiana. They were having trouble with the mathematics, Algebra, this and that. I used to go. Two nights a week, they used to pick me up and I would go and do tutoring with them to help them get through that first year in integrated school in Palmetto. I remember doing that. And the people were well organized. That was like a twenty-mile trip each way, so they had to come and get me and do that. And I was actively involved in a number of struggles. We did win, ultimately. After two or three months of picketing and boycotting that store, they finally decided to hire a cashier. They didn't come to the NAACP. They went to the priest at the church and got him to

recommend a person. But it was a victory because they hired a black person to be a cashier. Now, this is 1965. Now, that was not so long ago, right? And you think here was a battle. I often think back on this. Here was a battle. The whole community organized to try to get kind of the power structure to say, "We will employ black people in a position handling money," which was the issue there. And when you reflect on what this whole struggle was all about and what everybody takes for granted today as opposed to what a struggle it was to get certain things the first time. So we did win that battle and we continued to. I went to a few more public accommodations there in St. . . . but I always had some problems with that because we'd go there but were people going to actually continue to go there? [102] But it was probably good to go and open the door and eventually, over time, those places became open. But then I started concentrating on two things after that. One was registering people to vote in Opelousas because I could walk from one end of Opelousas to the other, which I did regularly. I had a little map and I just went street to street. So, systematically, over the next year, I registered several thousand people in Opelousas just by going house-to-house and asking people. When I found that they weren't registered, I'd make some arrangements for somebody to pick them up to get them registered. Or if they were really reluctant, I had a record of all of that so I could go back and get . . . Ultimately, we got most of those people. And in the course of that, you would talk to people about what was going on and what people were concerned about, so that led to other concerns and other issues as well. But the other group of people that I worked with pretty consistently were farmers in different communities. We would schedule meetings of farmers and there was a concern about the market for sweet potatoes and getting a better price for sweet potatoes. And most people were getting somewhere between fifty cents and a dollar for a fifty pound crate of sweet potatoes, which seemed awfully low to me.

**de Jong:** [111] Yes.

**Zippert:** And so we began to explore what we could do to get a better price for sweet potatoes. And we actually spent about a year meeting and bringing people. There were farmers in one end of St. Landry Parish who didn't know the farmers in another end. So part of it was then figuring out a way to bring those people together. And I worked on that pretty much the second half of '65 and into '66, and I didn't know what a cooperative was either. So I was getting information and reading and learning and trying to figure out what a cooperative was. Because the people didn't say, "We want a cooperative." They said, "We want some kind of organization that we would set up to market our own sweet potatoes." Well, after a good bit of study, it seemed like the cooperative way was the best way to do that. So I sent for information, and I was learning about cooperatives and how cooperatives worked and all of that. I didn't say in my background . . . I had really little agricultural background. However, I did spend several summers when I was between the time eight, nine, ten, eleven. Instead of going to a summer camp or something, my parents sent me to a chicken farm in New Jersey. I enjoyed the farm, really. It was outside and they had eggs. And they had two or three kids from New York who stayed with them. And we learned how to collect the eggs and candle the eggs. I don't know if you know what . . . you lift up the egg in a dark room in the light to see if there's any blood in the egg or anything, any impurity.

**de Jong:** Oh, okay.



**Zippert:** [136] And they also, at that same time, you would be sizing the egg. Was it a medium, large, or extra large? After awhile, you could pretty much tell except in a borderline case, and they had a little scale there. So I enjoyed the farm in New Jersey and then I enjoyed the farms and the farmers and the people I was working with in Louisiana.

**de Jong:** Right.

**Zippert:** And over time, we put together a group, and I was not rushing to have a cooperative, not like we got to organize this tomorrow morning. I said, "Well, we'll take our time and we'll really explore this and learn what it's about and do it right" which is kind of the best way to organize things, I think. Sometimes, since then, I've been put in situations where people wanted things to happen faster than they really would happen. I was a field secretary for CORE. I was supposed to get twenty-five dollars a week. I rarely got it. They rarely sent it. I guess they didn't have it most of the time. I had some savings of my own because I had worked when I was in college and this and that. My parents sent me a little bit of money. So I managed to stay as a volunteer at the end of that. At the end of year, I just said, "Well, I'll stay another six months." And for the first couple of years, I sort of went on that basis. Well, now we're looking at thirty-three years, so it's been a long summer.

**de Jong:** Are you . . .[laughs]

**Zippert:** [158] And I was a volunteer for pretty much until August of '67. I actually got my first job then. So I continued to be in touch with CORE throughout that whole period.

Along the way, we decided to organize the Grand Marie Sweet Potato Marketing Cooperative. That came out of all of these meetings and lots of discussions with farmers, and we came to that idea. And then, we went through endless negotiations with the Farmer's Home Administration for money to help them buy a facility. Ultimately, that involved getting people in Washington D.C. involved and writing. We were writing letters every couple of weeks. And, finally, we did get some help in buying a facility in Sunset, Louisiana and organizing the cooperative. And we went through a lot of difficulties in getting the right manager and getting people to understand really what a cooperative was about. And we had a number of people who bought potatoes from the cooperative in distant places and didn't pay, and we had to deal with those kinds of problems. So there were lots of problems connected with that. Somewhere along the way in this whole process in '66, I was having a meeting in Opelousas. Well, I had heard from time to time that there was a Catholic priest in Lafayette that had some kind of cooperative deal going. I'd hear that. Now, if you don't have a car, Opelousas to Lafayette seemed like a long way off. Anyway, through talking to some people in Washington, one day they said, "Well, we're going to have this Catholic priest, black Catholic priest Father McKnight since you're going to have this meeting." I had been calling them about some meeting we were going to. "We're going to send him to the meeting." So here comes Father McKnight with two of his assistants, with two or three of them including my wife. Now, my wife . . . anyway, Carol came to this meeting . . . her brother, Charles Prejean, and I think another person that worked closely with Father McKnight whose name was Alfred McZeal. Anyway, they came to the meeting. Well, it was a little disturbing to me because they came to the meeting and of course they had all the answers. And I had been working here for some time to suggest that all of the answers were in the group, and we had to learn these things together.

**de Jong:** [194] Oh, okay.

**Zippert:** Well, they had all the answers. You could do this and do that overnight. Things were going to happen this way and that way. And that troubled me a little, but I said, “Well, they had some resources, whatever.” And at that point, the Southern Consumers Cooperative and the Southern Consumers Education Foundation were already operating some Head Start programs, so they were experienced in the ways of federal funds and anti-poverty work and et cetera, et cetera. So anyway, they were a resource that was supposed to help, and to some extent, they helped. And then, I began working more closely with them. And they also had transportation and ways to get me around, which was good. So I traveled around with them quite a bit, and they would come to meetings. And I don’t know if we got some money through the poverty program. It might have been later. Maybe at the beginning, we didn’t, but at some point, we got some money to heighten the organizing effort that came through them . . . some federal monies from OEO.

**de Jong:** [211] Okay.

**Zippert:** And also, there was this whole . . . Well, they tried to put together a CAP agency in the area called Acadiana Neuf, which was the nine parishes in that area. And Southern Consumers was the group that was operating the Head Start program, so they had the Head Start program. Well, all of this was combined under the poverty program then, and you had to have a board that was, in part, representative of the people. But then, they said, “Well, all these local politicians had to be part.” And there were a lot of . . . I can remember meeting with four and

five hundred people arguing over how this was going to work and how this was going to be and how poor people were going to be protected in this. And there were demonstrations. It was a good bit of activity around how this poverty program was going to go and what role Southern Consumers was going to have in it and what role the political structure was going to have . . .

**de Jong:** Yes.

**Zippert:** [226] . . . and what benefits poor people were going to get. More and more as time went on, the control of the program went to the hands of local politicians and out of the hands of poor people. And I think we did have a lot of spontaneous interest and support in the beginning, but as it became clearer and clearer that this really wasn't going to be a war on poverty or really to help poor people, it was not going to help poor people in the way it was supposed to, people lost interest in it. And it dwindled in support and it became another program bureaucracy. But at the beginning, there was a lot of hope in the minds of people and in the community and poor people that this was a program that was really going to be for them that they could rally around and make some of the decisions but it didn't turn out that way. And, I don't know when—I guess in '66 or maybe in the beginning of '67—some of the people that I was working on with the cooperative and some of the people that I had been working with in the NAACP group there in Opelousas, they said, "Well, you need to get a car. We need to get you a car. We're tired of having to drive you or pick you up and drive you." So anyway, we went on this . . . And I was sort of agreeable to that and riding around with the Southern Consumers people, I had learned how to drive, and so I was able to get a driver's license by then. So somehow, between people that I wrote to in New York and people I knew and people in St.

Landry Parish, we raised about fifteen hundred dollars. And that was eighteen hundred dollars. That was sufficient to buy an Opal Cadet, which was like a Geo Metro or something. It was the smallest and the most economical . . .

**de Jong:** Little car.

**Zippert:** [257] They no longer sell that car in the United States, but we bought it because it was the cheapest one. There was some talk. Should we get a used car? Should we get a new car? And most people said, “Well, let’s get enough money to get a new car because at least it won’t break down all the time.” So between some people I knew, I was able to raise some money from them to . . . it was about half and half. We got this car. So then, I was really able to get around and move around. And I did spend more time in Lafayette and more time working with Southern Consumers people and with my future wife and so on and so forth and working with all of them. And that also gave me a chance to go to USL and take those two courses. The sweet potato cooperative was up and running then—operating. And in talking with Father McKnight—I guess this would’ve been in ’66 and ’67—he was already trying to convene some meetings to bring together people in several states that were organizing cooperatives in the South. And I can remember going to a meeting in mid 1966 in Mississippi near Jackson, Mississippi. Gee, I can’t think of the name of this place now, but it’ll come to me [Mound Beulah, Edwards, Mississippi]. Anyway, we went to a meeting there and we had about twenty people there from different cooperative and credit union groups from Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Tennessee. And we talked about trying to pull those groups together. We talked about writing a proposal to Ford Foundation and other places to support that work, and I began

working with some of those efforts more closely with Father McKnight and helped to write the proposal. And that proposal got funded in some point in 1967 for something called the Southern Cooperative Development Program through Father McKnight. Anyway, so in August of '67, I became an employee. That was the first job I had.

**de Jong:** [297] Okay.

**Zippert:** In Louisiana. So at that point, my volunteer service with CORE ended, and I started working with the Southern Cooperative Development Program. And those efforts also led to some subsequent meetings in 1967, one of which was in Atlanta, which led to the formation of the Federation of Southern Cooperatives, which I still work for today.

**de Jong:** Okay. And did they do the same kinds of things that you were doing in St. Landry Parish helping small farmers and . . . ?

**Zippert:** [305] Yes, we do a lot of work with farmers and land retention and cooperative and credit union organizing and that kind of work. At some point in this process . . . This is a period where the Vietnam War was escalating.

**de Jong:** Right.

**Zippert:** At some point in this process, I started getting notices from my draft board. And they then declared that my student deferment was at an end. On one occasion, I went to New

York to meet with the draft board, and Lincoln Lynch, who was then the associate national director of CORE, came with me to the draft board. And we talked with the draft board about my work in Louisiana and its significance and importance with CORE and that I was a volunteer and that in reality, this was my service to the country. This was a New York draft board. Had it been a Louisiana draft board, it wouldn't even have been. . .

**de Jong:** [cough] Excuse me.

**Zippert:** . . . any discussion. But the draft board was receptive and Lincoln Lynch wrote several letters to them. Some time after that, the draft board was destroyed by a Vietnam War related protest, and I never heard from the draft board again. So I don't know whether my records disappeared or . . . I don't really know fully what happened, but at least, in some ways, between the student deferment and some kind of willingness to accept the statements from CORE, that this was worth my service. I was never called to serve. Had I been called, I probably would not have gone to serve. I probably would have gone to jail. So they didn't call, so I didn't go, and I didn't have to go. Since everybody has to account for what they did in that regard, that's my accounting for that period of my life. Now, I don't know what else you want to ask about, and I don't know if you know about this famous document.

**De Jong:** [244] Oh yes, the . . .

**Zippert:** I don't know if we need to talk about that.

**de Jong:**        Yes, please do because I vaguely know but I'm not . . . Is this where they tried to brand you all communists and stuff? This is the Joint Legislative Committee on Un-American Activities State of Louisiana report on aspects of the poverty program in South Louisiana.

**Zippert:**        Well, we're talking about things that happened thirty years ago. Well, at some point in the process . . . well, actually, I was in Alabama. I was over here in Alabama with the Southwest Alabama Farmers Coop, SWAFCA. At that point in '67 after I had started working with the Southern Cooperative Development Program, I would go and spend time and visit with different cooperatives in the different states we were working. So I called back to the office, and they said, "Well, they're screening headlines in the paper that you're a communist, and that you were trying to take over the poverty program in South Louisiana and you are the primary communist in South Louisiana" et cetera, et cetera. Anyway, I came back to Lafayette, and they had banner headlines and so on and so forth that communists and civil rights people were taking over the poverty program and this Louisiana Un-American Activities Committee, which was kind of similar to the Sovereignty Commission in Mississippi and they had similar committees in all these states, was set up to challenge and fight the Civil Rights Movement. They subpoenaed me to this committee, and I never went. But if you go through here, there are copies of checks and things that were checks that I received from CORE for the Grand Marie and reimbursements to CORE from Grand Marie. And they have all this information and copies of all these checks that they got from the bank. And they interviewed various people about the Acadiana Neuf and the whole struggle. And of course, they also had things like I would go around debating against the war in Vietnam and that was considered among my Un-American . . .



**de Jong:** Activities.

**Zippert:** [390] . . . activities and so on. So pretty much from the point of this report on, I realized that every check that I would write, every credit card that I would ever use, any document, anything that I would ever do might likely show up again somewhere in some state report or congressional report or whatever. We have periodically had . . . the Federation of Southern Cooperatives went through a major investigation. In 1979, we had federal funds and they were saying we were using federal funds for political purposes. [pause in tape] So this report while it was kind of funny and there were newspaper stories for weeks in Louisiana, but basically, this was an effort to suggest that anybody who really believed in what CORE stood for in terms of ending racial segregation and discrimination and trying to help people end various kinds of economic exploitation and poor farmers to get a fair price for their sweet potatoes, that all of those activities were somehow considered to be Communist Activities. And if it wasn't so serious and . . . it was difficult for me to understand as a twenty-two year old person that the state of Louisiana was writing books and spending money investigating me. And they sent a guy maybe eight, ten months before this report came out. All of the sudden, one day in Opelousas, this guy appears on my doorstep and says he was sent by CORE to help me. And I asked him who he was and who sent him, and he said some things and I checked and found out that he hadn't been sent by CORE. And so it became obvious to me after awhile that this guy was sent by somebody to observe what I was doing.

**de Jong:** Yes.

**Zippert:** And one of the interesting things . . . Well, this guy was pretty lazy. So I'd get up at seven, eight o'clock in the morning and start walking from one end of Opelousas to the other or whatever, registering people to vote. I'd maybe already have two or three meetings with people when this guy would show up and kind of check in. And I don't think he was real serious. I guess he was getting paid to be an observer or whatever. He came to a few meetings and when they had the famous . . . when they actually had the famous two or three day hearing in Lafayette, they trotted this guy out as their grand informer and he gave his little statement about my dangerous activities. But he really didn't work very closely with me and he didn't do very much. But I guess he did enough to do what they wanted him to do and filed whatever report he filed. But as an informer, he wasn't real effective.

**de Jong:** [laughs]

**Zippert:** [452] But he was paid to do this as it turned out and he did his thing. His name is in here. I've forgotten his name even now.

**de Jong:** Yes.

**Zippert:** It showed the lengths to which the state would go to try to stop poor people from really working in their own interest. And it caused Southern Consumers Education Foundation to lose control of a number of the Head Start programs that they had because all of that got tangled up together. I certainly feel badly for them and some people lost their job as a result. Although to some extent, the program continued but under the direction of other people. So this

was not really a good thing to happen, but it didn't succeed in doing many of the things that the State of Louisiana had in mind. And the lawyers that . . . I was advised by lawyers not to respond to the subpoena because they said this committee was acting unlawfully and that it was a national House Un-American Activities Committee.

**de Jong:** Yes.

**Zippert:** [476] So their argument was that the Congress of the United States had pre-empted this area of investigating communism and that the state of Louisiana had no business doing so and that I did not have to abide. They filed some things challenging the subpoena to me, so I never did testify in front of this group. And then, of course, they published this report, which two-thirds of this report is on me.

**de Jong:** Gosh.

**Zippert:** And I'm all of twenty-two years old and in retrospect, it was part of the times . . .

**de Jong:** Yes.

**Zippert:** . . . and what was going on. And I didn't take it very seriously because I knew that I wasn't a communist and I knew what I was doing was to try to change conditions for people in Louisiana. But it wasn't part of any foreign inspired conspiracy of any kind. Of course, we're now in the position where we spend our time meeting and negotiating trade deals

with “communist countries”—quote, unquote. And, of course, being opposed to the war in Vietnam while it was going on initially took some courage but after awhile, most of the people in this country were opposed to the war in Vietnam.

**de Jong:** Yes.

**Zippert:** [510] But at the point that this went on, that was perhaps by some considered to be a treasonous or U.S. anti-government position or whatever. So to sit here now thirty years later, it’s even hard to remember all the details and what was really involved; although, periodically in my life, I’ve either directly or organizations I’m a part of have been subjected to these kinds of examinations that were politically motivated attacks. And we’re even experiencing some of those problems right now in Greene County, Alabama concerning voting and absentee voting.

**de Jong:** What’s going on?

**Zippert:** We have some people who have been indicted for absentee ballot fraud and so on.

**de Jong:** Oh.

**Zippert:** [533] Most of which, I honestly feel, is just an effort to stop people from actively politically organizing and helping their neighbors to vote, and it’s very sad. We’ve actually had this now . . . we had it in the mid-eighties and now we have it in the nineties. The FBI went to

visit everybody who voted in the 1994 election. I can give you a fact sheet with some detail on that. So we're continuing to fight these battles.

**de Jong:**        Yes.

**Zippert:**        And I haven't checked on my own FBI file. I suppose I should. But I'm sure it's pretty extensive. But you can't live your life worrying. You have to work on the things that are important to you and do those things, and it's unfortunate that the FBI is going around intimidating people and trying . . .

**[End Tape 1517, Side B. Begin Tape 1518, Side A.]**

**de Jong:**        Okay, you were talking about the FBI.

**Zippert:**        I just said that the FBI used to do some things that intimidate people and prevent people from using their democratic rights. And this Un-American Activities Committee and Federation experienced this. Nineteen seventy-nine to eighty-one, we had a massive investigation of every check we had written for five years and at the end of that, they said they couldn't find any prosecutable offenses. They couldn't find anything we had really done wrong. And then in 1985, we had this Greene County and Perry County issue of absentee ballot fraud was raised then and over two-hundred charges were brought and in the end, nobody . . . well, Spiver Gordon was convicted on four charges and on appeal, those were overturned. And now, we face this again. We have had two people convicted. They each face thirty-three months in

jail, and we have six other people, including Spiver again, who have been indicted. But we're hoping that we can raise enough of a movement and a concern around that to prevent them from being convicted and try to get the convictions of the people who've already been convicted reversed on appeal. And basically, these people help their neighbors to vote. In the case of the two people who were convicted, they helped over two hundred people to vote absentee in the December '94 election. The FBI went and questioned every single one of those people, and in the end, they came up with seven people who there's some questionable circumstance around their ballot. And two or three of those people are either drug dealers or they have some drug connection. Two of the people are kind of alcoholics. It's really hard to . . . if there's a problem . . . all of the people they have brought forward, there's some problems with them and their testimony. And in the end, what these people are being convicted of was genuinely trying to help their neighbors to vote.

**de Jong:** Yes.

**Zippert:** But the FBI and the government had categorized it another way. We are trying to get Attorney General Janet Reno and others to take a closer look at what their agents and supporters here in Alabama are doing including the FBI. So this kind of comes in cycles, and so whenever I write a check, whenever I use a credit card, whenever I make a statement of any kind, I fully expect that I'll see it again in some hearing or some other place, and I learned that lesson out of this period and this experience. So I don't know what other questions we've got here.

**de Jong:** [036] Just a few. I need to go back over some things. Could you tell me . . . you've worked for the Federation of Southern Cooperatives since 1967. Is that right?

**Zippert:** Well, I officially worked for the Southern Cooperative Development program . . .

**de Jong:** Oh, okay.

**Zippert:** . . . from '67 to '70.

**de Jong:** All right.

**Zippert:** And since January 1 of '70, I've worked for the Federation officially. Now, in that three-year period, much of what we were doing was organizing the Federation and getting the Federation started. So in some sense, I worked for the Federation the whole time, but officially, probably since at least January 1, 1970.

**de Jong:** Okay.

**Zippert:** [044] And I moved from Louisiana in September of 1971.

**de Jong:** And you came here?

**Zippert:** Well, we came to where the Federation's training center is in Epes, Alabama.

**de Jong:**        Oh, okay.

**Zippert:**        And we lived in a trailer, in a mobile home. We had about ten families that we moved to the land in Epes.

**de Jong:**        Oh, ten families from Louisiana or from all over?

**Zippert:**        All over.

**de Jong:**        Okay.

**Zippert:**        Some came from Atlanta. Some came from Mississippi. We came from Louisiana. Actually, three of the families . . . well, two and one single person . . . two families came from Louisiana to Epes.

**de Jong:**        Okay.

**Zippert:**        [051] But we drew in people from all over to have them in a centralized place, and we actually participated in building the center in the beginning and then to be the staff of it and develop it and have it go. So we came in September of '71 and in August of '76, my wife and I moved to Greene County to Eutaw, Alabama where we are now, and we've been living here ever since. But I continue to work. I worked for the Federation throughout in 1985, '84 and '85. We were part of an effort, which challenged the absentee owners of the weekly newspaper



in this county, the Greene County Democrat. We raised some questions with them as to what they were doing and how they were doing it. In the course of that, we said to them, we'd like to buy the newspaper the next time they sold it. And they said, "Aw, we're never going to sell it . . . over our dead body. You can't get it." About six months later, they called and said, "Are you still interested in buying it? It's for sale." So we got some information and my wife and I put together a group of people and we challenged them. We said, "Well, if you raise twenty thousand dollars, we'll mortgage our house and put up the rest and buy the newspaper." And we kind of did that, in part thinking nobody would do that, and people raised about fifteen thousand dollars. So we got into the newspaper business on a dare, and we're still here publishing the Greene County Democrat. We have four or five employees. One of them is the lady who walked in here.

**de Jong:** All right.

**Zippert:** [073] I've been involved in this stuff for a long time and continuing in the battle and continuing to do these kind of things.

**de Jong:** Yes.

**Zippert:** So ask me some other questions.

**de Jong:** Yes. Going back to setting up the co-op and the people in Louisiana, did you get any sense of anything they had been doing before you got there in terms of organizing or in the struggle?

**Zippert:** Well, and I know you had that in your stuff from the beginning and I did talk to some people along the way who said there had been people who had come through before talking about some kind of cooperative activity. But there was no . . . they didn't have old leaflets or old paper. Nobody had any kind of real information.

**de Jong:** It was just a vague memory that something like that had been going on before?

**Zippert:** [083] Yes.

**de Jong:** Do you think the idea for the co-op grew out of that memory at all or was it just something that they had . . . ?

**Zippert:** Well, I think some of the people had that memory. I honestly don't feel it was a big factor . . .

**de Jong:** Right.

**Zippert:** . . . in what we did. And I think what we did was more influenced by the Civil Rights Movement in spirit of the sixties and so on. Now had I been more conscious and aware,

perhaps I would've done more work and more research and tried to figure out some more about this. I'd hear it from time to time from a few of the people, not from everybody. And it wasn't altogether clear to me whether anything had really been set up or how it had worked. There wasn't enough concrete information to really hang onto. And also, sometimes, quite honestly, that whole thing of somebody has been here before talking about this was kind of used as a way to discourage people.

**de Jong:** Oh.

**Zippert:** [096] So something had happened before and these kind of efforts don't work.

**de Jong:** Oh, I see.

**Zippert:** And maybe we shouldn't do this because somebody tried to set up something before. So in some ways thinking back on it, when that was raised, it was often raised in a way that might have slowed down what we were trying to do.

**de Jong:** Right, and then they could've lied.

**Zippert:** So therefore, I said, "Well, there's only so much I can do in pursuing whatever this was." In other words, it was not presented in a very positive way as something that we really needed to know a whole lot about. And people didn't have . . . I asked people, "Do you have copies of anything? Was there anything written down about this or whatever?" And

nobody produced anything. So I really didn't have anything much to go on, and so I didn't pursue it and I didn't follow it up. Somewhere along the way, I talked to Clyde Johnson.

**de Jong:** Yes.

**Zippert:** [108] And he told me that he had been to St. Landry Parish . . .

**de Jong:** Yes.

**Zippert:** . . . and all of that, which was interesting to me. But that was at a point . . . and I was already in Alabama. I was already with the Federation in Alabama at the point that I met him, which I think was at the fiftieth anniversary of the Southern Tenant Farmers . . .

**de Jong:** Union.

**Zippert:** . . . Union in Memphis. I think that's where it was. Or maybe it was the forty-ninth or the forty-eighth. It was somewhere. That's where I met him and he mentioned that to me. I talked with him for maybe fifteen minutes. After I'd heard that, I said, "Well, maybe I should've paid more attention to this. Maybe I should've checked this out." But when you're actually in the midst of these things and organizing these things, that's not so easy to do.

**de Jong:** Right.

**Zippert:** So that's my excuse.

**de Jong:** He didn't say anything else to you about it? He just said he was there?

**Zippert:** [121] He just said he was there, and he had done some organizing there. It was kind of in a situation where there were lots of other people, so you really couldn't pursue it in depth. I guess I thought about doing that, but I never really got to do that.

**de Jong:** Right. Are you able to describe or explain . . . I have a vague idea of how the . . . Oh, what was the problem of selling the sweet potatoes? Who were they selling them to and who was controlling the . . . ?

**Zippert:** There were maybe ten existing . . . After you grow the sweet potatoes, then you harvest them so they have dirt on them. You put them in a wooden crate, right.

**de Jong:** Okay.

**Zippert:** So then in order for those sweet potatoes to be marketable, one of two things had to happen. Either immediately they were washed, sorted out. In the field, they would be graded. They were field graded. You tried to separate the number one potatoes from the twos from everything else because the number one potatoes were the ones that were going to a fresh market type market, and the others were more so going to a processing market.

**de Jong:** [136] Okay.

**Zippert:** So the farmer . . . at that point, they were either washed right then and repackaged after they were washed and they'd come on a grading belt where you'd really pick out the number ones and put them in the box and all of that or they were stacked in a shed and allowed to cure. In other words, they would sit there for several months and the sugar in the potatoes . . . they would lose some of their moisture which would concentrate the sweetness of the potato. And then you'd have a sugar-cured sweet potato, which you could sell. That's why you can buy sweet potatoes year round. And you had to have a facility to stack those potatoes in and control the temperature some in order for that to take place. So most of the farmers, they would get this dollar, sometimes seventy-five cents, maybe sometimes a dollar and a quarter or whatever, for the sweet potatoes directly out of the field. And they had no control after that, and they didn't get the benefits or the value of what they had in the potatoes, they felt. So the idea of the cooperative was to be able to get people . . . that they were going to be able to sell their potatoes in a distant market and get the benefit of that price.

**de Jong:** [153] Oh, I see.

**Zippert:** Now, in between there, there's a cost of washing those potatoes, grading them, repackaging them, management, marketing, telephone, overhead, and so on. All of which we learned about as we got into it. But the idea was that with financing, and we never got really, from the government or otherwise, the full extent of the financing we needed to have. In other words, that gave people the option because we had a building where we could store something

like seventy-five thousand crates of potatoes. So the different farmers had a different part in that building where, if they wanted to, they could store the potatoes and hope that they would get a better price later on. And they could sell some of their potatoes right away to try to get a better price. And at least in the initial three to five years of the cooperative, it worked because by having the cooperative, the cooperative was able to pay people more in some cases double, in some cases even triple what they had been receiving, and that forced the other buyers to compete.

**de Jong:**        Right.

**Zippert:**        Most of those shippers . . . most of those people were also growers . . . the other, the competitors. So they had several hundred acres of their own sweet potatoes, and then they would buy from other people to sell. And they would take advantage of people who didn't have any other place to sell them and they somewhat worked in . . . They would say, "Alright. We're not going to pay more than a dollar a crate at least to black people. We're not going to pay black farmers." You'd go to two or three places and they'd all pay the same. Well, after the cooperative got started, they were stopping black people in the street, stopping their truck and offering them more money than what the cooperative had offered them, which was double or so or more than what they had gotten previously because the cooperative had created a competitive market for sweet potatoes. And some of the people who . . . we had large growers and small growers and small growers were somebody who had five acres or less. And we had larger growers that had twenty, thirty, forty acres of sweet potatoes. Our largest growers had maybe even as much as a hundred acres of sweet potatoes. We didn't have many of those. We had

three or four. Well, for those people, it meant that they now had a facility. So they would sell a third of their potatoes right away and put the other two-thirds to be stored and cured, and they would continue to sell potatoes year round and get money. And actually, the potato price kind of would start going up. Well, up until Thanksgiving, you'd basically be eating potatoes that came out of the ground. But after that from Thanksgiving on, even say through Christmas holidays . . . through Easter, the price actually would gradually go up because the supply of potatoes would go down. At that time, there wasn't competition from Mexico or somewhere else, so North Carolina and Louisiana were the primary sweet potato areas. The cooperative had a tangible impact on those people's lives and what they could get for their potatoes. Subsequently, there were blights and other kinds of problems which helped to really . . . eventually, that's why the cooperative stopped operating because there were diseases and blights and problems which lessened the total production in Louisiana. And then also, I suppose the 1960s were a high point of really small black farmers being in production, and the number of black farmers had declined since then. Although in the Federation, we're actually working now with some sweet potato farmers in the Mississippi Delta and in Northern Louisiana in the area of Lake Providence. So to me, as things went on with the cooperative, it was kind of the classic case where if the cooperative has ten, fifteen, twenty percent of the market, it affects the total price in the market because the other people have to respond to what the cooperative does. And that happened. It also led to all of these issues of education because . . . and loyalty and understanding what the . . . because we had people then. Well, if the other people were going to pay you a nickel more today for your sweet potatoes than the cooperative, and you didn't feel any loyalty to stick with the cooperative . . . We had people who used the cooperative to get the best price. Well, that



would make it difficult for the cooperative to meet its marketing commitments. And we had problems with that from time to time, so the whole thing of educating people . . .

**de Jong:** [coughs] Excuse me.

**Zippert:** [226] . . . about what a cooperative is and how it works and how you're supposed to . . . the kind of loyalty that's necessary to make it work. I think we had a lot of . . . we learned a lot of lessons about that. Now along the way as time went on, I became more and more involved with other cooperatives in a wider region and with the Federation, and my role became more of from organizer to trainer to fundraiser and administrator. You get promoted out of what you really can do best or whatever, so I became involved in a lot of the efforts. I became the principle person writing proposals and raising money for the Federation, which took me away from some of these day-to-day efforts with the cooperatives, and other people have to take them over. Now there's a guy still in St. Landry Parish, Wilbert Guillory. I don't know if you . . .

**de Jong:** [241] I spoke with him last week.

**Zippert:** Okay, so you met him, and he was very active in the beginning. When I met Wilbert Guillory, he was a sharecropper. I met him in the summer of 1965 when I was with CORE going around.

**de Jong:** Yes.

**Zippert:** He and his whole family—I'll never forget this—they were picking cotton when I first met him. And we picked cotton with him for a couple of hours to talk with him and his family.

**de Jong:** Right.

**Zippert:** And he became one of the people who helped to organize the cooperative. He ultimately became the manager, and he then went into this whole program with the Zydeco festival.

**de Jong:** Yes.

**Zippert:** [252] A lot of those things, really, as a result of some of the organizing work that was done through CORE and that we did there to get started.

**de Jong:** Yes.

**Zippert:** And he probably knows more, after awhile, of what happened in the day-to-day operation of the cooperative than I do, really. And certainly after a point, we . . . well, there were people there. The cooperative was operating, and we came on to Alabama to start a training center to do things with people throughout the South and continue some of that same struggle. So I was not there for all of the details and the whole story of what happened afterwards.

**de Jong:** Were you ever successful in getting anyone elected to the ASCS committee?

**Zippert:** We were successful in getting people elected at the community level.

**de Jong:** Yes.

**Zippert:** But we never got any . . . I think we may . . . well, when I was there, we never got anybody on the county committee.

**de Jong:** Right.

**Zippert:** [268] Because at that point when we were dealing with it, it was an indirect election. You had to elect all these people in these different communities. Then they would go and elect the county committee, so you'd have to have a majority of all these community committees to be able to elect a county committee.

**de Jong:** Oh, yes.

**Zippert:** Then after, I guess, fifteen years ago, they changed it and it became a direct election of the county committee, but there are very few places where black people have been elected to the county ASCS committee. It's something like twenty out of seven thousand.

**de Jong:** Oh.

**Zippert:** And this is part of the whole civil rights report that the Department of Agriculture came out with in 1996. That whole system is a question mark. We have proposed that in counties where there's a significant presence of black farmers or Hispanic farmers or whatever, fifteen percent at some level, that you would already get one minority seat. That's one proposal we made or some kind of proportional voting. We proposed all kind of things, and they haven't gotten very far. They have appointed people as minority advisors, which hasn't really worked very well because they don't have a vote and most of the time, they've appointed people who they knew were going to be compliant and agreeable and weren't going to ask any questions, so why have them? So that whole system has not worked very well. And now of course, we don't even . . . What was the Farmers Home Agricultural Loan Program and the ASCS are now the Farm Services Agency, FSA. And it's been integrated. It's been reorganized. The first time I went in the ASCS office in 1965 to inquire about the election procedures, the ASC, I went in there with a group of black farmers, and this guy's name was Mr. Foret. I'll never forget Mr. Foret. Mr. Foret then proceeded to speak in Creole French, so he had a wonderful conversation with the farmers, and I had to ask for a translation. So I said, "This is not going to work too well here." They did translate for me, but I thought it was a classic kind of way to get around the organizing.

**de Jong:** [310] Yes.

**Zippert:** But we eventually did or we got all the information that we were supposed to have. Louisiana is a common property state that your wife owns a part of what you own automatically and all this so they sent all the white farmer's wives a ballot, and they didn't do the

same for black farmers. So we had to go and argue with them about that. The way all these things worked, there are so many details, right. So they win because they thoroughly understand all of the procedure and the whole system. So they figure out this little thing that you're not going to figure out quite in time to really win. And they do things like that all the time, and that happened in '65 in that ASCS thing. But I don't know if anybody ever got elected to the committee. I do know that there have been people elected to the police jury and to the . . . I guess they have a black mayor in Opelousas.

**de Jong:** [328] Yes, I think they do.

**Zippert:** And people have gotten elected to the school board and whatever, and we're involved here a lot in elections and politics in Alabama. But I do feel in some ways that some of the people who got elected and who were victorious in Louisiana won because of the work that CORE did and the people that CORE registered and organized and so on.

**de Jong:** That's all of my questions. Is there anything you want to add?

**Zippert:** Well, I think I should say for the record here, just one additional, one little small factor. And that is that my wife and I were the ones who removed the miscegenation statute in Louisiana.

**de Jong:** [342] I think I read a lot of reports about when you got married, there was a big fuss over it and . . . so they removed it because of you?

**Zippert:** Well, we filed a suit.

**de Jong:** All right, okay.

**Zippert:** Well, there was already a Supreme Court decision in a case in West Virginia called “Lovings vs. West Virginia” in which the Supreme Court had declared those kinds of laws unconstitutional. But the law remained on the books in Louisiana. So we decided when we got married that we should remove this law.

**de Jong:** Did you file the suit before you could get married or did you get married . . . ?

**Zippert:** Yes, you had to file the suit.

**de Jong:** You had to file the suit before you were allowed to get married.

**Zippert:** Well, we filed a suit against the Clerk of Court of St. Landry Parish, Mr. Harold Sylvester. Anyway, it took six months, and a federal district court ruled in our favor. So we went to get our license and Mr. Sylvester . . . we went there to see Mr. Sylvester, and he said, “Well, I don’t know what to do, mais chere. I don’t know what to do. I have ze black book and ze white book. What book must I put this in?” And we said, “Well, Mr. Sylvester, that was the point of the suit. There should only be one book.

**de Jong:** [363] Yes.

**Zippert:**        He said, “Oh, no. I don’t know, mais chere. I have to talk to my lawyer. I just don’t know.” So he wouldn’t give us a license that day, the first day we went. Well, this spread around and we came back the next day. We had about fifty people with us. And by that time, Mr. Sylvester had gotten some advice from somebody that it was probably a good idea to give us some kind of license even if it was the only one, and he wound up giving us a license that day. But a lot of the people there say, “He wouldn’t have given you that license if we hadn’t been here to demonstrate and raise hell.” Since this tape is going to be a historical tape, I wanted to put that on there as another contribution to the history of the State of Louisiana.

**de Jong:**        All right.

**Zippert:**        Okay. Well . . .

**[End Tape 1518, Side A. End Session I.]**