

MFDP Chapter 69

JOHN BUFFINGTON

Interview
John Buffington
Project leader of Clay County,
Miss. FDP--Member SNCC

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Side 2

Q: How long are you going to stay with the West Point group?

A: I'll probably be here another year. Most likely. But I'll ...well, I'll probably stay til about Christmas. Then I think I'll leave...get a scholarship...and go back to school. Once I finish school, then I won't have anything to worry about.

Q: Think you'll come down and work full time again?

A: Well, yeah, yeah, I'll feel much better, I think, being finished...I think finishin school offers a certain amount of reward. I'd like to get that off my mind now. I want to go on and finish and come back.

Q: What are you majoring in?

A: Nothing; I mean, I'm not majoring in, anything, really. I almost one time majored in political science.

Q: What do you think has given the West Point project the reputation of getting the most done in the state?

A: Exaggeration, for one thing.

Q: That's not a fair question to ask a project leader.

A: Exaggeration, yeah, and one of the things...well, we really followed the way that the FDP was originally set up, which is the best, I think...we really stuck just to voter registration, to trying to organize precincts...and every program we attempt to work on, we try to gear it to voter registration. This is, very easy to do--you can't talk about jobs without...if I talk about jobs, I'm always bringing up the point that you can't talk about this unless you talk about voting. Then one of the things we do, one of the things, to try to organize, we've held people together, one of the things, you know. And a lotta people, you know, see people coming up in the finances, you know, like--county's able to raise quite a bit of money to go to Washington, to send good people to Washington, and...people being involved in FDP, and Clay County, they can understand. They understand. You never met Miss Satter, she's an extremely bright lady, about the fifth grade rhetoric, extremely extremely bright, and she went to Washington, she made a really good impression, you know. She...we let her do many things, while she was there. She done so many things. And they want to go to Alabama, you know, to organize an FDP there. She knows the

complete history of the FDP. And it seems that people who do get involved, you know, many of them, not all of them, but many of them, understand what the FDP is, and they can explain it, you know...basically know what's happening. They read, they write to Jackson, inquiring after information. And they usually attend meetings good. They got good rhetoric--very talkative, you know. And that's why people give us a good go, look at us, because we're organized and have good people. Most places, they's less of them understands a lot. Some of the militants, you know, the ones still in FDP, they come to me and talk to me, but won't do much. Like they went to Jackson, went to jail, made a big scene down there; one girl got on the tube, made a big scene, telling the cop what she would do if...a lot of things like that. Just being very forward, wanting to be with the first crowd, going with the most dangerous. They go to the place they thought'd be the most dangerous, in Clay County. And girls like Carolyn, will come from--not a bourgeois background, but a middle-class background, a respectable background, you know--and it's really true, you don't find too many kids like that working. And Johnny, he wants changes in Mississippi. I can tell; he asks me lot of questions from time to time about what's going on. He's concerned about getting people registered to vote. But he's still a kid, you know; he's sincere. And that's one of the things, you know, about this. A lot of kids like...when people went to Washington, you know, for business. And they take it seriously; they take FDP seriously. Very serious. People's really involved, like Mrs. Adams, Lessie, Richard. He's willing to give up anything.

Q: You have a few Northern Negroes working on the project too, don't you? John Leslie, isn't he from Chicago?

A: No, he isn't.

Q: You don't have any Northern Negroes?

A: No. He stayed in Chicago for a year, and then came back down. He stayed in Chicago about two years, maybe. And let go Chicago when he came back down to work...in the movement. He's a Mississippian, just like I'm a Georgian.

Q: We've been asking people before about the difference between the civil rights movement as seen by the Negroes and the whole big movement, as seen by the white volunteers. What do you think the focus of the movement is for Negroes? I don't know if this is really a difference, but is it like attacking the white power structure and breaking all that down, or gaining equal rights within the structure?

A: What are you talking about?

Q: I'm talking about what people see as what they're fighting for.

A: Do the Negroes see what they're fighting for, you mean?

Q: Yes, do they see it in radical terms?

A: Radical terms. No, they don't see it in radical terms. Not radically. They see...see, one of the things the Negroes...they don't...if you're talking about, do they think radically, they can see, you know, see things exactly like the workers, then they don't. No. They just see it...they see changes, they see wanting to make changes, and make jobs, and get to vote...that's about it. That's about it.

Q: Then they want to work through the existing power structure rather than changing it?

A: Yeah. They don't emphasize the overthrow. And you can see that, you know. We walk about, and we talk about it, and they say, "We want to do it right. We's going to wait for the decision." Negroes don't want to force it. Negroes when they start to work, they's not supposed to make as much as the white folks. And they know that. But I think it's going to come a time, as they understand more,...but I don't think you could just...I don't like to just pound things into people's heads and say, "This is it." you know. And "This is bad for you, and this is good." They'll find out. I don't feel as if I should force them.

Q: Yes, that's the answer to the question.

A: One of the things, you know...people...one of the things you can't do, you can't go around making the mistake that some of the other workers do...like opposing the NAACP. And this is fine. Say, "I never get out publicly and denounce the NAACP." Among FDP nor go out into the communities and say, you know...let the workers do this..."NAACP is a sorry no-good organization." But what I do is talk about what I'm doing, you know, for the county. And people say, "Oh, I'm member NAACP." I say, "Well, that's wonderful." I say, "That's wonderful." And when they get involved, and I try to get them involved, and what happens, most of the people I just talked to was NAACP members. Oscar Brown, you know, one night he say to me, "Now wait a minute. They start talking about the NAACP." They'd read an article that was printed in the paper about the NAACP attacking the FDP, and he says, "You know, they haven't done anything here." He said, "they just get our money. I've belonged to that organization, and they do zero for us. That NAACP, I've been giving em dollars for twenty-one years, he says, twenty-one years I've been a member of that thing. And they have never told me

they's comin in, to try to teach me about their program. And they's just talking," they say. "What do you think?" I says, "I don't know. What do you think?" They talk, and they say, "They really ain't too good." "They don't give you any money." And then I state, you know, "No, they haven't given us too much money." Now they don't like NAACP. When NAACP was going to have a project here, they'd heard all these reports here, because Henry's brother-in-law was one of their workers, and he lives here. He's very...he's a big civil rights man, one of the first Negroes run for candidate in Mississippi. Independent candidate. And Brother Nimms is an NAACP member. So I talked to him, told him nothing, didn't try to force an opinion, you know. I didn't think it was wise, you know, to speak out and try to argue with him. About what the NAACP haven't done. So I just let him talk, about it. And when they said they was coming in him, in here, Brother Lindsay said, "All these people are doin' a fine job. Why do you have to come in?" And he told 'em, you know, explained about this and that, and they got in a big fight, he and his brother-in-law. So Rev. Lindsay, they began to pressure him, and he came by and told us he was looking for a house for these NAACP, these 10 workers coming in. And he was honest enough to come by and tell us they's coming. And he know, he know enough that we don't care that much about it. But we never, never did...from what he'd read, but he never heard us talk about 'em. Jack Jackson is strictly NAACP, and...what he said is, "it's a kind thing Rev. Lindsay done. I called him down to Jackson and told him not to come, told him we didn't need it, because I don't see how you could work here with that kind of competition. They ain't going to be no candidate, no work. So I don't think that'd be meaningful." And they'd gotten a house for 'em and everything. Then they called Jackson, and Jackson wouldn't go pick 'em up. He said, he didn't think they needed 'em. And they didn't want 'em, they wouldn't work and be involved with 'em, because they already had one. And they still like it. Well, I have arguments with Jackson, but not about NAACP. About other things, just our views. Because he's a very aggressive man, you know, and he understands, you know, he's the kind of person you can talk to and argue with. But I don't think you should spend all that time, you know...I really don't like to work that way. Maybe I should go down and try to talk about them other organizations, you know, what you're doing and what you're trying to do. But don't talk about it. Because I don't think it's FDP versus NAACP. I don't see it that way. Or SNCC versus NAACP. That either. I really never have felt that way; and I'm amember of NSNCC. One of the things, you know...I'm not, I'm not...saying I like NAA; I really don't. I think it should be a tea party or something. It's just a tea party; they don't do anything. But I...I, you know, I won't say they all...they're a useless organization, they never should have been organized. I won't say anything like that. They played a great part in what's

in what's going on. And I've said this, and I'll say it again, they've played a great role; and just because we're SNCC, we're not super, and we're not the only ones that have...created this movement. We're not the only ones. We're not the movement, it didn't start when SNCC was organized. We're not the only...you know...thing in all this. I've seen wonderful people in SCLC; lot of guys are very good friends of mine. And SNCC opposed that, you know. But I think SNCC is the most faithful. And determined. And one of the things, you can't keep SNCC down. People are more faithful, and more dedicated. That's the dedication. People are, you know, they say SNCC is bankrupt, that doesn't disturb anything. It doesn't mean to anybody anything. Many times, that's almost the ruination of another organization. The NAACP would just say that, it's the ruination. If they go bankrupt. But it doesn't mean that to SNCC. They say, "Well, we haven't got any money."

Q: Do you think the difference between the so-called philosophies of SNCC and SCLC are really that great, or do you think the philosophies are really not that different?

A: There's not really many differences exist. We'll work with SCLC on too many things. It all ends up, with a fight. And we're never...have an executive meeting, you know. We'll never work on another program with them. They are basically good, and working in the right direction. And we'll talk about it, you know, for eight hours, but we can't let them trip us, all this crap. They do us the same way.

Q: Do you think this kind of argument is healthy?

A: Yeah; it does more good. Because neither one of em... lot of these guys know people on the SCLC staff, and they get along fine. And when one says, "I heard you say this about me," the other says, "Oh, I wouldn't say that." You know. There's just this thing, it's not that they're right and the others...it's just, you know. Like we...at the last executive meeting, we decided we wouldn't have any financial responsibility, be responsible for any money spent in Alabama, you know. And that's what SCLC didn't want. They wanted us to work there. We said we're doing the march, and if it wasn't for the people that stated we're doing the march, we would only give our medical committee radio cars. We end up giving \$28,000. This buys everything. So King never... and you can see, though; King never opens the attack on us. And Foreman have never really openly attacked King. One of the things that have happened, that several people who call themselves SNCC, but they're really not...King come down to Mississippi, and these guys say, "Oh, I'm SNCC," and if he goes to Alabama, these guys put on a pin and the reporter says, who you working for, he says, "I'm working for SNCC."

And the reporter interested. And he say, "Yes, and I have a statement to make." And they'll speak for SNCC, you know. And they'll write it up, and say, "A coordinator said this, a committee member said this," I know the game. There's a big writeup in Newsweek, I think it was, about one girl who had said so much about Martin Luther King. She said some bad things, you know. And Jim personally, paid a personal visit. He didn't like it.

Q: What is SNCC's attitude toward the press?

A: Usually they don't like the press. Press' s not very friendly to SNCC. Never.

Q: How conscious is the movement of the rest of the nation? Particularly, how conscious is SNCC of what the rest of the nation thinks of it? It's my own impression that SNCC doesn't seem to care too much how things look to white Northern liberals. They're not worried about alienating them.

A: Oh, I think they are. They don't care, perhaps... our activities here...you have people that are for SNCC this week, and next week, they're you know, financing someone else. And they write terrible letters, and threaten...and ask why. And we write a letter back, say, "Okay, and don't give us any more money then." They don't care. And they stop. They don't care, about what...how they agitate here. How that looks to liberals in the North. And neither do I. Personally, I don't care.

Q: Is it that you don't really need their support, or...

A: Yeah, you need it.

Q: Is it that they haven't helped you sufficiently in the past?

A: No, you need the people's support in the North. But when you start solely depending, and people in the North change their opinion, this is not a wise move. Like the FDP has caused SNCC to lost a lot of support, really. They lost a lot of support because of FDP. But they don't care; they don't care for a minute. They don't care for...they don't care for many reasons, because when you start telling people, people start demanding, you know, they start giving you money and they start demanding programs, I think that's bad. And that's what they...if you ever talk to, try to explain your standpoint, you know, and say you're afraid of losing support, you know, and let them think they've got the control on you, they'd...the next time they demand more. And you get hung up, you see. And that's the worse thing about NAACP. If white liberals threaten to take their financial support

away, a lot of financial support would be gone. They would all quit. But...but you can't care about what they think about some of your programs. They threaten...they question, you know. "We've got a right," you know. With a statement they don't think is so wise, is a wise move or a wise decision. But some of the people, you go to the Atlanta office, you find a lot of interesting things. I mean, a lot of letters, that come from people, you know. Well, SNCC doesn't listen. They really don't care. They need the support, they really need the support, and it hurts...but on political issues, they ain't got time to get involved. They've lost thousands of dollars.

Q: Why do you think this is? Because FDP is such a radical idea? Is it what FDP does, or is it what FDP represents?

A: Well, they think it's radical, you know, acts to unseat other congressmen. And you know, they thought this was organized, that FDP people were involved...in the regular democratic party. And it's like all kinds of little Democratic clubs that they get support from, you know. That's a lot of little things. All kinds of little political organizations. And they don't support this; they don't think this thing should be done this way. They don't like mass demonstrations in Washington; they won't support that. They think that's bad, you know, to approach those Congressmen in office. Some thing like that. And they'll tell you, they'll write, and tell you that's bad. The trip to Africa caused a lot of confusion, on SNCC's support in Vietnam, that's...see, SNCC never came under the heading, and that's one of the things they stayed as they have, they never figured they was just a civil rights organization. It's not...it's the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. It's not equipped just to deal with civil rights. Civil rights, where there are Negroes involved. It doesn't say that. People get all these hangups, and they say...people are really confused about what SNCC is, and tell us they don't know...well, once I was on the SNCC staff for three years, and I still know...what SNCC is...I don't know.

Q: Is that because there's so much local autonomy?

A: Well, nobody...you just operate. SNCC used to have a structure, but it doesn't now.

Q: What kind of a structure do you mean? A hierarchical structure, with someone at the top?

A: Heck yeah; you know, how you do it, how this is done, what comes from here, and this person is responsible...is supposed to be responsible to this person, you know. Organization, so you could get things done. But then it's hard to get things done now, because you don't have any structure. It's just...

it's just a wild thing, you know. But basically, it's gettin better. The Mississippi summer project, you know, and SNCC grew, you know...going through growin pains, that's one thing...growing pains. And it's growing, you know, like in staff. Out in Mississippi projects they's got about 200 people on staff. It used to be about 20, about 50. It used to be about 40 or 50. Now they got about 275, 80.

Q: Are you talking about SNCC, or FDP...

A: Yes, about SNCC.

Q: Are you given more or less complete local autonomy in what you do? Do you receive directions from anybody? As far as directing the project here goes?

A: Well, the Jackson office, you know...about the challenge, you know. They call, and say, "Set up certain meetings," and that sort of thing.

Q: Atlanta doesn't give you any directions? What does Atlanta do?

A: Well, Atlanta...

Q: Do they transfer you around, for instance?

A: Yes; they got the say there; they say, "We'd like for you to come to Georgia, we'd like for you to go fundraise, you should go here, or we're sending somebody, because you need him." They can do that. They do that.

Q: Do you think that black and white will finally be able to live in complete harmony? In other words, do you think SNCC's philosophy will actually come about, or is it just a goal?

A: I can't speak for SNCC, you know; for myself...I think it's going to be...I never seen...I think there's going to be more bloodshed, really. And it's going to get much worse before it gets better. Most all revolution has to go through this thing, has to get real bad. And I do think it's going to get better. There's going to be more bloodshed, but as I said before, I don't think it'll be just an all-out black versus white. But it's going to be, certainly there's going to be more violence. Negro's fighting, and he's going to be... Because one of the things, Negroes are losin fear every day. And they're seeing, the white man's not as bad as they thought he was. And they's seeing that the white people are afraid of them. And they'll use that. The more law they have on their side, and the more justice they have on their side. The

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more they're going to do. And I do think, one day, you know, it'll be...complete harmony.

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Q: Do you want to talk about how you first got involved in the civil rights movement?

A: I was a high school student, in a rural area of Georgia. And about 21 miles from Atlanta. I used to go to Atlanta on the weekends, you know. I got involved in some of the first demonstrations started in Atlanta, and then I enrolled in college at Morehouse. I became very active. That was before. SNCC...there were a few organizations, campus organizations, you know. I became involved in Atlanta, Georgia, doing demonstrations at Rich's department store.

Q: Were there any particular individuals or issues or anything that made you make the decision to get actively involved? Situations?

A: Well, one of the things, you know, it's been one of the things above me since I was a child, you know. To see... from the time...well, maybe you have to go back to your childhood. When I would look at magazines or anything, and seeing all white faces, you know, and my skin was black. And I start to question things. And that was the time I knew we were denied...discrimination.

Q: Were your parents involved?

A: No.

Q: What did they think when you began to get involved?

A: My mother and father were very conservative. My mother, she's not as conservative as my father; he's, he just doesn't think. He thinks sort of like Booker T. Washington--Negroes should get more education, should clean up, should...try hard, you know, to master whatever, and try to make their schools best. They think along those lines. And he doesn't think anything about it, doesn't believe in integration. Says fix up your own neighborhood, things like that.

Q: Were they very happy when you got involved?

A: No;

Q: Did you ever agree with that line of thinking?

A: No, because see, my father's very...my father's illiterate.

He's got a third-grade, he was a third-grade student, and he happened to be one of the Negroes who made it; he made quite a bit of money. And for a Negro to make it with a third grade education--it's hard for Negroes to make it with a Ph.D., but to make it with a third grade education, and get to be a middle class, it's done a lot. And he says, you know, it's how you work, how you do, how you carry yourself. Things like that.

Q: Did you finish college before you started working on the project, or did you drop out?

A: No, I have another...another year in college. Not a year, actually; what happens, you lose your credits...it's hard for me to go back to school; very hard.

Q: Do you think you will?

A: Yeah; I see the need, I see the need for education. Especially when you're...I used to not think so much about it, but now that I'm older, I see the need for it, you know. And...I see, it's sort of being in this type of work, and the movement's not going to last forever...and that...and you know, that, it's sort of like I depend on the movement. This is the only thing, you know, this is my heart. But then, you know, the future, you have to think where you're going to be, where you're going, are you going to sleep in a sleeping bag all your life. Things like that. I'm not disgusted, you know, I'm just getting older.

Q: How old are you?

A: 25.

Q: Did you...what types of different work have you been doing since you've been working for the movement?

A: What do you mean?

Q: Well, what did you do before...

A: Well, I was in Chicago, I was in school, in Chicago. I was going to school, and working part time--Friends of SNCC, in Chicago. And very active in the school. On the executive committee in Chicago, of Friends of SNCC. Same type of thing.

Q: How long have you been working fulltime?

A: I worked full time...I used to work full time in '60, but then I quit, I decided I would go to school. I didn't work any more full time until oh, last summer, when the Mississippi summer project started. Then I came back.

Q: How long have you been working in West Point?

A: A year now.

Q: From the beginning of the project here?

A: Yes.

Q: Do you have plans to stay for a year, or did you think of going back?

A: No, I came down to stay for six weeks. And I was going back to school. That was my plans. Joe was the same way, same thing; he thought he would come down, work, then...six weeks, and then away back to school. But it's hard. In six weeks you can only build so much. And you know what's going to happen when you leave; it's all going to go back the way it was. And last summer, was not a pleasant summer, because the pressure was really on, you know. Everybody was in at 9 or 10:00, people really scared. Always being harassed, and chased, and things. You know people who were really involved, last summer, if everybody were pulled out, I don't know what would happen to those people. We did a certain amount of protection, especially the white workers.

Q: You were offered it?

A: We offered it. A lot of protection to the community, to those who had become directly involved. Some of the officials would say, you know, "They'll only be here for six weeks, and then they'll leave with your ass hanging out the front."

Q: Is that why you decided to stay?

A: That's one of the reasons why I decided to stay. That's one of the reasons; I tried to encourage other people to stay, you know, until at least winter, or something like that. Then they'd probably leave.

Q: How many do you have, who plan to stay this summer?

A: I don't know; you never are able to tell. Some say they're leaving, and then one day you wake up and they're knocking at the door. They're back. And some stays, you know. I wouldn't want to say. About four's said they're staying, and out of the group I'd say there'll be two or three others come back. Some of them will fall into the old routine of doing classwork, and that they've...if they go and try to do things, and they'll fund raise, and they write to find out what's happening, and if something happens, you know, they'll come back. If something's happened, they'll be right back. And they'll stay two weeks, or something like that. And they end up staying six months.

Q: What other differences do you see between last summer's project and the one this summer?

A: Now...are you speaking about this town, or the entire state?

Q: Clay County.

A: Oh; well...

Q: Is the entire state different?

A: Well, different counties have different...some of the things that happened last summer in some of the counties, is not having as much effect. And like in this county, they didn't do anything last summer. And now they're doing things.

Q: Would you say you found project people more involved last summer?

A: They were...yes, it seems to me they were more involved, and more sincere in what they were doing, than the people this time, it seems like. And I could be wrong, but it seems to me that way.

Q: What do you think are the main advantages of having white summer volunteers?

A: Well, the advantages, I think it's good, you know, to have whites coming down and working. What I hope, what I planned too, what I'd like would be to have as many Negroes involved, you know...as whites, and try to balance. I think it's good for the city, it's good for the Negro community because it makes them feel good, to see white and Negro working together. It sets an example for the people, you know, and the white community tends to...make them resent they really resent you, though, at times. White, Negroes mixed, you know...they think that's not...but that's one of the advantages, you know...to let him, to let the city officials and the white citizens know that it's going to happen in Mississippi, you know. And maybe these are outsiders, but that's what they call them, anybody born outside Mississippi are outsiders, but they're born in the United States, and I don't see how they could possibly be outsiders, but let 'em see people, you know, in the sovereign state of Mississippi, declare that they're working with Negroes. Paul Johnson rants and raves about integration, and his platform was that it'll never happen, you know. And you know, Negroes and whites canvassing in the Negro ghetto, walking in the downtown areas together, shopping together, that's an advantage. And generally I don't...see, maybe I've

lost a lot, maybe I've lost a lot of prejudices, you know. I don't think about people as being white. It's just...they're people. And I'm often...I admire or dislike coworkers...I dislike having so many white coworkers here. Not the FDP, not the Freedom Democratic Party; some of those are fine.

Q: Are there any local people?

A: No; no local people, not white.

Q: You mean other SNCC people?

A: Yeah; other workers. I don't think it's too good, it's not a good idea to have 21 white workers in a county.

Q: I don't think there are...

A: yes.

Q: Are they jealous of the number of workers?

A: Well, huh. A lot of the boasting, that goes on, they think...other directors get kind of jealous of this...counties competing against the other...that's usually what happens, you know--see which county can really move. And see, they were using...last summer, you know, if you could get fifty people...no, a hundred, two hundred people to demonstrate, this county was moving. Which is not true. See, I don't think that...I think in a sense that having workshops, teaching people to use the vote wisely, and really teaching, you know; political education is more important to me than....and I would, I wouldn't refrain from trying to call any big mass demonstrations, you know, around...and I've had many issues come up that you can. But I think, you know, that having three hundred people together, coming together, to talking together, about how to run and candidates, and such...is more lasting than three hundred people going to jail, you know, not knowing what they're going to jail about. Really, they know basically, of course, they dislike things, they know they're being denied things, but they don't know politically.

Q: How'd you happen to end up with 21 volunteers?

A: Well, the county; the FDP office, and the executive committee, each precinct decided how many workers they wanted. And it came to a total of 25. In each precinct it made a report. We try to rate them from precinct level to county level, you know. Like that, a precinct can decide

how many workers they want, and ask the committee, and if they think that's too many, they can talk about it and change it. Like when they said twenty five. "There haven't been any problems, it'll only confuse them to have all 25 workers gatherin in an office the size of this room" you know. As far as...you know, having any problem of staff, I'm not confronted with that.

Q: You said you were more interested in developing understanding in the people, than you were in mass demonstrations. Yet a few of us...a few of our talks with volunteers show that they're much more interested in things like... demonstrations, and like this evening Jay and Jim were plotting how to throw a complete picket line around the downtown area. Do you find that this makes it harder to work?

A: Well, see, if I can say, I haven't had any trouble with them. We talk about, and we talk with the executive committee about this idea, and this is one of the things I'm always bringing up, you know; let the people decide what they want to do. And...and if they decide not to, that they don't want to picket, however they want to do it, there's usually a way to...I try to work it out...but if...I do guide, if I see like something that people are really making a big mistake about, then I'll force my opinion on them. And many times...I like this you know...I've said things in executive meetings to try to get people...and usually what they say is, "That's right; what do you think, John?" And I say, "That's the way it should be, it should be like this." And I remember there used to be a time when they'd accept this, and now they don't do it.

Q: You mean the volunteers?

A: Now, the local people. They argue, you know, about issues. And I think that's an indication of independence. And a lot of executive meetings, they have them, and they decide, and that's why we tried, and that's what happened in many of the areas. That's a problem--to get the whole program together. And they go out and work on it. Because this is what they like; this is one of the things they'd like to see. To see this program. And I don't think it has a tendency to draw people in, to really make them feel a part. No..

Q: Do you think it does or doesn't?

A: It doesn't.

Q: Is the volunteers' independence a hindrance?

A: Their independence a hindrance? In some areas, yes, in some counties, yes. You have some of the volunteers saying such things as, "I don't want to work with FDP; I'm COFO." We have three over here that's not COFO, but I don't know--something else. And "I'm not affiliated with any organization."

But they're here; they're in the state of Mississippi. And they're doing things. They're not affiliated with either one of the organizations, and I know the reason for that, because they want to do as they like, you know; and there are people hung up on this thing about authority, you know. And saying "I resent authority," you know. And you have people who resent structure, you know, entire structure, and things like that, and so they work independently. And nobody... in some of the areas, knows what the other one's doing. And it really... what happens, they get angry, and they pack up and leave, and they take their little project with them in their little suitcase. And it's just... it really creates it misleads, and confuses people, because they do not know exactly what's going on. All right; here's a person. You find people to say things like... Now another group came by here this afternoon, and they say, They wasn't from FDP, No, they didn't have anything to do with COFO--they was working independently. And they say, what's going on? He's not NAACP, and people don't know. They're confused. But we haven't had that problem here. And I don't think it'll happen here.

Q: What you were saying about demonstrations--do you think the time for a lot of demonstrations is past already, or do you just think...you're not against demonstrations?

A: I'm not against demonstration. Demonstrations are geared toward economics, more. Now I support--this is just personal, me speaking--I support a picket line, if it's going to prove something. I'm for demonstrations if there're some results. But I'm just not for...you know--listen, I know you know that you can accomplish something out of a demonstration. Something good. But I do think the time is out for demonstrations. For mass demonstrations. I think there are more important things to do. Can't demonstrate for the right to vote, you know; that kind of thing...the laws won't change, for all that. I think the most important thing is what you do with the people in Mississippi when they do become registered, and do have the right to vote, you know. Will it be like Chicago? Will it be another Chicago? That's the thing, you've got to work on that. And there's no law, there's no law or anything, you know, or no bill they could pass, to protect the people in Chicago, for instance. Like the machine, and how it's set up, and how it operates. There's not going to be any way, you know, or anything you can do once it happens, really. Not really much you can do. You have to really politically organize people. And I think it's really a great need, for political organization and education. More than anything, and using the vote wisely, and using money wisely.

Q: Do you find any of the other SNCC people calling you conservative for that sort of statement?

A: Yes; they've always called me conservative.

Q: Do you find the volunteers calling you conservative? Wanting to do something?

A: Yeah; they'd like to do something more that way, at times. It's just like the Beasley boycott, for instance. The thing that's happening in that community. Now I understand Bert--you've probably seen Bert--he's a kid, he tries, he wants to be radical, and he's really trying hard. Trying to be something he can never become. They want to continue to boycott, to boycott, to boycott...See, one of the things, you take people out in large numbers, what I believe, I think numbers represent something--people. They must really represent something. And if you pull people out of school in large numbers, I think it's better to let them slowly drift out of the boycott, and back in school, and then you'll still have 10 or 20 hanging on. And that's silly; that doesn't prove anything. What you should do is, pull them out in large numbers, go talk to the Board of Education and let them promise these things which they won't do, and what you do, is put them back in school, and those kids that is really involved, talk and organize more. And then they can say, "Look now; they have a deadline on this." And they can boycott again. And then you can pull more. The numbers, you know, that represents some sort of organization, I think. But when you...when this circle is broken, and people drift back in school, the pressure's off the Board of Education. They understand what's happening. So I don't think...you can't just continue to boycott, boycott, boycott. What counts is what happens--has anything changed. No.

Q: Was it Bert's idea to boycott in the first place, or was that from the students here?

A: That generally came from...well, it started in the FDP precinct, the boycott.

Q: Then that was a local decision?

A: Yeah, a local decision. They didn't...I gave them certain information, how to go about it, but they said, "Why didn't we just keep 'em out of school?" And they didn't understand boycotts, you see. "We'll just take 'em out of school." And that's another thing I'm discouraged about, you know; workers talk like...they really haven't explained to the people in the community. They heard of a sister, who was a victim...and that he, that he has to do what he's doing, to hold that job, to keep that job. But he does things like make the kids go out and clean up the building, you know. That's the way he punishes kids every day. And building cleanup. Because if they didn't do that, they'd have to hire extra hands, and that's \$40 which could go to white education. That's coming down from the Superintendent, to save on help. And that's one of the ways...and I said, there's too much attention been focussed on the principal, and not enough on the school.

Q: Do you consider the people, like the people on the school board and the sheriff, and the rest of the local people, also victims of this?

A: No. Some of them. Now some of them, I look at some of them...maybe I'm wrong. But I look at the chief of police, certain things I dig about him. Not that I trust him. But he's honest, you know, in a lot of things. Like once he told the sheriff, and the sheriff was going on about the factories here, and the sheriff said, "John, lemme tell you; all these factories got 50-60 and some of them 80-90 percent Negro workers." And the chief of police said, "Joe, you know it's only 20 percent, at the most. And some of them don't hire any." Things like that. And I think that's an indication of something...I don't know what. But it seems to me, he's quite honest. The sheriff, you know, look at him...give him the eye, and he still say, "Wait a minute." He say, "That's wrong, Joe; no more than 20 percent."

Q: Do you find the chief of police easier to work with, then?

A: I never dealt with him. I never...I been here a year, and I think the sheriff seen me maybe about twice, since I been here. The chief of police, no, he didn't know me. He didn't know me until the other day, I was arrested. I never...you know; I never have any direct dealings with them. I mean, I don't have any reason to tell them, I don't think, about anything. I've called, you know, and told 'em about Freedom days. They don't like that, when we're having Freedom days. They thank me for calling, something like that.

Q: When we talked with the sheriff, the thing he said he was most hurt about was that he couldn't just sit down with people, sit around a table and talk about, you know, what the problems were.

A: What they do, you know, is...the FDP has had dealings with them, that's all they do, is talk.

Q: How about in regard to nonviolence? What do you feel--there's two different types of nonviolence: the philosophical nonviolence of Martin Luther King, and the other type's called tactics, according to SNCC. Do you feel this would be your type?

A: Tactical nonviolence. Nonviolence to me, uh, I'm not too sure whether...I know I'm not nonviolent. I know that. And it's hard for people, I think it's hard for people to...it's hard for me to say I'm nonviolent, because I don't think I can just say what I would do, under certain circumstances, if...although some people can, like John Bush. I think he's totally nonviolent. But I don't see, you know, I don't think...it's hard for people just to say, I'm nonviolent. Many people say it, and they're really not. Certain things, you know, can get you going, and you react in different ways. You may be nonviolent sometimes

as a tactic, and then in a demonstration, there's 200 cops with guns. I think that's the time to be nonviolent. But say, for instance, I don't think I would stand for a... you know, a redneck to hit me and beat me. I go limp and ballup in a knot. I don't think I could do that. But if it's ten, or five, I'd be nonviolent.

Q: Do you think that the movement will continue to be nonviolent? Or that this nonviolence will become ineffective?

A: That's really hard to answer. See, one of the things what happens, the more Negroes push, and the more they accomplish, the more laws is passed, the more civil rights laws, and the more changes, there is, the Negroes in the South are losing fears every day. And there's many of them really think they're going to have to get even with the white man. And one of the things, ways they think they can get even, you know, is to do some of the things he have done. You know. If...and I've heard, you hear, canvassing in the community, you hear people, and I think there's a good chance of violence in West Point if you really get Negroes, really going to war with the whites. Because I can remember a lot of incidents, happen here, you know, where people like when we moved here to Mrs. Adams' house, and it was just rumors, you know, that when they burned the cross, that this wasn't a rumor, this was true--when they burned the cross right outside here--and 50 Negroes organized, you know, and went up in the corn field with guns, and they have about 25 Negroes circling this house, and the went up and told the sheriff, you know, that if any of us was hurt, they'd really be a racial war here. And the sheriff put on...he told me he didn't want that to happen. And that...what he would do, is... you know, put policemen on duty in this vicinity, and patrol... and try to protect Mrs. Adams' house. And he did that. And policemen knew that these Negroes were armed, and that they didn't dare say anything to them. They just drive around in 10 or 15 cars and the police wouldn't stop them, or say anything with them. They'd stop them and tell them they should go...they didn't mean no harm, there wasn't nobody going to be hurt. And from then on, every time we call, they've come, and they come, and they have made arrests--you know, arrest white people. Here.

Q: How long ago was the cross burnt?

A: That was last year.

Q: Do you know much about the Deacons?

A: No; well, Mrs. Maryann Davidson, she's a lady in Columbus, a retired schoolteacher. But she organized the Deacons in

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Columbus.

Q: A lady?

A: Yes; she...she's 68 years old, but very peppy. She gets around like she's about 18. And she organized them there. They bought ammunition and guns, and she comes here--she was here the other night.

Q: Oh yes; that little whitehaired lady?

A: Yes, very lightskinned. She's very violent and bitter. And she come here to West Point, she's trying to organize one here. But she's done...she's done quite well out in Feeber. She's going to try to get Columbus and West Point deacons to merge. She's very intelligent, very educated lady. One of the first Negroes to write for Reader's Digest. In this country.

Q: What did she write about?

A: She used to write about...she was a mental...articles about mental health, and all that. Her reactions. The first article ever published, by a Negro woman, in Reader's Digest. She's a very brilliant lady. Very brilliant. Attended one of the better schools, you know. I think she went to school in Oklahoma.

Q: Speaking of nonviolence, isn't that kind of related to religion in a way, because people who are nonviolent are religious?

A: To religion. That's true.

Q: What role do you think religion plays, now?

A: I think it's playing a great role, now. If, if Negroes didn't have the religion, the faith, the hope--you know, and the Bible speaks that it's wrong if your brother do you one way, that you should...that you shouldn't do the same thing. Forgive him. You know; things like that. You hear these phrases, you know, these Bible quotations, a lot in meetings. And that's one of the things, you know, that's kept in the movement. And nonviolence have accomplished a lot, you know. It has, I think. But...religion has played such a great role. We started out like this, and you have to look at the precincts we have, and most of the people have set up their precincts like the church. It's the only form of organization most of them have known, is the church. And if you're ever going to be effective, that's one thing you've got to do--get in the church, get with those people there, the ones in high standing--the Deacons, the church officials. And that's one of the things we've been lucky enough to do here.

They's really contributed. And I think there'll always be an need inthe movement for these types of people, you know.

Q: Do you think that religion is ever a hindrance?

A: Yes; yes. Well, you know, you look at Mrs. Adams. She's religious, and she belongs to the Church of God and Christ, which is what they call a faith church. And her bishop is more or less concerned. And if he tell her not to do a thing, and she disobey him, she doing something in the movement, he tell her she have to consult him. She doesn't have any right to question him. You're not allowed in the church to question anybody. To question their decision. Things like that foul it up. And another thing, some people so religious...but I don't think they use that, that religion can be used in many ways. If you're real active in the movement, you can use it to support that. Then you can take it and use it to not participate. And the segregationists can take it and use it. The whole thing, you know. Everybody can find something in the Bible to defend what they're doing. That's one thing, that happens. The segregationist, you know, he find quotations in the Bible to defend what they're doing. On civil rights, to quote civil rights people find things in the Bible, to defend what they're doing, certain portions. They find the arguments, those that are not active, "leave it in the hands of the Lord," that type of stuff. They go on prayer. He say, "Keep still, and I'll fight your battle." Things like that. It's a hindrance, it's a help. It's...it's really confusing. But more, I would say, it's a help. It is; it's a helpful thing.

Q: Do you see any different attitude toward religion among the younger people?

A: Well, you can go back...you have to go back to, I think as the movement grows, you know, and Negroes work into main streams of America, churchgoing disappears. You don't have it; you don't have church attendance. The way they used to. And that's really what's happening. Have you noticed the younger kids, the militant ones? They don't think too much about religions. They don't think...they think of taking action, and most of them think of religion as something the white man give them, or theyve had to work hard all week, and they go to church and pray, and get their soulful, you know. Frank's one of those--his father's a preacher. And then they go back to meet the white man on Monday, you know, ready to work, having taken out some of their hostilities. And when they's shoutin, it's just the white man on their back, and the only way they can let it come out is by shoutin. It's very interesting--he's a good guy to talk to. And he doesn't believe, you know; he doesn't believe. And he goes

to church because he's a preacher's son. He sleeps when he goes to church.

Q: Do you feel that the irreligious volunteers that come down, the atheists or the agnostics, do you feel that this is any hindrance to what they're doing?

A: No; the only way it can be a hindrance, if you tell people, you know, when they talk about their religion, and this one of the things I made clear to volunteers, regardless, of peoples' belief, I think you got to respect it, religious beliefs especially. You should respect it. I don't think you should go around telling people, "I'm atheist." or denouncing people's believing. I don't think the workers have a right to do that. And as long as they don't try to do that, there's no problem.

Q: If the volunteers are asked their religion by the local people, what should they say?

A: Well, usually they don't ask what your religion is; what church do you belong to, that's what they usually ask. And most of them say, "none." And well they might say, "I got a son that's a big devil like you," something like that. So it doesn't really push them. I mean, Mrs. Adams, we live with her, and she knows, she really knows that we don't believe in Christianity and all that, and we talked about it, and she never did...she never did push me too much. She never told me I was going to burn in hell.

Q: How do you feel about it? Do you still feel yourself to be a Christian?

A: No. I used to be

Q: Why did you pull away from it?

A: Oh, I saw so many phoney people, you know. And people thought alike, like he said, you know. Seeing people, you know, really... And what I really noticed was--we had a young preacher who had just finished...he was a new preacher and they hired him, and he was talking about social change, you know, and he said it was the church's duty to purify society, to...you know, that was the church's role to act as a bleaching agency to purify society and drain out all unuseful substance, and...and when you talk about how awful it was. And the lay captain, you know, said, 'I came to church to hear something good,' you know. He was just so disgusted today. He said, 'You're going to have to preach, you know, if you want to be our preacher.' He said, 'You never do make people feel good.' I listened to him two or three time, and he never...it was good to meet him and know what he was talking about. It was good to

...a lot of other people, the majority of the people, you know, came, to, you know, hear the preacher talk about the land of milk and honey, you know, and when you put on the golden slippers and things like that and, you know, walk all over God's heaven. But he, you know, was young, and he would talk about change, you know, and they said he was too political, you know, and they got him fired.

Q: Do you still believe in a God?

A: Do I still believe in God? I believe there's a supreme being, but I don't know--hell, I don't know if He's just a person with long hair, you know, that walked around, you know, with white robes and a halo around his head and being all glory and righteousness and all this crap, you know. I don't know...I don't believe that, but I believe there had to be a beginning, you know, so there had to be a supreme being. And I don't know, you know, there might end up being.... But I don't believe I should be worshipping under this, in this fashion...I don't know who set that standard--all this church-going, you know, I don't go for all that. I just believe in a supreme being, you know, like...like if you've got a watch, you know, somebody had to make it. That's about the way I believe. I know I'm not completely an atheist, and I won't tell people their beliefs are wrong. Now religious arguments, you know...I never had religious arguments but a very few times. I just told them that was the way I felt and they could think what they wanted, but I never argued.

Q: What about the accusations that people are using the Movement to teach people about other things, like Vietnam? Is it just old people or people from the North, or is it local people too?

A: What's happening there, you know...a lot of local people really--you talk with many of the local people, and they don't like what's going on, and they can relate a lot of that to their problems here, the problem they're having, you know, in Mississippi, you know. But personally I'm really ignorant about Vietnam because I don't know what's going on, and I...I know I should want to know, and I should be involved, and I think it's very unfortunate what's going on over there, but you know, you get too confused trying to deal with all these things, so rather I don't like it--I mean I really bitterly don't like it. I don't want to become very active in it

Q: It seems like most of the white volunteers that come down from the North try to tie all these things in together and call it the Movement instead of the Civil Rights Movement.

A: Yeah, that's, that's...

Q:

Q: Do you think southerners do this at all, southern Negroes, or is it just whites?

A: No, it's white volunteers, 'cause Negroes know, you know, well, first of all, Negroes have been excluded from foreign affairs. They've heard nothing about it, you know. People, even college graduates, you know...and SNCC they're not concerned, but they are concerned, you know, but they have nothing to do with foreign affairs, you know, and they're completely ignorant. You know, by being excluded from that, they have no interest in it. And usually when you pick up a paper, you know, there's something about Vietnam, but we skip over that and look up civil rights articles, you know, or something like that. I speak for myself, you know. But there's very few people in the Civil Rights Movement, you know, Negroes...who are really, you know, who really understand Vietnam and all this foreign, all this foreign activities, you know, 'cause Negroes don't have a part in it--not to my knowledge Negroes don't have a part in it. They don't have too much to do with, you know, any of that. Then you'll find some of them--some of them like Stokeley, you know, Stokeley Carmichael, who really oppose what's going on in Vietnam. They'll probably go to Washington... two of them, two or three of the Negroes in the Movement, you know. But they don't like it.

Q: Do you think a lot of the volunteers come down here thinking that the Movement is just another branch of their ideal and then find out that it isn't just ideals but involves a lot of hard work? Do you think a lot of them...

A: Yes, yes, yes. And what they usually do, you know, is pack up and go home. See, this is a problem I've had with a lot of the workers. You know, this fellow Bert, you know, he came and was ready to... Two white workers, you know, got thrown in jail, and he wanted to get 75 or 80 local kids, you know, thrown in jail because two white civil rights workers got thrown in jail. See, and you can't... you can't--they were going to go down to the jailhouse and demonstrate, and it didn't prove anything because to Negroes, two white people getting in jail and getting out, you know... You know, white people in jail really don't mean too much, white civil rights workers...you know, just civil rights workers, because they know that in that type of work, they might go to jail any time, and they'll say that's bad, but it doesn't emotionally move them or make them, you know, take any action on it, but if it's a lot of local people in jail, that's when people really want to move, you know. If it's just civil rights workers, you know, they know... they've been in this before.... And I didn't see any need of...just because somebody got arrested on a traffic charge, you know, two civil rights workers, there's no reason to demonstrate. It just doesn't make sense to me, and I told them, you know, 'Don't do that.' Because it didn't, you know,

it really made no sense at all.

Q: Do you think a lot of them have tempered their idealism since coming down?

A: Yes, because some of them, you know, are really seeing-- got out in the communities and have gotten a better view on things. Um...and one of the things I think they've seen that's been proven to them is that you can't push people; you have all these ideas, and you think they work, but you see that people gradually have to learn about the Movement and have to find themselves just as, you know, you all. And what...it disappointed me the same as it disappointed the other people, you know, people don't come running and willing to go to jail, then, you know, the people are no good.

Q: What sort of characteristics do you think are most beneficial in a civil rights worker? And what sort of characteristics would be negative to what they're doing down here? Personality characteristics.

A: Yeah, personality... Would be negative, you said, to what they're doing. You mean, what men would dislike and like and... Well, personally, wearing...their personal appearance matters a lot... Girls wearing jeans...it's just a custom of the South--I was born here and I know--wearing jeans, the people really, you know, don't like that, wearing jeans, or they don't like to see workers, you know, with long shaggy hair. They don't like that idea, and... those are about the two things, you know, in personal appearance... And you know, like the conduct--the way you carry yourself, you know, drunkenness and things like that, they don't...the people don't condone that. Basically... and the upper class, you know, don't like the way you dress, you know. They like--they feel that you're supposed to be a symbol, and if this symbol should wear--you know, the right symbol should wear a suit and tie and things like that, but that doesn't appear to you...you know...all the middle-class people--that's not true of all the middle-class Negroes, but the majority of it is, and then people don't, you know, pay it any mind, 'cause it, you know... coming in a suit to people in a shack and telling them, you know, telling them a lot of things about voting and... They resent it, you know, 'cause you're bringing up the--you're forcing up the--you're saying, you know, 'Look what I've got on. I'm better than you,' and they really think that, so what they want to do is get you out of their way, you know, and they'll agree to what you said, 'Yeah, that's right,' but that doesn't mean anything. And everything, you know...one of the things, you know, to eat--you get offered every time, you know; people want you to sit down and have dinner with them, and this is good, you know, regardless of how full you are, you know, to sit down and eat...eat something with them. Because they really get offended if you don't. And it's just little touchy things

like that. And that's the thing, you know, where we had problems last year. People--everybody would offer people food, and they'd say now you know, they'd just had dinner, you know. Then they might go back the next day and they'd offer them again, and they'd say, 'No, I just had dinner,' and people would get the idea, you know, that you're really high hill, especially whites, you know. They just don't trust them that much, I think, in the first place. 'They think they're just too good to eat at my table, you know.' It's just a thing. The whites--it's a lot, you know, because whites have a lot of problems working, being affected and building their trust, you know. And when they can trust them, you know, and when they can loosen themselves and just talk, as they would if they were just another Negro talking to another Negro, you know.

Q: But this thing about eating: sometimes the people are over-generaous, you know. Like we ate here the other day, and we found out after we ate dinner at the house that the lady had given up her kids' dinner so we could eat, you know, and it almost seems like it's another kind of fear or...

A: Yeah, well, I'm not saying, you know, what you could do always, you know, is say, 'Oh, this looks good, and I'll take a bite of...' sometimes just a p[ie]ce of cornbread, you know--just 'I'd just like a piece of cornbread,' and they feel good, you know. That's usually the southern custom if you're offered, you know... You just can tell, you know, the people are poor, 'Oh, I'll have just a piece of chicken, one piece of chicken,' or 'I'll take a piece of bread,' you know, just so as not to offend the people. And that's really what they mean, you know, when they say come and eat. If they just prepared enough to feed the family, you know, just to take a bite of something...yeah.

Q: Do you have a preference for female volunteers over male volunteers or males over females as far as their ability to work is concerned?

A: No. No, girls can do the same things basically that guys can.

Q: Do girls seem to bring up any more problems than boys do?

A: Yes, that's true. But...it all depends, you know, on how you start out. Like if you tell them--sometimes you do run into girls that's really problems, and you're going to run into guys that's really problems, you know. The whole thing about sex, you know, I've got to make it strong.... and you always have to get Negroes off their backs, you know, and don't let them be fooling around, you know, and such because what you create is...people hang around, you know, who're not really interested, who care nothing about it, you know. And I understand the psychological thing about

this, why Mississippi Negroes want to, you know, sleep with an all-white woman--I understand, but that's not the only problem, you know.

Q: You don't have any problems in the sex department?

A: No.

Q: What about when you leave? How long are you going to stay with the Movement?

A: I'll probably be another year, it looks like, but this is not...no, I'll probably stay until about Christmas, and then I think I'll leave and go to...get a scholarship probably and go back to school. But once I finish school, there won't...I won't have anything to worry about.

Q: Do you think you'll come down and work full time again?

A: Well, yeah, I'll feel much better, you know, then I think. You know, I just think finishing school offers a certain amount of security. And I'd like to get that off my mind, you know, and I'll finish and come back.

Q: What is your field?

A: Nothing, I mean I'm not majoring in anything to date. I'm just...I had a one time major in political science.

Q: What do you think gives the West Point Project the reputation as the best in the state?

A: You know, exaggeration for one thing (chuckle). Uh, no really,...

Q: That's not a fair question to ask a project director!

A: Exaggeration, uh...one of the things makes people think--well, we really followed...we really followed the way the FDP was originally set up, which I think, you know, is the best that, you know, we really stuck to trying to organize precinct meetings, starting voter registration, and we...every program--every program we attempt to work on, we try to gear to voter registration, which is, you know, very easy to do because you can't talk about jobs--if I talk about jobs, you know, I'm always making the point, you know, you can't talk about this unless you talk about, you know, voting. Uh...then one of the things we do...one of the things we've done to try to organize the community, we've helped the people together--one of the things, you know, and a lot of people, see people coming up in the finances, you know, like the county's able to raise quite a bit of money to go to Washington, to send good people to Washington, and things...people being involved in FDP in Clay County and all, not completely--you know, they can't under-