Civil Rights History Project
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Interviewee:	Walter Bruce
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Interviewer:	John Dittmer
Videographer:	John Bishop
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John Bishop: And we are rolling.

John Dittmer: Today is Monday, March eleventh, 2013. My name is John Dittmer, and I am here in Durant, Mississippi, with videographer John Bishop to interview Mr. Walter Bruce, a leading civil rights activist in the Holmes County Movement. This interview will become part of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C. First of all, Mr. Bruce, we're delighted to be here today and thank you for taking the time to talk with us.

Walter Bruce: You're perfectly welcome.

JD: I'd like to begin by asking you about your home and family. Were you born and raised in Holmes County?

WB: Yes, I was, out in a little community called Rosewall, out in the country.

JD: Um-hmm.

WB: Yeah, that's where I was born at.

JD: And what did your parents do?

WB: They done a little sharecropping, just a little bit, [laughs] not no whole lot.

JD: What was it like to be growing—were you on a plantation then?

WB: Well, not just a plantation. It was just we was on a—a white fellow had some land out there, but, you know, it wasn't like the Delta or anything like that. You just—if you wanted to, you know, have little crops on it, you could do it. But it wasn't no plantation.

JD: So, when did you start picking cotton?

WB: [Laughs] I never did pick but just a little cotton. I never could pick—I could hoe pretty good, but I couldn't never no cotton. [Laughs]

JD: [Laughs] Well, I bet you don't regret not being—

WB: No.

JD: And when did you—did you move to Durant at what point?

WB: Oh, it was in the early '60s.

JD: Early '60s? So, you were back there at Rosewater—?

WB: Rosewall.

JD: Yeah, Rosewall, yeah, yeah. Well, tell us something about your childhood experiences, what you remember growing up in that area of the county?

WB: Well, when I was growing up out there, you know, being a teenager, and then out there, you know, a whole lot of people lived out there in that community. And I formed a Little League baseball team and I ran it for about fifteen or sixteen years. And then, I started a gospel group, [laughs] and on into the Civil Rights Movement.

JD: Yeah, well, I thought I'd talk about the gospel group a little later.

WB: Yeah. [Laughs]

JD: But where did you go to school?

WB: I started off out there in Rosewall. When I finished out there, then I went to Ambrose School in Lexington, Mississippi.

JD: Tell us something about these schools and your teachers and subjects.

WB: Well, out there, you know, it just went to—you had, you know, finished the eighth grade. And then, I moved into Lexington, moved with my sister. I had a sister that lived in Lexington and I finished twelfth grade over there at Ambrose High School in Lexington. But, now, they've got the new school at McClain, but at that time it was Ambrose High School.

JD: It was rather unusual for people to finish high school, wasn't it, in those days?

WB: Yes, it was.

JD: And so, you liked study?

WB: Yeah, I liked it.

JD: Um-hmm. What do you remember about your teachers?

WB: Well, not no whole lot. It's been a long time. But Miss Davis and all them were our teachers out there. It was quite a difference from then and now. [Laughs]

JD: Um-hmm.

WB: Yeah.

JD: Did you have brothers and sisters?

WB: Yeah, I had—it was 13 of us, 6 brothers and 7 sisters. But all of them have passed away but me.

JD: Oh, wow. And where were you on the list?

WB: I'm the baby. [Laughs]

JD: You're the baby of the family. Wow, so you probably had brothers and sisters as adults when you were growing up?

WB: Oh, yes. Yeah, um-hmm.

JD: And they had kids you played with?

WB: Um-hmm.

JD: And you were their uncle? [Laughs]

WB: Yeah, that's right. [Laughs]

JB: Can we pause for just a second?

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay, we're back.

JD: Okay. Just take up where—?

JB: Yeah, just take up where you were.

JD: Okay. We were talking about school. What about church? Was church important in your family?

WB: Yeah. All my family was churchgoers, sure was.

JD: Baptist?

WB: Methodist. [Laughs]

JD: Methodist! I see. Tell us something about what you remember from church and the importance for your family.

WB: Well, as I said, when I was out there in Rosewall we had a little wooden church. It was about a couple of miles from where we stayed, but we used to walk over there, you know, every two—we had like two Sundays a month. But, you know, we had to—I can always remember the creek running between our house and the church. We always would cut a tree and

throw it across there, you know, and put some planks up there, you know, and walk across. That's the way we went to church. [0:05:00] They didn't have no cars or anything like that then.

JD: Wow. So, your folks were supporting 13 kids. Did they—were they able to do that on cotton, on sharecropping?

WB: Yeah.

JD: That must have been everybody pitching in.

WB: Yeah.

JD: How many acres did your father farm?

WB: We didn't own any acres.

JD: Yeah, but—how large was the area you farmed?

WB: We didn't—it wasn't no large place, maybe like two or three acres or something like that.

JD: Oh, really?

WB: Uh-huh.

JD: I see. So, it was—

WB: Yeah.

JD: And you plowed behind a mule?

WB: Yeah, I used to plow a little bit. [Laughs]

JD: Um-hmm.

WB: I remember one time when I was small, I wanted to plow. And that was even before the Movement started. And I had been asking my daddy and telling him to let me plow. And so, the day that he set aside for me to plow, and then, he told me that day that I wasn't going to be able to plow because his stock had got out.

And there was a white fellow that lived on up above us. His name was Old Man Guess. And his stock got out, and when they went up around his house, he put them in the pasture up there, you know. And when my daddy went up there to get them, he told him he had to pay a dollar a head to get them. And he told him he didn't have no dollar a head. And so, finally he came back to the house and told me that he couldn't get them because he didn't have no money.

And so, I finally got the drop on him. And so, [laughs] after he kind of disappeared, then I went up there myself and knocked on the door. He said, "What you want, boy?" I said, "I come up here for my daddy's mule." He said, "Did he tell you that you're going to have a dollar apiece?" I said, "Yeah, he told me." I said, "I ain't got no dollar."

And I said, "But I tell you what." I said, "If you don't let them out, I'm gonna let them out myself!" [Laughs] And he said, told his son, "Go out there and let that boy have them mules. That boy ain't got no sense!" [Laughs]

JD: That's interesting. Wow! So, you stood up to him?

WB: Yeah, I stood up to him.

JD: Tell us something about race relations. How many whites were there in the area? What were your other contacts?

WB: Well, whites in the area were heavily populated, you know, when the Movement started. It was more whites in the city. But Holmes, the county, you know, mostly been totally black. But at that time, you know, you couldn't tell it, because the whites had control of everything. Yeah.

JD: One of the things we were talking about children today not realizing about the old times. And, of course, one of the major factors of life back then was Jim Crow segregation. For these younger people, tell us what it was like to live in a segregated society.

WB: Well, it was kind of rough. You know, but just like you said, I guess, you know, at that time, you know, it wasn't too hard to get along with it. But, you know, it wasn't too much you could do about it. But, you know, we kind of got along. As I said, out of all the time that I've been in the Movement, or even before the Movement, I never hated white folks. I just didn't like what they—the way they, you know, did us, but I never did hate any of them like that or anything like that. But whatever I had to say or do, I just, you know, go on and do it.

JD: Was there any—any racial incidents, any violence or anything, that you remember around when you were growing up?

WB: Well, that's about the only thing that I knew about, you know, as I said, when the stock got out out there. But we—we were, you know, not too far apart. You know, we kind of communicated together. I never had no more problem after that happened.

JD: How old were you when you went up there?

WB: Oh, I was about—between seven and eight. [Laughs]

JD: Oh, no kidding? Oh, what a wonderful story!

WB: [Laughs] Yeah.

JB: Can we pause another second?

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're rolling.

JD: What kind of law enforcement do you remember? Police, sheriff—were they a visible presence?

WB: Not too much. I mean, at that time, you know, all the sheriff's department and the police department were all white. Um-hmm, yeah.

JD: Um-hmm. But basically is it safe to say that you had limited contact with whites during your growing up years?

WB: I didn't have no whole lot of problems during my growing up years, um-hmm. Most of the problems I had with them was in the early '60s.

JD: Um-hmm, yeah. Well, we're going to get to that soon.

WB: Yeah.

JD: Did you—[0:10:00] rephrase the question. You were growing up and you had limited contacts with whites, there was a black community, and you stayed pretty much in the black community? Did you work at all outside the home, other than sharecropping?

WB: Oh, yeah. Well, as I said, I was a carpenter from my early, from my sixteenth year birthday on up until I retired from carpentry.

JD: Well, I want you to talk about that. How did you—did you have the skills to be a carpenter? Did you apprentice yourself to someone, or did you just pick it up?

WB: No, I told—someone asked me that question, but I told him I never went to school to be a carpenter. And so, it was just a trade, a gift from God, that I started out carpentering. And I don't know how many houses I've built in Holmes County and Attala County—over 60, I expect.

JD: Did you have a crew working with you?

WB: Yeah, I had two more fellows working with me.

JD: Uh-huh.

WB: Um-hmm.

JD: And who bought these—who were you building these homes for?

WB: Oh, I built some for white and black. [Laughs]

JD: Um-hmm.

WB: Yeah. After I got, you know, started in the Civil Rights Movement—I mean, when I first started, you know, I was thinking that wasn't no whites going to hire me. That's what I was kind of thinking about when I got started in the Civil Rights Movement. But then, I think the reason that a whole lot of them were still hiring me was because they were—they was kind of afraid if they didn't hire me, you know, that maybe I would [laughs] do something against their business.

JD: [Laughs] Yeah. So, you just—you were a contractor when you were a teenager?

WB: Um-hmm.

JD: Or did you just start hiring out to yourself?

WB: Yeah.

JS: When did you build your first house? Do you remember that at all?

WB: No. No, I can't really. The first one—I'm trying to think which one—

JD: But it was—are your houses still—are some of them still standing?

WB: *All* of them still standing.

JD: All of them are still standing?

WB: Yeah, every one of them.

JD: Wow.

WB: Um-hmm.

JD: So, you can just drive around the county, and you can see what you did.

WB: Yeah.

JD: That's amazing. Yeah. And you were a singer. How did you get to be a singer?

WB: Well, just like you said, I organized that baseball team. All my life, that's almost I ever did is fool around with people, you know, from teenagers on up to adults. And then, we started this group, and this past October, we celebrated our 54-year anniversary. [Laughs]

JD: Wow. So, tell us about what kind of songs—who else was in the group, what kind of songs did you sing, and where did you sing?

WB: We sung spiritual songs. We sang all around through Holmes County, Attala County, Leflore County, Waterloo, Chicago—

JD: Wow.

WB: Milwaukee. [Laughs]

JD: So, you were well-known outside the state?

WB: Oh, sure, um-hmm. Yeah.

JD: And you did a lot of touring, did you?

WB: Yeah, we did a whole lot, sure did.

JD: When were you most popular? When was your group the most popular?

WB: Well, we're still pretty popular. [Laughs]

JD: [Laughs] I see. But you did radio broadcasts?

WB: We do radio broadcasts right now every Sunday.

JD: Wow. What station?

WB: WXTN in Lexington.

JD: Wow. Did you make any records?

WB: Yeah. Well, we're getting ready to make another one, because I done sold all these here just about. I've got some—maybe I have one. I know I've got some tapes, plenty of tapes here. But those CDs, they go real fast.

JD: Yeah. Are all the members of your original group still in it, or have you had replacements?

WB: Oh, we done had a whole lot of replacements. A whole lot of them have passed away.

JD: Yeah.

WB: Most of them. I'm the onliest one that's been in there the 50-some years. All the rest of them are since then. But the ones that was in there that started out with me, all of them have passed away, um-hmm.

JD: Well, music was very important in the Civil Rights Movement, wasn't it?

WB: Yes, it was.

JD: Talk a little bit about that, why it was that there was so much music and what it did for people.

WB: Well, I think, as I said, what the blacks were going through with, and they just got connected, you know, with the church and gospel songs and all like that. Now, some of them still like the blues, but most of the people that went to church all the time, they really liked that gospel singing.

JD: And then, did you—was singing a major part of the mass meetings that you had?

WB: Yeah, we had—we—yeah, we always open up with prayers and songs when we have [0:15:00] these countywide meetings, we call them, um-hmm.

JD: Well, let's then turn to the Civil Rights Movement in Holmes County and in Mississippi and your role in it. What are your first recollections of the Civil Rights Movement underway?

WB: Well, as I was, you know, growing up and seeing everything, you know, that was going on, and so, when the first—at the first beginning, I wasn't as active as I was a little later on because, as I said, by me being a contractor, you know, and I was wondering, you know, if by taking a part in the Civil Rights Movement, you know, would I be able to get the jobs and things that I was getting.

And then, I don't know, and then something just come to me and said, "Well, what good is a job if you ain't got no freedom?" And so, I just went on and did what I had to do, and if anything get in the way, I just let them know the way I felt about it. And so, that's the way I really got started. And so—

JD: Do you remember—while there were a number of things that have been sort of influential in the Civil Rights Movement, unfortunately some of them acts of violence—do you remember when Emmett Till was killed?

WB: Um-hmm, yeah.

JD: Tell us about your—you were what? In your twenties then?

WB: Yeah, um-hmm.

JD: What was the conversation around here? What were you feeling?

WB: Well, we—I mean, everybody around here was, you know, just really upset, you know. But we knew that, you know, certain things like that might would happen, because at that time, you know, I didn't know—it's just a gift, I'd say, and a blessing from God that I never got hurt because, you know, from what I was involved in in all these different places that I was going to and all these different times of night coming in. And it was—it was just rough back there. But people would always ask me was I afraid. And I told them the only time that I would be afraid was when I get ready to come into the house. I said as long as I was, you know, riding along, I

never thought too much about it. But you just kind of had that feeling when you get out of your vehicle, you know, and get ready to come in the house or something like that. You had that feeling.

JD: You might have felt that when you were seven or eight years old and confronting that white man that he could have retaliated too in the same way.

WB: Well, yeah.

JD: Did you have kids when Emmett Till was lynched, and if so—?

WB: No. We've got a daughter. She wasn't born then.

JD: Uh-huh, yeah, so you didn't have to deal with your kids and talk to them about it.

WB: Um-um, no. Uh-uh.

JD: Yeah, a number of Movement people, the younger SNCC people, say that's when they decided, because Till was a boy their own age.

WB: Yeah, right!

JD: And that they were going to come here and do something about it.

WB: Yeah.

JB: What exactly—what was the Emmett Till story? What happened?

WB: He—well, they claimed he whistled something at a white lady over there. That's what they—that's what the story was out. But I don't think that happened. I think they just—he probably was involved in the Civil Rights Movement, I think, and that's when they assassinated him.

JD: It was a big story, wasn't it?

WB: Yes, it was.

JD: All over the nation.

WB: Yeah, it was major.

JD: The trial and all of that.

WB: Yeah, it was.

JD: It wasn't that far from here either.

WB: No, Greenwood is about 50 or 60 miles from here.

JD: When did you first hear about Medgar Evers and the NAACP?

WB: Well, after I—I mean, I had heard something about them even before the Civil Rights Movement. But after the Civil Rights Movement got started, then I, you know, heard a whole lot about him then. Just like when we used to go to these meetings in Jackson and Tupelo and all them different places. And I knew a whole lot about him.

JD: Did you meet him and talk with him in those days?

WB: Yeah, we used to meet.

JD: Did he come up here to speak?

WB: Yeah, um-hmm.

JD: And Aaron Henry?

WB: Huh? Yeah, I know Aaron Henry real well. [Laughs] Yeah, he's real active in the Movement.

JD: Well, I want to talk a little bit about the factors that led you to believe, to get involved in the Civil Rights Movement. What was it? Was there any one thing? Or was it just you saw people doing things—you were running a risk because you could lose business.

WB: Um-hmm.

JD: What made you overcome that and become active?

WB: Well, as I said, I really [0:20:00] got started in the Movement, you know, going to these different places, and I would, you know, see how that the white folks were doing the black folks, just like when we—because, see, it mostly started out in the Mileston community. That's in the Delta. And most every time we would go down there to meet, and then, when we'd get back up to the highway, which was Highway 12, somebody was going to always get stopped there, you know. They just give them a ticket, even whether you violated or not. They just give you a ticket or just trying to stop you, you know, from going down there to the meeting. But every time that we had a meeting down there, somebody's going—two or three people are going to get a ticket.

JD: Did you start going to these meetings in '62, '63, or was it later?

WB: No, it was in the '60s. [Laughs]

JD: Yeah. Did you attend any of the meetings in Greenwood?

WB: Yeah, I was meeting in Greenwood, too.

JD: Okay. Well, talk some about the SNCC people who were around here.

WB: Well, the SNCC people, now, they were around here for years. I mean, they were real active in it. Yeah, they—and most everywhere we had a meeting, you know, it would be some of them would be there. And they were very active, you know, and direct, you know, and kind of help you get everything lined up. They were real active.

JD: One of the major stories of the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement was the Freedom Summer of 1964, when you had upwards of a thousand volunteers, most of them young white people—

WB: Yeah, right.

JD: Coming into the state to do voter registration, to work in community centers, and to organize, help organize, the Freedom Democratic Party.

WB: Yeah.

JD: There were more than 30 volunteers in Holmes County. Tell us what you remember about that summer.

WB: I remember, you know, when they was coming in here. And just like when we was trying to get registered to where we'd be able to vote, and so, they would be here to help us out. And so, when we first started to voting here, we had to do our—I mean, register—we were doing it down in the basement at the post office there in Lexington because they wouldn't let you do it in the courthouse. Because whenever you'd go to the courthouse to try to register, they would know that black people, you know, couldn't read too well and they would give them a *Jackson Daily* newspaper. And if they couldn't read that newspaper, they wouldn't let them register. And they also asked you how many strands of hair did you have in your head. [Laughs] And if you couldn't answer that question, they wouldn't let you vote. And then, they'd also ask you a question, like, if you fill a five-gallon bucket of water and drop a bar of soap in there, how many bubbles would it make? [Laughs]

JD: Yeah, it was very difficult.

WB: It was very difficult.

JD: Very difficult. About the summer itself, were there—I mean, with a lot of these young white folks coming around, what impact did that have on the community? A number of them lived with local people, didn't they?

WB: Yeah, talking about the outside people?

JD: Um-hmm.

WB: Yeah, they stayed with the black folk when they come in here, most of them, you know. Now, the white people didn't like that, but they didn't—them SNCCs and all them, they wasn't afraid of them. [Laughs] So, whatever we wanted to do, they were right there with us.

JD: Um-hmm. So, you were active in the summer project then?

WB: Yeah, um-hmm.

JD: What do you remember about specifically, other than the voting part which we're going to get to shortly, of how that summer went down?

JD: Well, as I said, they finally, you know, after we just kept on meeting and going on, then they—I guess, when they passed that act, then we had to go back, and they had to move all of our names up to the courthouse from the post office. You know, we had to re-register where we could get a chance to vote. But all that was—they just—they really didn't want you to register to vote.

JD: And after Freedom Summer—I'm going to get into voting shortly—but after Freedom Summer, why, you also had the Meredith March Against Fear.

WB: Um-hmm.

JD: What do you remember about—did you march at all in that?

WB: Yeah.

JD: And what was the atmosphere like then?

WB: Well, anything, you know, that come up that we didn't like, well, you know, then we might would have a meeting and decide what we're going to do. Or either just like—at that time, it was about 16 or 17 communities with the Freedom Democratic Party. But right now Holmes County is the onliest one that's still got the party going. And so, we would meet up and decide what we were going to do. And the SNCC people, they would always be in there with us.

[0:25:00] But they—we always made the decision, you know, and then they would, you know, go along with us. And sometimes they'll, you know, have an idea of what we need to do, and we worked right close together. Sure did.

JD: Yeah. Very few blacks were registered to vote.

WB: Oh, yeah.

JD: And then, in April of 1963, 14 Holmes County blacks went to the courthouse to attempt to register.

WB: Yeah.

JD: The first 14. Tell us what you remember about that, those people and that time.

WB: Well, I knew all of the people that went up there. And that's when they were asked all them different questions about the bucket with the soap and the hair strands. All those people, the first 14 people that went up there, were from Mileston. And I knew all of them, um-hmm.

JD: Tell us something about one of those people, Hartman Turnbow.

WB: Hartman Turnbow was tough. [Laughs] Yeah, he was [26:00]. He had a loud, heavy voice anyway, and so, he would speak out.

JD: Do you have any Turnbow stories? Everybody seems to have some.

WB: Oh, yeah.

JD: Tell us some.

WB: Yeah. He would always—he kind of stuttered, you know, when he talked, but he had powerful speeches, though, that he made. Yeah. He was real active. But, as I say, I knew all of them, the first 14 that went up there.

JD: Um-hmm. Ralthus Hayes?

WB: Ralthus Hayes.

JD: Tell us about Mr. Hayes. What did he do for a living? And what was his role in—?

WB: I think most all them that went up, I believe they kind of sharecropped. But most all of them that went up there, they kind of owned their own—

JD: Farms, yeah.

WB: Their spot down there in the Mileston community, um-hmm. Mr. Hayes, Russell, and Whittaker, James [26:53], and all them.

JD: Yeah, I read where, because they owned their own farms, they had more independence, that they couldn't be kicked off the plantation.

WB: Yeah, they couldn't be kicked off. But somebody would go down there, you know, and get them out from down there, because they know, you know, if the white folks know that they was going up there to try to get registered and all that, they're going to try to protest against all that. And so, then I guess they just made up their minds that, regardless of what happened, they were going to get registered where they could be able to vote.

JD: Yeah, things really started to get violent once blacks started to assert their rights, didn't they?

WB: Um-hmm, yeah.

JD: Turnbow's house was fired into and burned.

WB: Um-hmm, yeah.

JD: Bob Moses came up. Do you remember Bob?

WB: Um-hmm, yeah, I remember Bob Moses, yeah.

JD: How about Alma Mitchell Carnegie?

WB: Yeah, she was good. [Laughs] Yeah, her and Miss Essie Quinn. All of them down there. Well, some of them wasn't in Mileston, but they were down in the edge of the Delta. Miss

Quinn, she was out on—right on the outside of the hill. She was right up from Tchula School up there. But those, as I say, most of those first 14, most all of them lived in Mileston that came up to try to get registered to vote.

JD: A number of people from Holmes County went to Jackson for the demonstrations in the summer of ’65 and got thrown in jail at the fairgrounds. Did you know any of those people?

WB: Yeah, I knew some of them. Um-hmm, yeah.

JB: Were you one of them?

WB: I didn’t—I don’t think I went to that one. I never got put in jail in Jackson. I got put in jail in Holmes County. [Laughs]

JD: When were you put in jail?

WB: Oh, it was in the early, middle ’60s, early ’60s, I would say.

JD: What did they get you for?

WB: Well, what happened, Jay Young, he lived up here between here and West. And somehow, when he went to Lexington, they locked him up. It looked like he was, you know, drunk or something like that. But then, we know that wasn’t true, because, you know, as long as I’ve been knowing him and playing ball with him, I never know him to drink. And so, they locked him up. But, now, he did have a bad heart, and I think that they refused to give him that medicine. And so, that morning when they went in there, they found him dead.

And so, then, me and Mrs. Hightower, we went over there, you know, to see what happened. And so, when we walked up to Calvin Moore, the sheriff then, and I asked him could we see him. He said, “Naw, y’all can’t see him,” said, “because [0:30:00] he’s not even dressed.” And I told him, I said, “I don’t want him dressed.” I said, “I want to see him like he is.” He said, “Well, you can’t see him.” And I said, “You know what?” I said, “It’s going to be better on you

if you let us see him." And so, "Well, I'm going let y'all go in there, but y'all are the only two going to be able to go in there."

And I went in there and looked him all over, and I couldn't find no scars or anything on him, you know, where he had been beat or hit or anything like that, because, as I said, I looked him all the way over. And then, when we come out from there, we decided to put on that boycott. And then, it went on for a few days, maybe a week or more. And so, we had a community store here, so I was in the store, because every time—

JD: Was this Durant now, or—?

WB: That was in Lexington.

JD: Lexington.

WB: Uh-huh. And so, I'll go in the store, and Mrs. Georgia Clark—all of us worked together, and anything that happened in Holmes County going always, you know, confront me. And she come and told me, said, "They want you to come to Lexington. They done locked up twelve people." And so, when I got ready to go to Lexington, when I got ready to walk out the store, then the sheriff and the deputy was coming in the store. And they said, "We've got a warrant for your arrest." And I said, "Okay," so they carried me on.

We got in the car and we were going to Lexington. I said, "What y'all got me for?" He said, "We got—they said that you were hauling the peoples over there to march." And I said, "Well, you must don't know who bought that damn truck." [Laughter] I said, "That truck belongs to me," I said, "and I'll haul any damn body that I want to!"

And so, they carried on and locked us up. And so, then it wasn't too long before my wife and brother came over to get me out. But I said, "No, I'm not going to get out now." I said, "We're all going to stay in here together, or we're all going to get out together."

JD: These were the other 12 they had?

WB: Uh-huh. And so, and then, I think his name was, um, Hooker, and he bonded all of us out. And so, they kept carrying us around to Jackson and different places, you know, trying to get us convicted, but we [32:18]. And then, the same night that we got in jail, there were so many people in Lexington that you couldn't even walk around the streets.

And so, when we got out of jail, then we formed another march. [Laughs] And then, we went to marching around the square. And they were running up beside of me, the whites was, "See can you get them to stop marching," and all that. And we just kept going. And they said, "Well, if they don't stop marching, we're going to lock them up."

And so, they parked the car there and told them, said, "Y'all get in." And so, everybody—they just filled the car up. And the man that was driving it, the police that was driving the car, couldn't even get in there, because they [laughs] there were so many people in there. And then, they made them all get out. [Laughs] And so, it was kind of funny and dangerous, too.

But, you know, whatever we planned to do or we decided to do, we'd go on and do it. And so, then they finally—and then we finally called it off after, you know, we kind of got what we were expecting and asked for. And so, then we called it off for that march.

JD: So, you got out of jail and you went right back on the streets.

WB: Right back on the streets.

JD: Yes. You weren't intimidated at all by—

WB: No, uh-uh, no.

JD: Thinking you'd probably get arrested again.

WB: I didn't—we didn't care then! [Laughs]

JD: Yeah, yeah. Were you arrested any other times?

WB: No, that's the only time that I was arrested.

JD: How were you treated in jail?

WB: Well, nobody never come around. Most all of us in—you know, all of us wasn't in the same cell, but close together. But wasn't nobody worried about getting in or getting out. We just don't—

JD: And you were in there for how long?

WB: Maybe two or three hours.

JD: Two or three hours, I see.

WB: Um-hmm, yeah.

JB: It would have been scary. You know, it's scary. I've been arrested a couple of times.

WB: Oh, yeah?

JB: You don't know what's going to happen. It makes you nervous.

WB: Oh, yeah. You don't know what's going happen. But, as I said, you know, folks were together back in the '60s, '64 and on up and on up. And, as I said, I never seen that many people on that square in all my life as it was that night. I mean, you couldn't even—

JD: And these were your people?

WB: Yeah. You couldn't even walk around that square. The streets were full and the roads all around that square.

JD: Um-hmm.

WB: Yeah.

JD: I'd like to talk a little bit about the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. But were you involved at the beginning in early 1964 [0:35:00] when the party was formed?

WB: Um-hmm.

JD: Tell us about what you were doing in Holmes County, because you were getting ready to challenge the all-white segregationist Democratic delegation at the national convention in Atlantic City. How did you go about that?

WB: Well, when it first started out, the Freedom Democratic Party, when they elect a president, you know, for it, the first president that they elect, you know, he would have like two years. And I think it was three ahead of me. And so, when their time was up, then they elected me. And that's what I tease them about some other times, I say, "Now, when I was elected to be the chairman of the Freedom Democratic Party," I said, "it was just only two years." And I said, "Now, since I got to be chairman, and it's going on 40-some years," and I said, "and you still haven't changed." [Laughs]

JD: Oh, really? You're still active in the party?

WB: I'm still the chair—

JD: I was going to ask you about that later.

WB: I'm still the president of the Freedom Democratic Party.

JD: Wow.

WB: Um-hmm. And after I was elected president of the Freedom Democratic Party, and then they also elected me as being the coordinator, and I had to go to all these 17 and 18 different communities, you know, to set up a meeting. And so, I was the coordinator and the chairman from that day on up to today.

JD: Tell us a little bit more about the early days of getting ready and choosing the delegation that would go to Atlantic City, the precinct meetings that were held to elect this group.

WB: Yeah, we—as I said, we were—at that time, we were—all the communities, most of the meetings, you know, had different nights. But in Durant, we always would meet on Wednesday night, and Lexington had a different night and Old Pilgrim Rest and Mileston and all of them. But we would all—and every third Sunday, we would have our countywide meeting, and that's where everybody in the county would come to this meeting. And then, and that's where we picked our—the people, you know, to go to these different conventions out of the countywide meeting every third Sunday. And so, we still meets every third Sunday.

JD: Wow, that's wonderful.

JB: Let's pause.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay, we're going.

JD: Well, the Freedom Democrats lost their challenge in Atlantic City.

WB: Um-hmm, right., um-hmm

JD: But then, they decided to challenge the seating of the congressional delegation.

WB: Um-hmm.

JD: That would be in January of 1965, saying that that delegation was illegal, because blacks could not vote in the elections that elected them.

WB: Um-hmm.

JD: Were you active in that movement to get Mrs. Hamer and Ms. Devine and Ms. Ray seated in Washington?

WB: Yeah, we were involved in all of that. As I said, we was always—when something like that happened, we, you know, that third Sunday we would always meet, you know, because, as I said, the county was real together then. And anywhere you'd meet, you know, you'd have a

crowd. But at that time, we didn't have a center like we have now, you know. So, we'd just meet at this church, maybe like this third Sunday, and the next third Sunday, another community might would have it. But that's the way we, you know—and we would pick out our delegates, you know, who we were going to send to be the delegates from the Freedom Democratic Party, like that.

JD: In Holmes County, were the ministers active in the Movement, or just a couple of them?

WB: We had just a couple of ministers and a couple of—well, I would say more than a couple. It was maybe like five or six ministers and maybe five or six or seven teachers were involved in it, you know, when it was real active. But, now—

JD: Why was that early on that the professionals were not active in the Movement? You were an exception.

WB: Well, at that time, the preachers was afraid, and the teachers was afraid, too. [Laughs] And so, they—we just couldn't—we would talk to them all the time, but we just couldn't ever get them to find out why they wouldn't—well, we knew why they wasn't coming, because, as I said, a whole lot of people back then were just really afraid. And then, after some of them, you know, found out what was going on, then a few more, you know, would ease on in. But the teachers and the preachers were really scared during the struggle.

JD: I can see the teachers were afraid of losing their jobs, right, because they [0:40:00] had white superintendents?

WB: Yeah, but the preachers—

JD: What were the preachers afraid of?

WB: That's what we asked them, because they were pastoring a black congregation. But I guess they might have been, you know, considering, you know, maybe borrowing money from the banks or something like that. But they were just—and then, some of them, you know, they'd be telling them, "Well, you're a preacher. You know better than to fool with that mess," and all that kind of—and some of them would accept like that.

JD: I know in some counties, there were some ministers who were really working with the white people.

WB: Oh, yeah.

JD: The white people were sort of giving small favors, and they were supposed to keep—

WB: Yeah, we had a little of that going on, too.

JD: You had those who you could say you couldn't trust them?

WB: Yeah, right.

JD: That they would—something would happen, somebody would be in a conversation, and all of a sudden, it would get back to the white folks.

WB: Yeah, and then I—you know, getting on to the teachers, some of them stated that the reason they didn't come to the meeting because I just only finished twelve grades, you know, and there wasn't nothing I could tell them. And then, later on, one of the teachers got fired. And so, that was down here at Williams-Sullivan High School, and they sent for me to come down there. I said, "Wonder why they sent for me to come down there, because they already said there wasn't [nothing] I could tell them?"

And so, when I went down there, it was nothing in there but teachers! And I told them, I said, "Well, now," I said, "I'm surprised y'all asked me to come down here," I said, "because I heard that y'all said that I just only finished twelfth grade and wasn't nothing I could tell y'all." I

said, “Let me tell one thing.” I said, “Now, you’re right.” I said, “I can’t teach school.” I said, “And you can’t read a blueprint.” [Laughs]

JD: [Laughs] Yes.

WB: I said, “And what I’ve got, they don’t teach that in college.” I said, “That had to come from the ‘man above’ to give you the courage and not being afraid to speak out.” And I said, “But I tell you what.” I said, “Before the sun goes down,” I said, “the teacher that was fired is going to be back in his position.” And so, later on that evening, they called me back and told me he had his job back. And then, that’s when I told them, I said, “Now, that lets you know that when you’re together, you can get things done, but when you’re divided,” and I said, “and that’s what they was trying to do, keep the teachers and preachers from fooling with—” they—white folks would call it “a mess” then. They didn’t think nothing about it. [Laughs]

JD: So, the teachers were fired, and they got their jobs back?

WB: Yeah.

JD: And you were helpful in that?

WB: Yeah, we—

JD: How did you go about doing that?

WB: We just called the superintendent and told him he was going to either put him back or we were going to put a boycott on.

JD: And that’s all it took?

WB: That’s all it took.

JD: You must have had some power.

WB: We had power.

JD: Yeah.

WB: Yeah.

JD: In her wonderful new book on the Holmes County Movement, *Thunder of Freedom*, Susan Lorenzi Sojourner writes that you were, quote, "unquestionably the Durant Movement leader," and that you spent, quote, "several dangerous years opening up the predominantly white hill towns of Durant, West, and Goodman."

WB: Um-hmm.

JD: First of all, tell us something about Sue and Henry Lorenzi, the white volunteers who came to Holmes County in the fall of '64 and stayed for a while.

WB: Well, Sue and Henry were here at least five years, and they were real active. And anything that we were, you know, trying to do, they were right in there working. But they worked the whole five years that they were here [laughs], you know, helping anybody. And everybody seemed to love them. And we just all worked in there together.

JD: A lot of this, with Sue and Henry, at first were living in the community center, and a lot of activity after that around that. This community center—well, tell us how it got built and what its importance was for you and the community in organizing.

WB: Well, the center, I mean, you know, it was kind of a community thing. Different ones just volunteered, you know, to get in there and help get it built. That was in Mileston.

JD: Um-hmm.

WB: Yeah. And so, that's the way it got built. But, as I said, when we first started, you know, we didn't have that. But by Sue and Henry being here and kind of spearheading it and everything, that's the way that center got built, you know, just volunteer.

JD: Um-hmm. And one of the things that was coming out of that was a health clinic that was started in the fall of 1964. A diversion here: Tell us a little bit about healthcare in the state.

When you got sick when you were growing up, what was available to you? Did you go to doctors, a hospital? What kind of [0:45:00] services were there in the county?

WB: Well, the services in the county back then was real poor for black folks. I mean, because, you know, someone didn't go—we had a doctor. His name was Dr. Brocken. He used to go around, you know, to different people's homes, you know, if they would get sick or something like that, because blacks didn't go to no hospital too much, because they didn't have no money or something like that, and no clinics. But, now, these doctors, they would, you know, some of them, you know, couldn't even get to people's house, because we didn't have no cars and didn't have no good roads and things. Sometimes they had to walk there at night. But it was real bad back then in them days.

JD: I believe there weren't any black doctors in the county, were there?

WB: No, there were no black doctors.

JD: Are there now?

WB: Yeah, it's black doctors in the county now.

JD: So, you were dependent on white doctors.

WB: White doctors.

JD: Did you go to their offices? Were there segregated waiting rooms and things? Do you remember?

WB: Yeah, I remember all of that. I never did go, but I remember, you know, that they had, you know, a room for the whites and a room for the blacks. And that was in everything, train stations, buses, eating places.

JD: And when somebody got sick later on, why, you had first of all the health clinic, with the nurses who were there, and then the doctor who came up from Jackson.

WB: Um-hmm.

JD: But then, you had the community health centers. You have them here now, right?

WB: Yeah, right.

JD: Are they effective in helping people?

WB: Yeah, they're really effective. Now, we've got Mileston. I mean, Mallory Clinic. You know, they've got a clinic in Lexington, and they done built one here in Durant. They've got a big clinic up here on 12 going to Lexington. And it helps a whole lot of black, and the one in Lexington. So, they're real cooperative. So, we don't have no problem, you know, people getting served for help now.

JD: And all of that there, that's part of the comprehensive community health center movement across the country, and nearly forty million needy people are getting help from these clinics, centers, and it all started here in Mileston.

WB: That's right! That's where it started, in Mileston.

JD: With the health clinic. It's quite an accomplishment for all of you.

WB: Yes, it is.

JD: Okay, we're going to talk about political organizing. How did you go about the job of organizing, of getting people together and developing what became some power for you?

WB: Well, as I said, here, when I started here in Durant when the—see, the school up here in the city, what is called the city school, Durant High School, now, it was segregated, you know. Wasn't no blacks up there. And Mel Leventhal, you might have heard talk of him. He was the civil rights lawyer for Holmes County.

JD: Yeah, I knew Mel, yeah.

WB: And so, he got involved with us up here at the school. And so, we had a meeting one night, and we had, you know, been talking about the school. And so, he—we appointed him—he was our attorney for the school up there. And then, he came back and told, you know, that we needed to appoint, to elect two blacks—you know, they didn't want but two blacks to be on the board up there, because, see, they always wanted you to be the odd number. And so, they appointed me and [48:52]. We were the first two blacks that served up there on that board.

And so, then we got [49:04]. And at that time, it was supposed to have been that when they hired the principal or the superintendent, one was supposed to have been black and one was supposed to have been white. So, it went on thataway for a while. But right now, the principal *and* the superintendent is black right now. But that's the way it was organized.

But, and so, because we tried to get them to merge with the county, but they figured if they did that, they were going to lose control, and so, they fought that. And so, they wouldn't connect with the county schools. They wanted to stay up there, because they figured, you know, that they were going to [49:51] over there. I never will forget. It was [0:50:00] Doug [49:57] and Hugh Carl, And—let's see, Doug was a dentist. [Laughs] And so, they fought that. And so, then it was finally made them accept it, the school did. But the reason they were fighting it, you know, because they didn't want to—they figured if they do that, you know, they were going to lose control over there, even though they were going to lose control of it anyway.

And so, after it got like that, then a whole lot of white folks moved out of Durant. And so, right now, a whole lot of them moved out and still got houses for sale here. But that was the first thing, you know. And then, after that, you know, we integrated this Ritz Café. You couldn't go in there but white, you know. You could go in the back, you know, and they would serve you back there.

JD: When did you do that? And how did you go about integrating the café?

WB: Well, as I said, we'd meet every Wednesday night. And we decided that certain Wednesday night, you know, what day we were going up there. And so, now, black folk were kind of afraid, too, because over there by the post office in front of that café, the street was full of blacks, but didn't but a few of us go up in there. [Laughs] And so, and then, after we went up in there, and then we didn't have no more problems, you know, out of going in there.

JD: So, when you went in—this was after the law had been passed, so it was illegal.

WB: Yeah, uh-huh, yeah.

JD: And you went in and what did—did they serve you right away?

WB: They served us. Yeah, they were real nice. I'll give them credit.

JD: They didn't turn you away or—?

WB: No, we weren't going to be turned away. [Laughs]

JD: Yeah. So, people—until you took that initiative, why, blacks just assumed that something bad would happen to them if they went in.

WB: Oh, yeah, they were afraid. That's what they were afraid of, something was going happen. But we just went in there, you know. We just went on in there. And then, later on, the next incident was here in the Dairy Bar up there. You know, you could buy ice cream, but they had two signs, even at the train station, black water fountain and white water fountain.

And so, we had said we were going to do that that Saturday. And so, that Wednesday night, we suggested what we're going to do. And the first time we had decided, he had an old German police dog he had tied up there by the—and so, we talked to the mayor and told him he better make him move that dog or we were going to get rid of it. And so, he finally moved the dog.

So, we went around there. And he said, "Before I sell a nigger an ice cream out of that window where it says all-white,'" he said, "I'll burn this son-of-a-bitch down to the ground!" His name was Mack Brown. [Laughs] And his son was working at the Merchant and Farmers Bank. That's where he retired from. And so, now, I told him, I said, "Well, you know what?" I said, "Are you able to get you a match and set this so-and-so afire?" I said, "Because the next time we come around here to buy some ice cream," I said, "it ain't going be no sign up here saying no all-black, nor all-colored, nor all-white."

And so, that was on a Saturday. And so, that Sunday, we always park up there on the square, you know, when we get ready to go sing. And that's where we meet at, you know. They park up there on the street, and then we get in the van or whatever we had to go. And so, I noticed when I looked—parked up there in the front, the boy didn't have no signs period up there. And it wasn't burnt down! [Laughter] And so, from that day on, we—you know, you could go to either window you wanted to.

And then, the next one was the Piggly-Wiggly. At that time, we had—

JD: And the Piggly-Wiggly was a grocery store, right?

WB: Yeah, a grocery store. That was the one that the black bag boy and the white bag boy got in a fight. I think the black boy won the fight, but he fired him and he didn't—and kept the white. And so, then we met that Wednesday night, and I told them what we were going to do. And so, we called him and told him he was going either have to give that black boy his job back or either fire both of them. So, he refused to do it.

And so, then we boycotted. And so, we were out there not too far from the store—we were on the parking lot, but we—you know, you had to be a certain distance. And so, I never will forget it. I think it was [0:55:00] maybe like that Monday, about three or four white families

came through to go to the store. And they said, "What y'all doing?" We said, "Well, we're boycotting the store because he fired the black boy and kept the white boy." And they said, "Well, I don't blame y'all." Said, "We'll go to another store." And they just kept going around the thing and went on off.

JD: Was that unusual that whites would cooperate with you?

WB: Yeah, it sure was. But they sure supported us, because they said, "We can go somewhere else." And then, the white fellow that brings the chickens and things up there, you know, they have eighteen-wheelers and trucks loaded with chickens and things. And he went there. And so, when he—he didn't unload. So, when he came out by us, he stopped. He said, "I don't know what y'all are doing." He said, "But whatever you're doing," said, "you keep doing it." Said, "You're going to get what you want," said, "because this is the first time I ever come here with a load of chickens and had to carry all of them back." [Laughs]

And so, then the next day, he called me and said, "Well, we done got rid of the white boy." And I said, "Well, we'll be meeting this Wednesday night." I said, "I can't make that decision now." I said, "I've got to go back to the meeting."

And so, that Wednesday night we met, and I told them what had happened. And some of them wanted—they agreed with me, and some of them said, "Well, he's going to send him to Lexington." I said, "I don't care where he sent him." I said, "We said fire him here in Durant." I said, "If he want to carry him to Lexington, that's good." I said, "But we done what we asked for." And so, and I said, "We're going to lift the selective buying." And then, after that, then he was one of our radio sponsors. He sponsored us until he went out of business.

JD: Oh, really? How—interesting story.

WB: Yeah.

JD: You're talking about schools, and desegregation first came in 1965, I believe.

WB: Um-hmm.

JD: With just a handful of blacks attending all-white schools.

WB: Yeah, right.

JD: What happened after that?

WB: Well, the first incident I had real bad was in the school. It was in Attala County. And that was at the school there in—going in—it was in Attala County. And so, this young man—I think his mother or grandmother one called me because—it was in McAdams School, that's where it was—and asked me would I go over there and see what had happened to her grandson.

And so, at that time, as I said, I was building houses. And even if I was putting a top on a house, if somebody called me that was in trouble, I would get down off the house and go see about it. And so, that morning, I went over there. And so, I'd never taken a gun or nothing like that, because I know if I had a gun, you know, and they stop you, they're going put you in jail or something like that. So, I didn't carry no gun.

And when I got over there, before I got over there, I couldn't see nothing but blue lights. And so, I said, "Well, I don't know what happened over here." So, one mind said, "Go back," and then, the other mind said, "No, go on. You done got this far. Go ahead." And so, when I got down there, they had the sheriff, all his people there, the constables, and even just white people, you know, with guns. And so, I just got out and went on in there.

And so, when I walked in the room, the sheriff was in there. And he said, "Can I help you?" I said, "I'm looking for the principal." He said, "Are you the undercover man?" I said, "I'm looking for the principal." "Are you FBI?" I said, "I'm looking for the principal." "Are you

a detective?" [Laughter] And every time he asked me a question, I'd tell him , I'd say, "I'm looking for the principal," so I guess he found out that I wasn't going to answer his questions. And he said, "The principal is not here. She's sick."

And so, when I came on out, and the school had just had, just like you said, that was the first year of integration. And so, when I come out of the school, even like the blacks were afraid to talk to me, I guess. [Laughs] And so, when I got [1:00:00] near 'bout back to the highway, one of the young men—I guess because he had a group, you know, and we used to sing on different programs together—and he said, well, that boy's mother worked down at Carthage, that's down there at the chicken place.

And I drove all the way from there to Carthage. And then, I got to Carthage, and they told me she had come back to Kosciusko, and I had to drive back from Carthage back to Kosciusko. And then, I finally found her, and she said, "Well, he's up there, and did I know the Careys in West?" I said, "Yeah, I know them." And so, she said, "That's where he's at."

So, I went up there, and he finally come to the door. I said, "Now, don't you come to the door for nobody else." And he said, "Well, I didn't rape that girl." Because the kids, they wouldn't go to class, because they thought they had killed him. And he said, "No." Said, "I've been courting that girl ever since the school was integrated." He said but what happened he went at this house and knocked on the window, and the girl came out, and they went on, you know, and did what they were going do.

And when they finished, I guess, she got ready to go back to the house. I guess her mama and dad found out that she was out of the house. And so, when she seen all them lights on back in her house, she wouldn't go back there. She went home with him. And he slipped her in his daddy's house, because his daddy didn't even know that the girl was in his house. [Laughs] And

they found out that he had let them come in his house, and he's in the bed with pneumonia and flu. But they got him out and knocked him up.

JD: Well, what happened eventually? Did he—was he brought to trial or anything?

WB: Well, after they found out that I was in it, and they had set a court date, but that court date never did come forward. And he hasn't been to no trial from that day to this day.

JD: Um-hmm.

WB: And they just dropped that like that after they found out, you know, that he had some support. But I'm saying that—and he wasn't killed or nothing like that, and he didn't rape her because they were going together.

JD: Yeah, yeah. The—

[Break in recording]

JD: —gration.

WB: Um-hmm.

JD: And once the Supreme Court decided in the Holmes County decision in 1969, the U.S. Supreme Court, that the time for all deliberate speed was past, and it was—schools were going to have to be integrated immediately, what happened here when whites were faced with having lots of black kids going to their schools?

WB: Well, it was kind of tough up here. But we went to Durant High, and we had some parents that, you know, put their kids up there, and a whole lot of them did not put them up there, because I guess they were afraid something was going happen to them. But I believe the first ones that I can remember that put their kids up there was Hattie Bell Saffold and Louise Winters. And so, I know they put their kids up there. And so, then after people found out didn't anything

happen to them, then the other people went. And so, now it's just about totally black. It might be a few whites up there.

JD: Where do the whites go?

WB: West, to the private school in Lexington.

JD: Um-hmm. These were Citizens Council schools at first?

WB: Yeah, they call them private. We called them private schools here. But they done named them Christian schools and all that kind of stuff. [Laughs] But there are still a bunch of them. The whites go to that school up at West.

JD: So, schools are pretty much segregated today, too?

WB: Yeah.

JD: Only blacks are in the public schools.

WB: Yeah.

JD: And they have black teachers and superintendent.

WB: Um-hmm.

JD: Back to your organizing, Sue writes that, quote, "you ran strict meetings, fined people for not showing up, and raking offenders over the coals for their fears, false excuses, and inactivity. And despite this, or maybe because of it, Durant meetings had more people attending, more money raised, and more projects involving more folks than anywhere else in Holmes County." That's a lot to deal with. Let's start by talking—and you've mentioned this several times—the real fears that people had about getting involved. How did you deal with that? How did you get them to overcome their fears and take chances?

WB: Well, as I said, [1:05:00] I had been working with black peoples and young peoples almost all of my life. And they had quite a bit of confidence in me, you know, whatever I said,

some of them would try it. But, now, it was kind of hard for a while, but they finally come on in there. And then, some of them was, you know, thinking that they was going lose their job if they got involved in this or that. And so, we just let them know, you know, that if you've got a job and ain't got your freedom, you don't have too much. And so, that was the way I always—and I always just had a whole lot of patience. And so, I just would work along with them and encourage them. But, as I said, we did that for a long time.

And then, we didn't have no center here in Durant, but we had a little old shotgun house out in the country that we were using, you know, for our meeting place. And we would meet out there every Wednesday night. And every Wednesday night, after we'd get opened up out there, it would be a carload of white people would come through and shoot over the top of that building. They didn't shoot *in* the building, but they would shoot over the top of it. And after they'd shoot over the top of it, you'd come this-a-way and then go on around that way and hit another road and come back to Durant.

And so, that next Wednesday night, I had organized a group and I told them, I said, "We're going bring some guns out here this Wednesday night. And I don't want you to shoot in the car, but just shoot over the car like they've been shooting over the building." And so, I had about three or four on this side of the center, and three or four on this side of the center. And so, when they came through that next Wednesday night, just after we opened up—they were pretty near on time. They come by—*pow, pow, pow, pow!*—and go on around.

So, this time, when they come on and were shooting over the building, and when they passed the building and went down that way, then my group opened up fire over their heads. And they turned around and come back. [Laughs] They didn't go all the way around that time. They turned around and come back on this side. And when they got back on this side, then the group

up there opened fire over their heads. And so, then I heard that [laughs] when they got back to Durant, they said, "You better not go out there!" Said, "Them niggers got all kind of machine guns out there!" [Laughs] There wasn't no machine guns. They were just different ones firing.

So, finally, a little later on, then we used to meet at this place. And we met at the church over there, called Second Pilgrim Rest Church, but—and some of the SNCC people, you know, were here, too. And so, they was coming on up that road and were going to come on to the meeting. And when they came by this church, they seen this rope. They had a grassroot rope that they had soaked in some gas. And they carried that rope in the church and tied it around the pulpit and brought it back outdoors, you know, and set it afire. But it just so happened that the Lord had sent them by there, and they seen that rope, and so they pulled it out of the church. And that's the only thing, the reason that church is still setting there.

And so, then I called the sheriff, Andrew Smith. He was the sheriff then. And he said—he was an old rednecker, I call him—and he was saying that he didn't care what happened, and all that kind of stuff. He wasn't going do this and he wasn't going do that. And so, a little later on, I called him back. I said, "Well, I'll tell you what." I said, "You don't have to send nobody out here." I said, "But if I call you *back*," I said, "we're going to be calling you for you to send the ambulance out here, because anybody we catch trying to burn this church down, we're going kill him." And then, he sent his deputies out there. [Laughs]

JD: Yeah. So, whatever happened to the nonviolent movement? [Laughter]

WB: Yeah.

JD: Were you always armed when you went out, when you went to meetings? Did you carry a gun in your car when you went out?

WB: Now, that's something I hardly ever did—carried a gun. As I said, now, when I went to Mileston, I didn't know all that was going on. And, you know, I thought they might have just—because the grandmama, I think she thought that they had killed the boy, you know. But the reason I didn't is because I know, you know, that if they catch you with a gun, [1:10:00] they were going have, kind of have something that they're going frame you, so, if they would stop me, they never would have found a gun on me. I didn't really carry no gun. It was way on over in there before I started carrying a gun or anything.

JD: Um-hmm. But when they would come into your community and attack you, your own property, why, you would fire back.

WB: Yeah. Well, I had some people, you know, that I, you know, that I know. But that was the only time that I asked them, you know, to bring some weapons out there was when we was out in the country. But when we were meeting in Durant or something, we didn't have [1:10:41]. And some of them was trigger-happy. They were glad to—but that time I did ask them to bring them out there, you know, but, you know, not to try to kill nobody but just let them know that by them shooting over the building wasn't going to stop us from meeting.

JD: Yeah, yeah.

WB: Um-hmm.

JD: The voting rights movement in Holmes County and in the rest of the South really got a boost by the passing of the Voting Rights Act in 1965, which made it much easier to register and vote, particularly with the federal registrars coming in, as they did.

WB: Yeah, right.

JD: And the movement changed during that time. You were talking about the professionals and how before, in the early days, they were either afraid or did not participate. But that sort of changed once the Voting Rights Act came.

WB: Yeah, it did, uh-huh.

JD: And Sue says that you, despite the fact that they were not active before, that you really wanted them in the Movement. Is that right?

WB: No, they wasn't active. No, I stayed on them. Every time I would meet, that was two of the things that I would bring up was the teachers and the preachers. Because I figured that the preachers didn't have nothing that they should have been afraid of, you know, because they didn't—they [1:12:06]. Some of them might have been borrowing money, you know, from banks or something like that. But, then, as I said, the teachers, they—we did have a white superintendent. But, now, when the one that got fired, now, we had a black superintendent at that time, but the whites were over him, you know, and that's where it was.

JD: Let's move, then—and I'll be finished shortly, but this is just fascinating—to the election campaigns and that you were so important there in organizing these communities, in getting the vote out and selecting candidates. The first was in the general election of 1966, I believe, Ralthus Hayes ran for Congress in that district.

WB: Um-hmm.

JD: But it was just really a preview of 1967 when you decided to run a slate of candidates in Holmes County. And that became one of the most famous elections in Mississippi history for the result.

WB: Yeah.

JD: Talk a little bit about how you—how did you go about selecting candidates? You were going to run for all the county offices, for state representative. Did you have lots of people volunteering to want to do it?

WB: Yeah. Well, at that time, as I said, whenever we would select candidates or something like that, we would always—not in a community meeting—we would always do it at the countywide meeting, which was on the third Sunday. And that's where we would choose our candidates. Some of them, you know, we would appoint or ask, and then some of them would volunteer. Because, you know, Representative Clark, he was the first black that [clears throat] became a candidate for U.S. Congress. [Clears throat]

JD: Yeah. Well, so, that election you had Representative Clark. Now, had he been active in the Freedom Democratic Party for a while?

WB: Um-hmm.

JD: And you had other teachers and were the ministers getting involved now in the late '60s, or were they still on the outside?

WB: Some of them came in, yeah.

JD: So, you had a larger movement then, a larger party?

WB: Yeah, um-hmm.

JD: And Representative Robert Clark became the first African American to sit in the Mississippi state legislature in the twentieth century.

WB: Um-hmm, right.

JD: And tell us how you got him elected.

WB: Well, as I said, we came and, you know—all that, as I said, most would take place on a third Sunday, because the community meeting, you know, it would just be maybe just the

community. But that third Sunday, *everybody* from the [1:15:00] different areas of the county would be there. And that's when we would choose our candidates and we would also know by how they were supporting their community, you know. If they wasn't supporting their community meeting, you know, on Wednesday night or whatever night they had, we would be kind of skeptical of them. But they had to be showing their face for us to even decide that we were going to support him as a candidate.

And, see, then, at that time, as I said, we were really together. And if we choose you, that we're going to support you as a candidate, and then if somebody else decides to come out against you, well, we were strong enough at that time to let them know that we were going to support *you*. And if you want to run against him, then you're going be out there on your own. And so, we would pick our candidates like that on Wednesday, and that's where we came up with Mr. Hayes and Robert Clark and Griffin McLaurin. And everybody decided to run was always being selected on that third Sunday, not no community meeting.

JD: Um-hmm. In other words, you were very careful with these first races that you got the best people to run?

WB: Yeah, that's right.

JD: And you had a decision to make in 1967 that either you could have—Representative Clark, for example, could have run in the Democratic primary against a white candidate, or you could have run an independent slate and waited until the November election.

WB: Um-hmm.

JD: Why did you decide to wait until November instead of running in the primary election?

WB: Well, we figured kind of, you know, that might be our best chance at that time.

JD: Why would that be? Why would it be better to just run in one election than to do it in two?

WB: Well, as I said, Representative Clark, he was pretty well-known and he communicated. Some of the whites, you know, were in his corner, and most all of the blacks. And so, but now, the person that he defeated, he was kind of—he had been in there a long time. But we all got behind him, and all of them said they were going to support him, and that's the way they did. I don't know why—why we picked November. [Laughs] Instead of having two chances, we just did one.

JD: Yeah. And the chances were a lot better running in the general election, asking people who hadn't voted before—you're only asking them to vote once.

WB: Yeah, right.

JD: How did you get the vote out? Tell me—recall about election day. Take me through election day, what you were doing.

WB: Well, on that election day, as I said, I was the coordinator. And every community that had a meeting, I would go there. And that's what we were, you know, being strong about, because, as I said, I was the coordinator and I would go to, at that time, Durant, Goodman, Pickens, Mileston, Tchula, Cruger, Old Pilgrim Rest, Lexington, Howard, and Old Pilgrim Rest, every community that had a meeting. I'd say it was seventeen or eighteen. And we would go there and be pushing our candidate, and then, sometimes our candidate would go with us, too. And that's the way we—we were real strong back in that then. Whoever we supported then, you know, was just about going to get elected.

JD: Um-hmm. And did you have carpooling on election day?

WB: Um-hmm, yeah.

JD: Or did you make sure you had—were there any problems at the polls? Were whites—were they able to vote pretty freely, or was there intimidation?

WB: No, there wasn't no whole lot of intimidation around the polls. Some polling places, you know, we'd have a little problem, but not too often because they knew we were mean, you know, and they know that we was together. And they know that this thing had went so long. And I give them credit, now, because some of the whites, you know, they might not would have come in there, you know, because they didn't know what their race was going do, just like we didn't know maybe what our race was going do. But some of them, they knew it had been so long, and some of them, you know, were very cooperative.

JD: Well, that again speaks to the—

[Break in recording?]

JD: Just south of here in Madison County, you had intimidation at the polls going on well into the 1970s. [1:20:00]

WB: Oh, yeah. Holmes County was the strongest county that the Freedom Democratic Party was in. Now, it was in other counties, but Holmes County was sure enough strong, and it's still pretty strong today.

JD: Yeah, and the Freedom Democratic Party is alive and well in Holmes County.

WB: In Holmes County.

JD: Well—

WB: We still meet the same Sunday and the same time. [Laughs]

JD: Uh-huh! Well, I want to thank you very much for talking with us. But I'd like before we close for you to talk a little bit about what you've been doing lately, about your own family, about conditions today.

WB: Well, I told my men—my wife, she passed in ’91. And we’ve got a daughter. But, as I said, and they never did disagree with me because I was gone all the time. As I said, there wasn’t a night passed that I—because, as I said, I had them seventeen or eighteen counties that I had to be at. And so, she never did say anything about you’re staying on the road too much. Well, I think she appreciated what I was trying to do.

JD: It’s important to have that support, wasn’t it?

WB: Yeah, that’s right. And then, I had other people, you know, that would tell me, and I told them—and then, they’d ask me, say, “I don’t know how you put up with fooling with all them different folks.” I say, “Well, they don’t worry me, because that all I did all my life, was concern about—.” And I said, and the main thing I said, and I still say that I never did hate white folks. But I said the only thing that I just didn’t like the way that they was treating the black folks. And that way you can get along and you can [1:21:59] with anybody.

And the main thing: I always have been outspoken. Whatever I have to say, I don’t care where I’m at or who it is, I’m going say it. And that goes a long ways, too. And I said, and I want all, the whites or blacks, to know I wasn’t for sale. I said I wasn’t out here trying to accept no money or put no money in my pocket, I said, because I wasn’t out there for. That’s the only thing I want is freedom.

And I said the same thing I say today I said in the ’60s, and *early* ’60s, that you don’t need nothing all-black, you don’t need nothing all-white. And I say that in every meeting I go to right now. We don’t need all-black candidates and we don’t need all-white candidates. I always think it should be mixed. And I feel that way today.

JD: Final question: What do you think have been the most positive changes that have taken place since the 1950s and ’60s? And what remains to be done? What are the major problems facing the black community and Mississippi?

WB: Well, as I said, now, you had to keep letting them know that just because you might be the majority, that don’t mean that the majority always be the best thing. I said—and so, now, see, a whole lot of people will say, well, they’re going to support you because you’re black or this or that. I said, “But that’s not the name of the game.” I said, “God didn’t intend for it to be like that,” I said, “because if God had been pretending to be that he was for all-black or all-white, just like I said, the president we’ve got now never would have got elected.”

JD: Yeah.

WB: I said, “He wouldn’t have got elected if the white folk hadn’t helped to get him in there.” And I said, “And he wouldn’t have been—the second term if it hadn’t been for the white folk.” And I said, “That should show you right there that God knows that this thing needs to be mixed.” And I said, “As long as I live, I will always stand by that.” I don’t need nothing all black or all white.

JD: Um-hmm. Is there anything else you’d like to add to our discussion?

WB: Well, I appreciate y’all coming [laughs] and I hope I live to get to read about it. [Laughs]

JD: Well, I mean, you have made such an impact on this community, on the state, and we are just delighted that you are willing to tell your story for us and for all the many people who will be listening and watching you when the museum opens in Washington.

WB: Um-hmm.

JD: Thank you again, Mr. Bruce, very much.

WB: Okay. Let me see, I think I've got a picture here of the group—

[Recording ends at 1:24:55]

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Sally C. Council