

Civil Rights History Project
Interview completed by the Southern Oral History Program
under contract to the
Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African American History & Culture
and the Library of Congress, 2011

Interviewee: James O. Jones
Interview date: May 25, 2011
Location: Mr. Jones's home, Austin, Texas
Interviewer: Joseph Mosnier, Ph.D.
Videographer: John Bishop
Length: 1:13:57 (Part 1 of 2)

John Bishop: Okay, Joe, we are rolling.

Joe Mosnier: Today is –

JB: Wait a second; something's wrong. Oh, no, it's fine. Okay. We're okay.

JM: Okay. Today is Wednesday, May [25], 2011. [Clears throat] My name is Joe Mosnier of the – [clears throat] excuse me – Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Uh, I am in Austin, Texas, with our videographer for the project, Mr. John Bishop. Uh, and we are here to interview Mr. James Oscar Jones for the, uh, joint project, uh, being conducted by the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian, and more particularly, the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History – African American History and Culture, excuse me, the new, uh, Civil Rights History Project, a national, uh, civil rights oral history series.

Mr. Jones, it's good to be with you. Thanks so much for sitting down with us.

James Jones: Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

JM: Um, as I mentioned before we turned on the camera today, I thought we'd start with, um, just a sketch of your family history, because I know it will have a lot to do with the course of your life. And, so I'd like to hear about where you were born, where you came up, your parents?

JJ: Glad to. My parents – Ernest Jones and mom, Perdis Jones. Dad, my father, born and raised on the farm – that was his life; that's what he loved to do. I'm a member of a family of ten children, six boys and four girls. And the first five children was born as Rowden, because their dad was Rowden, and he was killed cutting logs into wood. And so, that first five were very young when he died, and then, my dad, Ernest Jones, married my mama and has five more children. But my dad raised all ten of us, because they was very, very young when their dad got killed. And, basically, what he did was – they were very disciplined, uh, had a seventh grade education, Mom had a seventh grade education, but very bright, very, uh, brilliant people.

And one of the ambitions they had, that they gave us as we were little kids – he had two goals for us. He wanted all of us to be educated and he wanted to see all ten of us in heaven. And so, he wanted us to be committed to church, hard work, and school. So, I had the pleasure of going to school all the way through elementary, all the way through high school, and I never missed a day. He was mean and tough on us going to school.

We had to get up four o'clock in the morning, milk the cows, feed the pigs, and do all of this, walk one mile from the house to the dirt road where the bus came by, and

catch the bus at six forty-five. And you had to do that or you were sure that was your – and it applied to everybody, the girls and the boys the same way. So, we had the fortune of understanding work very early and going to school very early.

And that's kind of what Dad shaped. He said he was – when he bought his first acre of land, he was thirteen years old. He paid one dollar and twenty-five cents. It took him six months to make that dollar and twenty-five cents. So, the farm we grew up on were part of Frank McKinney, which is, um, Jimmy [Ed] McKinney, which is my mama's side, but then he added to the acreage and grew us a good, good farm where we farmed cotton, corn. And then we had – because he couldn't borrow any money from Farmers Home Administration in those days, he created, um, a large piece of the farm, and we had peach orchards and berries and all of that. And the cash money we made from the sale of the fruit and vegetables is what money he used to farm the, uh, cotton and corn with.

JM: How big was, um – and what was the nature of Willisville in those days?

JJ: Well, when I was a little boy, it was a lot of folks there. Uh, it, uh – it never has been an incorporated town. It's just a village. I would say when I grew up, two or three hundred kids, maybe. And what happened is, most [5:00] of the kids grew up with me, migrated and took off, went to Detroit, Dallas, Texas, Houston, Texas, all those places, looking for work. We were the only farm, black farm group, in Willisville with a farm. All the other kids worked on farms, but they were not theirs – primarily white farmers' and – and that was hard, because they weren't allowed to go to school. They came to school maybe after Thanksgiving, but by March it was time to start tilling the

soil again and they had to come back to work. So, a lot of them didn't have that opportunity I had to go to school from grade one through high school.

JM: Yeah. How did your – how did your father manage the farm [clears throat] without all that extra help that would have been there if he hadn't sent you every day to school?

JJ: Well, what, um – what he did was, all of us was big enough to do some farming, the older sisters and brothers, but also he always used – there was some older kids who dropped out of school and just kind of wandered. And he would go get those kids and bring them back, and they would work there with us. And he would pay them at the end of the day or at the end of the week. They was excited about that, because when they worked on the other farms that they didn't own, a lot of time they were put on the books. And the problem with that system was, they never made enough money, they never worked hard enough to pay off those debts. So, you were always – and then, Dad would have them to come over in September when the state fair was taking place. And he would say, "Come on over here late in the evening, and I'll give you a little work, so you'll have a few bucks to go to the fair." You know, and everybody wanted to go to the fair, but they didn't have any money, so that's how Dad helped out. And then, they was gracious to come over and work at our place, as well.

JM: Were your parents, um – tell me about church, and were they – were they active in the NAACP?

JJ: My mama was very active. Dad stayed very close to the farm, you know, day in and day out. But, uh, Sunday was a day you couldn't touch the farm. I mean, that was a day you had no choice but to get up and down the dirt road and fighting the dust, going

to church – all daylong church. [Laughing] Not one service like the city folk got at eight o'clock or twelve o'clock. No. You went to church in the morning and when you got out of that church, you went to another church, because my mom had a beautiful singing voice, and everybody in the little neighborhood wanted her to come sing. We'd hop in the back of the truck and go to that, and if somebody had a five o'clock meeting, we'd go to that church. So, it was church, church, church, church! [Laughing] So, oh, yeah, I had plenty of church.

JM: Yeah. Tell me about their, you know, their sense of politics and race relations.

JJ: My mama – everybody called my mother “Vic.” Matter of fact, when she passed away, and they had the name Perdis Jones, and a lot of folks called the funeral home in Magnolia, said, “Who is this Perdis Jones?” So, the undertaker said, “Well, everybody know her as ‘Vic.’” And when he said that —. People from all over the country had left and went to Milwaukee. Said, “Uh-uh, y'all cannot have that funeral. Postpone that funeral because we want to come home to the funeral.” And that's when the word got out it was Vic, so hundreds and hundreds of people came in.

But Mama on – she was very active in organizations, NAACP in Magnolia – that was the closest place. She would go to those meetings, and when she would come back she would talk to kids at church, “Now, we got to do some things. They talked about in that meeting how we can do better, how we – how folk need to learn how to fix up their own homes and all that and stop depending on outside people.”

And then, she would – when they would have those meetings, she and her sister would throw people in the back of the old pickup truck and they were gone. And it was

not a thing where she would go ask parents' permission. She would just get in that old truck and just go through, "Get in! Get in this truck! Get in this truck!" [Laughs] And they would go to the meetings. So, the kids, you know, growing up in a rural area, they were glad to jump in the back of the truck and go somewhere, you know.

So, she was – that was her. She was just very active, all over the place. And, um – and when she learned about [10:00] what people were doing, she would come back to church and talk to church people about, "What we need to do is we need to get the men together to do this, and then the women get together," because that's the kind of thing she would learn from the NAACP meetings.

JM: Interesting, yeah. Do you remember, um, [clears throat] say, let's think of a few things from the '50s, you know, from *Brown v. Board* to Montgomery to Little Rock, especially Little Rock, given where we are, where you were? Um, were those things talked a lot about in the house, at church? How'd they ripple through your life is what I'm after.

JJ: The one thing I remember was in the *Brown*, uh, the *Brown* case. Thurgood Marshall – and my dad always – he had this big old radio, huge radio, and it was very powerful. Matter of fact, in Willisville, Arkansas, we could pick up St. Louis, and that's how we kept up with baseball, always had the radio on. And Mr. Thurgood made a statement, and it was on the radio, he wanted every Negro in America to stand still that one day at noon, because the –

JB: Excuse me, we've got a problem here.

JM: I'm sorry.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay, we're back.

JM: Um, Mr. Jones – uh, we just had a brief pause to check the camera. Um, you had just started to talk about *Brown* and you were saying an important thing about your dad in relation to Thurgood Marshall.

JJ: They was so, um, amazed by that. And Mr. Thurgood put out on radio that on that day, twelve noon, all Negroes should stand still at twelve noon, because, uh, uh, the Supreme Court is fixing to make an announcement, and that announcement and that Supreme Court are going to change this whole nation. So, Daddy, you know, said – and he went to the little school, Sweet Home School, where I was going to school. He went down there and told the teachers about it and said that we need to make sure everybody hears what, uh, is about to be said. So, he had that much politics in his head. And people got those radios and really was listening for that – for that announcement.

So, he – he stayed on top of stuff the same way – he was that same way about farming. He could not borrow money from Farmers Home Administration. But what he would do is that he kept his eyes very close on what white farmers were doing. And some of the wealthier white farmers would, um, use these plows, and they would break a plow, and they had the ability to go to get money and get a new one.

And what he did was he would ask those black guys that were working for those white owners, he said, “What they going to do with that plow?”

“Oh, nothing. We've already gone and got another.”

He said, um, “I want to see if I can get that plow.”

So, they would say, “Mr. Warmack, um, Ernest want that plow.”

“He can have it. It's broke.”

And he would take it up to – because the little school we went to had a vocational school. And the kids would experiment with, um, welding that back. And so, we would use those plows, so that was – those were an accumulation that he didn't have to pay for as part of his farming. So, he was on top of the farming, as well as, um, um, the political side of things.

JM: Yeah, yeah. Um, the fact that your father owned his own farm – how much did that matter, in two ways: one, in relation to other members of the black community locally –

JJ: Um-hmm.

JM: And in relation to, um, maybe how your life unfolded in, uh, in a sense of how you measured your own possibilities and independence.

JJ: Um-hmm. The first part, on the, um, the farm side, when Mom and Dad – people who lived on other farms, and they had very poor houses. He knew that if we did any kind of work on those houses, they would get tossed off the farm. What he would do, he would have us to go [15:00] and help them – they had cracks in the house and all that kind of stuff. We would go cut wood and put it on the *inside* to seal the – to seal the holes and everything, and that was no cost. And that was something we, his sons, we had to do it.

And when, and if we – I remember the one time my brother under me, he took a quarter from this little lady. She says, “Y'all do so much, and we're just so thankful. Here, y'all take this quarter.” I told Chester, “Uh-uh, don't take no money. You know Dad. This is something he want us to do for folks.”

And we went home, and Daddy would say, “Did you boys take any money?”

I said, "No, sir." I said, "Chester did."

He said, "Well, how much money did, uh –?" I don't remember her name.

I said, "Gave him a quarter."

"Give me that quarter."

And so, he took the quarter, and we went to church Sunday. [Laughs] He made Chester take that quarter up to the pulpit and put it in the offering. He could not spend it. [Laughs] So, and we did that for a *lot* of elderly people. And so, he was just that kind of caring.

On the other side, I was being kind of trained to do something pretty good, but I didn't see it, because Dad and Mama would go to the school and would have all these talks with the teachers. And what they was talking about, later on I learned from my older sisters and brothers, is that they said, "James, Dad and Mom is very proud of you. You're real smart, and they're telling those teachers to push you, push you real hard because you've got the smarts."

But I learned that a little later because I noticed I always have to do everything at school – *everything!* We have a little school program: "We want you to be the emcee." "We want you to, uh, start that group." "We want you to be over the agriculture program," and I had all these assignments. And so, when I would come home, um, I didn't get a chance to go out and play because I had to do all these things. And they were talking about, "Now, James, you've got to get all of that stuff done." So, between feeding the hogs and the chickens and all that, and doing that, by that time, it was dark. And I also played basketball on the basketball team, but I didn't see anything in that.

But when I got a little further in, um, school, toward the eleventh grade, I could see it. Uh, “We want you to do some marvelous things, James.” And, “You’ve got the skills. You’re smart. You do good work in school. You’re going places.” That’s when they started, uh, encouraging me. And then, when that happened, uh, I was playing basketball, and this was a real shock to me, because, you know, we worked hard, but Daddy didn’t give you no money.

And we would always ask Daddy, “Daddy, why do you – other kids come work on the farm – why do you pay them, but you don’t pay us?” He said, “That’s because I’m saving for hard times.” [Laughs] So, my sister Clara [Lee] said, “Well, Dad, it’s pretty hard.” [Laughs] He said, “No. You don’t even know what hard time is. You’ve got to a place to stay. You’ve got clothes.” He was teaching us, “You don’t know what a hard time is.”

And then, the guys way across what we called the creek, the bus didn’t go over there, so they would – basketball guys – they would come over to our house and stay with us, and the bus would come down this dirt road. And we were playing in this district, uh, tournament, and Daddy came up to us and he had like twenty-five dollars in change and one-dollar bills. He said, “James, take this, and, uh, you boys got a little money to spend.” And he said, “And the girls, buy them –” [sound level drops and continues to fluctuate] ice cream was like a nickel – “and buy the girls some ice cream.” And, oh, man, we was on cloud nine.

So, uh, when we got to the gym, I bought these girls the ice cream, and so the word was around, “He’s rich!” [Laughing] That’s what they – because I had a few dollars. “Oh, he’s rich! He’s rich!” So, so, a lot of the kids started calling me rich. I

said, “If I am, I don’t know nothing about it. I don’t see – you saw the same money I saw at that one ballgame.” [Laughter] So, he was a – he helped us and he pushed me and all of us to do well.

JM: Was it always the understanding in the family [20:00] that you’d head off to Pine Bluff and college?

JJ: Yeah.

JM: Yeah.

JJ: Yeah, that was – everybody was pushing me. Plus, the older sisters and brother at that point had gone on to Milwaukee. Now, they went to school as they left, but that was after they left. But in my case, I stayed there. And my older sisters and brother would write me letters and say, “How are you doing in school?” And, “Send me your grades.” And I would send them my grades, and they would send me a dollar. And, you know, back in those days, a dollar, man, you was filthy rich. [Laughs]

JM: I’m interested – we’ll talk about everything that’s going to happen at, at – uh, in Pine Bluff after you get there in ’61 and especially in ’63. But I’m curious if, um – how much the early ’60s were – late ’50s and early ’60s were making an impact on you, Little Rock in ’57, sit-ins in Greensboro in ’60, all of what happened quickly after that.

JJ: The one big favor, or not favor, but the one thing that prepared me really well for that is that, because Daddy and Mama listened to the radio and they paid attention to that kind of stuff, and they were *really* on top of Central High. And, uh, and I remember one time Mama said to me, she said, “Son, if you ever is put in that situation, don’t turn it down. You go forward with it.”

And that was a result of – what I didn't realize was that my mama and my aunt and Daddy – in the early days they had buses come through our small town, and even in those days, they were the only black folks that would get on that bus on the front seat and take us with them. And then, that kind of came of back to me. I said, "Oh, we integrating the bus line!"

Because when Central High came through it kind of – and, and those were her words, that whenever you get an opportunity to, uh, do something for other people, don't be afraid. Because you didn't come from an afraid – she said, "It was dangerous when y'all went to weigh your own cotton. White people didn't like that. And – but y'all have been through it and you've seen it. And you can – when opportunity comes, don't go to the back of the line. You go to the head of the line and be brave about it." Now, they all – now, they *did* talk about that.

And, um, when I went to – went off to school – I had all that in my head. So, it wasn't – I wasn't looking for anything, but when I saw, uh – when I got to Pine Bluff, in the city you saw real, real segregation, because it was a city. In Willisville, you're down to – in the woods – and when you'd go to town you would see it. But when I got there, I really saw it. But I wasn't organized or nothing, but I saw it as I went downtown and I saw the Holiday Inns and all of those. I looked at it and I saw – the onliest thing I saw of black folks, they were maids. So, that registered in my mind. When I went back home, I shared that with her.

JM: Yeah.

JJ: She said, "Well, son, if you – I'm not going to tell you what to do." That's what my mama said to me. "If you, um, go somewhere and y'all like –" because we

would travel sometimes in the sports – “don’t you never go through a backdoor. If whites go through the front door, you go through the front door.” Now, I heard that from her.

JM: Yeah. You mentioned a moment ago, um, that your family – you mentioned that, you know, you had gone and weighed your own cotton. Can you tell that story just a little bit and what that meant?

JJ: Um-hmm. Well, kids who lived on a plantation, they would work hard. And you have these ten- and twelve-foot-long sacks, and when you picked that much cotton, you were hitting sixty pounds, sixty-five, and some guy was really good and hit as much as eighty. But when they brought their bags [25:00] to the gin, white people didn’t let them stay there to weigh their own cotton. So, they would bring their bags and drop them and go back.

Now, in my case, Daddy and Mama, Aunt Nune [Gladys Martin] and Uncle Blufus [Martin] went to the gin. Now, my mama, dad, uncle, and auntie were gun packing black folks. They would sit right at the gin with them double-barreled shotguns and two shells between their fingers. And when we got our cotton, “Come on, boys!” And they would go up there and weigh – we would weigh our own cotton.

Now, the kids who were bringing their cotton to the, uh, gin, they couldn’t weigh theirs. And we would sit there and watch this. Sometimes those bags would be seventy pounds of cotton. And these guys would ask each other, “Well, John, what’d you think?” “Oh, let me see. Oh, give or take, forty-one pounds. Oh, pretty good old boy. Give him the benefit – forty-seven pounds.” So, that’s forty pounds that were taken away from him! So, I would sit there and witness that!

Now, the fun kind of thing was, me and Clara Lee and Jesse and all of us, you know, we felt pretty comfortable, because Mama and Aunt Nune was there with those guns. And so, when we weighed our cotton, we were looking quite forward. [Laughter]

JM: How could your family get away with that?

JJ: It was – you know, everybody in Willisville and the surrounding area believed that if they bothered my family, it was a whole lot of killing going to take place. They believed that. Because my brother had been in a real bad racial situation, Troy – I've got his number in there. He was the only black member that went to a little town called McNeil [Arkansas], and he got a job working on the railroad. He didn't – he wasn't on a train. He was doing the hard work, putting those spikes and all that to keep it up. And when he went wherever they went, and on the way back when they got to McNeil, they told Troy he had to get off the train, because he couldn't – blacks couldn't – well, Negro – it wasn't the black folks then; it was Negro in those days – Negroes couldn't ride the train through McNeil's little small town.

And my brother Troy, uh, wouldn't get off the train. And just like my parents, he had his weapon. And, boy, it was a hard knockdown fight. You know, he stabbed and cut a whole bunch of white folks. And then, they chased him and shot him up pretty bad. But he got through the woods and all that.

And so, the white people decided that they were going to come to our house and kill him. And Mr. Chester [Willis] is the guy who in Willisville has the little store, both the little stores there. He told those people, said, "Don't. Don't y'all go over there. Y'all are gonna get killed."

And so, my daddy had some brothers, some cousins, and you have to go down through these woods, this dirt road, to get over to the farm. And about dark of night, they was coming in there to get Troy. And, man, there was so much shooting and so many people got hit. And I heard them screaming, "Oh! I've been hit!" And what Daddy did and his brothers, when they were shooting people, they went to them and took their guns. They let them go but they took all their guns. And so, it was kind of known that the McKinneys weren't the folks to mess with. [Laughs] And it was a lot of them; it was a bunch of them.

JM: How old were you?

JJ: I'm sixty-eight.

JM: No, no, sorry. Excuse me. How old were you then?

JJ: Oh, eight, nine. Matter of fact –

JM: So, early '50s then?

JJ: Yeah. I went up – I went up to Willisville, because Daddy made the comment, said, "If, uh, if they come down here and mess with me, I'm going to kick their ass!" Those are exact words. So, I thought he was talking to me! And I went to Willisville, like a mile and a half. [Laughing] So, I walked all the way to Willisville and told this white guy, Warmack, what my daddy said! [30:00] He kicked me! I went back home and told Daddy. He kicked me! Daddy said, "I'll take care of that later," because all this was in the making, preparing for this. Yeah.

JB: Can we pause for a second?

JM: Sure. That's extraordinary!

JJ: Um-hmm. Oh, yeah.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JM: Tell me what it was like, impressions you formed when you arrived in Pine Bluff to go to school. And I'm thinking about – you mentioned already that you saw segregation in the landscape of that city in a way you hadn't seen it before, but also on the campus, because that was, that was a very important black institution.

JJ: Um-hmm. When I got there, uh, to Pine Bluff, you know, that was my first big city. Uh, the campus was very pretty. It was real exciting. And what helped me jumpstart real fast is the school I went to, Oak Grove High School, was a *very* good school. And, matter of fact they had sent – about four guys from their school were professors at Pine Bluff. And I didn't know them. That was before I came along.

And my brother in Milwaukee sent me a letter and said, "There is a guy in the vocational school. You go find him and tell him that Charley B," one of my older brother, "sent you." He was a Haynie, Dr. Haynie. And I went there, and when I walked into his office, he looked up and he said, "I don't know your name, but you're sure one of them Joneses [laughing] from Rosston, Willisville." And he recognized me, "Oh, yeah, you look just like Ernest Jones."

And so, I started talking, and then he, you know, really was telling me all about the school and walked around. He took me all over the campus and said, "This is one of my boys, Ernest Jones's boys. Them boys are sweet, kind," I mean he really just painted this beautiful picture. "They're smart, and I want *all* of you professors to keep your eyes on him. He's a good student. Don't, don't, don't be putting him over there in social studies. He's good in math, algebra. He came from a high school that had all of that."

Because when some guy asked me, he said, uh – one guy told me, said, “You might need to take preliminary courses.” He said, “Are you from a small town?” I said, “Yeah.” He said, “Well, what – what did you have in high school?” I said, “I had algebra. I had trigonometry. I had physics. I had biology, chemistry.” [Laughs] He said, “Man, what kind of school did you go to?” I said, “I had a school that was a very good school. Matter of fact, the, uh, principal imported – he handpicked teachers from all around to come there at that school.”

JM: Was Oak Grove private?

JJ: No, it was a school, but it was, uh – there were four schools in Arkansas that was built way back in 1931 by the, uh –

JM: Rosenwald School?

JJ: I think they were – they were the – it’s a group out of New York somewhere built these schools way back, because I know our school was opened in 1829. And the school was built, and they had the vision of folks coming, because the school was built with dormitories, so these teachers came from other places, and they lived right there on campus. I think the Quakers or Quakers are –

JM: Exactly.

JJ: And there was two all-black school districts. Mine was one of them, and the other one was Arkansas City, where *Ebony* magazine’s [John H.] Johnson man came out of. So, we had – unlike a lot of other schools, we had books, because we could float bonds and we had the, you know, the books not – because a lot of the white schools would give their old books to the black schools. But, no, we had good books and we had good teachers and everything like that, so I had a good start.

JM: You're describing a personal history that isn't very typical for folks in that time.

JJ: Yeah, yeah.

JM: Between – I'm sorry.

JJ: So, when I got to Pine Bluff, I was very comfortable and had met somebody that had been in Rosston, and then he took me around. Then he introduced me to Dr. Marshall. And Dr. Marshall was a professor on campus, and he had another little house [35:00] right by his house. And he asked me, he said, "Well, are you going to live in a dormitory?" I said, "Well, I've got to live somewhere." And Dr. Haynie said, "Put him in your house over there. And you'll like – you'll take a liking to this young man."

And so, we started talking, and he said, "You sure know a lot to be a country boy." He said, "These country kids come up, and they don't know nothing. We think the city kids know everything." And so, we just started talking, and then he was the one told me, he said, "There are some folks in Little Rock that's trying to get a civil rights thing started, and they went to Philander Smith [College]. And they didn't have no luck there, because all those kids were city kids, and their parents said no, uh-uh, and they was going to get put out of school, and all that." He said, "I want you to – I'd like for you to meet those guys." And that's when Grinage –

JM: Yeah.

JJ: That's how I met [Ben] Grinage.

JM: Ben Grinage.

JJ: And when old Grinage came down, and, uh – Grinage and Bill Hansen.

JM: Um-hmm.

JJ: And I hadn't met Worth [Long], but a little bit later on, I met him. So, a few days later, uh, they both came and started talking. And, uh, so, uh, so Bill Hansen said, "Dang, man! You've already done what we're trying to do [laughs] down at your hometown!" [Laughs] And that's when, uh – I said, "Well, you know, that's how my – I was raised." He said, "Man, this will be a piece of cake for you."

But then, they, uh – that wasn't when they were trying to get it started, but they said that they was working in Little Rock and doing some things. "But when we come back to Pine Bluff we need to sit down and talk, because this is a college town, and there's a lot of segregation here. And here you guys are down here, y'all got all these MacDonald's and all of this, and the black people can't go to them, and – and this city is driven by the university." And that's how I met them.

JM: Yeah. Do you remember more specifically about this group of folks, Grinage and Hansen, one's black, one's white, they're SNCC people – this is probably the first you might have heard of SNCC maybe?

JJ: Right. When we met, uh, Grinage talked about he had been involved in labor and union groups a lot. When Bill Hansen talked, he talked about he had been involved in sit-ins and things like that. But the first thing Bill Hansen said is, "We need to organize some students to challenge –" they had already been around and saw the MacDonald's. I didn't even know what a MacDonald's and all that was [laughing], even though it's right down the street. But Bill Hansen's take was, "I'm a white boy and I don't need to be leading it," and that's what he said. "But we need a black person, and you've already done all this stuff."

And he said, uh, “If you went into one of these white restaurants and was arrested, what would, uh, your parents say?” They would come up here and they would come to the jailhouse and they would say, “James, is this what you want to do?” And if I said, “Yes,” he’d say, “We’ll do whatever you need for us to do to support you,” and they would go back home. He said, “Really?” [Laughs] “They wouldn’t –?”

I said, “No, no.” I said, “Because they talked to me long before I knew anything about this kind of stuff – about, you know, ‘if you get involved and stuff.’ And they talked about, ‘Don’t you ever go through no white doors, no back doors. You go through the front – if there’s a front door and white people go through it, you go through it, too.’”

He said, “Whoa, man! Was your mama a civil rights worker?” I said, “I don’t – I guess not, because in Willisville there wasn’t a whole lot to do.” But I did tell them – I shared with them how Mama and them rode the bus. And he said, “Yeah, that’s civil rights stuff!” I said, “Well, I didn’t know it.” That’s just – to me, that’s how they were.

And I remember Bryan Warmack was the – what we considered the rich white man in Willisville. [40:00] And as we got involved, as I got involved, he was talking to Mama about, “You need to go get that boy, and he up there doing all of this in the black school, and that’s where he needs to be and not running around, blah, blah, blah.”

And [laughs] so, Mama got the word. And, uh, I wasn’t home when this happened. They said Mama went and jumped in the car with him, made him take her up to Waldo to buy some clothes for me, and told him, said, “I really ought to make you take these clothes to Pine Bluff!” [Laughing] My sister said – and Mr. Warmack was a big white guy – she said he was freezing cold he was sweating – he was sweating so bad, because he knew Mama had that pistol in her purse. [Laughs]

But, uh, anyway – and I told him that my mama wouldn't do that, and he said, “Because in Little Rock, that was an issue.” Everybody was afraid their parents would take them out of school or do all this, the other, and that. That's why they couldn't get nothing started.

JM: Early on, did you have any instinct that what might actually end up being a problem, what did end up being one problem, would emerge, namely, that folks at the college would – that your president would –?

JJ: No. You know, um, I didn't think that side at all. Um, you know, I was – I went and looked at the hotel that was segregated, and I went down there by myself the first time, just walking.

JM: Just to check it out?

JJ: Yeah, just to check it out. And, uh, when I came back, when they started talking about we need to protest these places, um, you know, I said, “Let me go talk to some – I'll go talk to some students.” And when I talked to them, I told them what my parents are like. But I also said, “Now, if your parents is going to come up here and jump on you for doing it, don't go. Don't go.”

And then, Mr., um, Dr. Coleman – her husband was the principal of a high school, and he told me, said – I went and met with him. He said, “Now, I've got some young high school students in my school,” Townsend High School. The big high school there for mostly black was Merrill High, but this school was kind of getting started. He said, “These kids – what you're talking about doing – they need to get involved with a guy like you.” He said, “They're smart but they want to be thugs.” He said, “Oh, they're real

brave and they want to be thugs.” He said, “But I think if they were around you, you would change them.” I said, “You think so?”

And, uh, so I met with them and talked to them about, you know, my parents and what that was like, and they liked that. I said, “Now, look. What we’re talking about is going here, and it may be very violent, but we’re going to be a nonviolent group.”

[Laughing] So, all them boys said, “Aw, hell, no! Oh, no! Uh-uh! There’s going to be some fighting!” “Oh, no!” I mean, “They hit you in the face and knock you down, and you’re just going to fall and get up?!” I said, “Yeah.” They said, “Oh, no.”

JM: Why did you think that was a good idea, the nonviolence?

JJ: Well, the way I looked at it was if you can be nonviolent, the white people would be very happy to beat you down. They would be very happy doing that to you. But I felt, though, that in spite of that, you could overcome it over a time period. And I felt that if I were beaten down, and the other kids were scared and afraid of it, I think eventually they’ll come – they’ll come around. Like them kids I’m talking about – they did. And I just – and I think what [45:00] helped me is I wasn’t scared. I wasn’t scared. Yeah.

JM: When the – I’m sorry.

JJ: I, uh – my knowledge wasn’t good enough to, uh, feel that I definitely could win doing it right then, but I felt that I could see in white people’s faces that it was working, because, uh, I saw a young white girl and young white boy come up and would hit me and stuff and run. And when I would look at them, I saw them crying. I saw them crying. But they wouldn’t – didn’t want folks to see them, but I saw them. I said, “You know, they’re doing something they don’t want to be doing.” It, uh – and I saw that.

And when I told, uh, Grinage that, he said, “For real?” I said, “Yeah.” You know? “They were told to come up and hit us, but that wasn’t in their hearts.” And I saw it. I saw then we can do this. We can do this.

JM: At the end of the first day, February 1, ’63, in Woolworth’s, were you – how did you feel at the end of that day?

JJ: That was a little scary because, um, we sent – the first day we went to Woolworth, we tried to go there, it was locked, so we couldn’t get in. Door was closed, renovations or something. And then, what’s her name? Diane! Diane [Nash] came, was in town. Diane, Diane – what’s Diane’s last name? I understand she’s still going strong. Diane, Diane, Diane. Anyway, she’s an extremely light-skinned black girl. And she went down to Woolworth and went in and eat because they thought she was white. And when she came back, she said, “No, it’s open.”

And when we went in, she said, she said, “Go in at eleven o’clock,” for some reason. I think that was a time I guess a lot of people were going to be in there, so we piled in there. And it was a massacre, because, uh, Diane had been through the Freedom Rides and all that stuff, and her theory was, her strategy was that if it was a lot of people in there, it wouldn’t hurt very well, because it wouldn’t be enough room. And, uh, and then, she said, “If they start hitting you, fall to the floor, and when you fall to the floor, to do all this demonstrates, fall toward where the people were.” So, when we did that, [laughing] all the white folks that was in there was also on the floor. [Laughing] So, you’re down over there, and they try to get up, and you scoot a little bit further, and they fall. So, it was kind of fun and a little bit scary, you know. But, uh, that’s how it went. But, uh –

JM: Chancellor Davis before too many days asks to meet with you.

JJ: Oh, oh, yeah, yep, yep. That went – well, two things. Because we had a pretty good crowd, but that was short-lived, because Dr. Davis called us in, and then half of the parents came to Pine Bluff, too, and they were snatching all them kids off. I think when they finished, Dr. Davis and the parents, three or four of us, maybe, was left. I know I was there, Nash, uh, I think – let me see – Joanna [P. Edwards] stayed, the girl Joanna. Joanna now is, um – matter of fact, Joanna is a professor at, uh, Pine Bluff College, and I think she just retired. She stayed. Um, who else? There was this tall guy from Texarkana. He stayed on. There was about four of us, about four of us.

And then we all went to see the president, and he was pretty point blank. He told us the *very next day* if anybody went downtown – was suspended. Now, the interesting thing about that, now, that was kind of different. It was only about four or five of us [50:00] who said we was going, but when we went the next time, there were about twelve or fifteen folks – in the suspension that, that, that – but they didn't come the first time! [Laughs] So, it kind of grew a little bit there. And he put us all out.

JM: How did you – how did you, uh, make your decision to take that hit, to take the expulsion?

JJ: Well.

JM: You've said a lot already that creates the context for that, but still that must have been not an easy thing.

JJ: No. But, uh, in my case, in my case, folks – everybody asked me, “What do your parents think?” I said, “My parents support what I'm doing.” And the tall guy from

Texarkana, he called his parents and talked to them, and they kind of let him alone. Um, the guy that – this guy, this other guy, Nash, he was from Pine Bluff. He stayed there.

And I was kind of like the voice of encouragement. They would sit there and listen to me, and, uh, “What if we get hurt?” I said, “We *are* going to get hurt, uh, but we – you know, we are like a – this is like a war. And Woolworth, they attacked us, but there was no jail stuff there.” And I said, “Eventually, we’re going to have to go to jail if we continue to do this.” So, they were a little bit afraid of the jail.

And then, we went back there two or three times. Shut out. The most violent – I thought the most violent was when we went to, uh, MacDonald’s. I thought that was the – I think that crowd really meant to hurt us. And I think what helped us was, uh, the owner, um, locked the door, locked us in and turned that gas on – and that gas was awesome. But I think if we had not been locked in, the audience I saw on the outside, they really had weapons and bats, and I think they would have hurt us real bad.

JM: Can you describe that moment a little bit more when he turned the – I don’t understand when he turned the gas on.

JJ: The, uh, uh – when we were in there, the kids that was working in there, they left and went out. And we were still at the counter, waiting to be served, and they locked the doors. Now, the gas was not the natural gas. It was, uh – what kind of gas was that? That foggy – they turn that fog gas, and it burns you. And it, oh, it gets in your eyes and shuts your breathing off. What is that gas called?

JB: Like tear gas?

JJ: Yeah, yeah, that’s the kind of gas. Now, what helped me with that was my brother, Troy, was in Houston. He had talked around at home about that gas, because

police would shoot it sometimes. And he said if – the way you handle that is that water helps you dilute. Make sure to grab a – get hold of some water, and if you're in a building, a commode, put your head in the water, and water the towel, and he told me that. And so when, uh, they shot that gas, I went to the sink, turned to the sink, and the water was still on. I said, "Everybody, get in the water!" And we all went in the water. And, uh – well, I guess somebody was close by, because the water got cut off!

[Laughing] But we was surviving pretty good. But that was – ooo, and that – ooo, it just burns. It just burns you up. So, it was a –

JM: Who turned on the gas – the police or the owner of the MacDonald's?

JJ: I guess the owner.

JM: Okay.

JJ: Because it was a [makes swooshing sound].

JM: They were shooting it at you?

JJ: They were shooting it, yeah. And when they came through the back, [makes more swooshing sounds], sprayed, and then lock-down. And we was in there, so, uh, that's how that came about. But, uh, fortunately for us, I had heard about that, and we had a little water. That calmed people down a little bit.

JM: One of the key themes in a lot of this, these kinds of moments, was the tensions that are inevitable, that just couldn't be avoided, in those moments in the black community. So, for example, we've talked about, uh, Chancellor Davis, his pressures, his trying to – well, I guess he has his set of motives.

JJ: Yeah.

JM: [55:00] Typically understood to be that the legislature was in session.

JJ: Right.

JM: And he wanted to make sure the money wasn't cut back sharply for the college. Um, black clergy, the traditional NAACP elites, the black business community, to the extent that – people have different interests and motives. Can you talk about sort of how –?

JJ: Yeah. The black community came down on us very hard. There were two black business people that supported us. The entire black neighborhood wanted us run out of town. The, uh – Mr. Brown was the funeral home guy; he was the only one. And the white population got very upset with him because he was wealthy. And, uh, and he said to us, “This thing will get out of hand, but I'm going to just say this part right here. If y'all end up in jail, don't worry about it. I'll bond everybody out of jail.” And that's all he said to us. That was Mr. Brown, the funeral home man.

And his son – he was an older guy, and his son was about to take over. And, uh, and he said, “Dad, you sure you want to do this?” His dad said to him, “Son, if you don't want to do it, get out. I'm going to do it.” And his son came back and said, “I'll handle it for you, Dad.”

The other person was Dr. – Dr. – there was one. He was a dentist, a very well known dentist, and of the medical community, he was the only one. And he came that evening after it was over with and he asked, “Was anybody hurt? If anybody gets hit in the mouth, don't worry about it. I'll take care of it at no cost.” So, those two were the *only* two business people.

Now, where we went down, when you would go towards, uh, MacDonald's, there was a couple of businesses. There was a little club there and something else. Now, those

folks told us not to walk on their side. [Laughing] We had to go on the other side; there were no sidewalks over there. These are black businesses! “No! Get off the side!” So, that.

Now, one thing that came to our rescue, I think, sealed the deal, is there was this guy named Reverend Allen. He was the pastor of a large Methodist church. And I think Reverend Allen may have been from New York or somewhere. You know how the Methodist Church transfers? And we didn’t know who he was. There comes this guy with this blue suit. And, uh, we was getting ready to go to – I think we was fixing to go to [pause] Holiday Inn, maybe, because that’s where we got arrested, the first arrest. And this guy shows up, fair-skinned guy, nice blue suit.

And we were standing at this Holiday Inn. And this guy walks up and says, you know, “These are students, here to get an education. Their parents has worked hard and gave them money to come up here to go to school. They got money to come into your place and pay for their meal.” And we’re all sitting there; we had no idea who this guy was. And so, and this manager, or whatever, he came out and said, “Who are you?”

That’s when he said, “I’m Reverend Allen, uh, the pastor of whatever this church.” He said, “Yes sir.”

The other guy said, “Does the United Methodist Church know you’re involved with this?”

He said, “I ain’t involved with nothing. I think these are our future.”

“You need to get off the premises! Don’t, you’re going to jail!”

He said, “If standing on the premises, just standing here and having a conversation – just take me with you.”

But I got the impression – we all got excited – but it looked like it was something about him being a Methodist that kind of calmed those folks away. And then, that’s when he [1:00:00] turned around and said, “Do y’all have meetings and get together?” And, uh, and Bill Hansen and Grinage said, “Yeah.” He said, “My church door is open, day or night.” So, uh, he said, he said, “Well, thank you!”

And so, we left there and went to his church and kind of talked about what may happen, this might be a going-to-jail thing, because this guy had police standing back as if they was going to arrest us. So, we went over to his church. But we came the next day. And the next day we came, that’s when them kids from Townsend, uh, the thugs, wannabe thugs, and they showed up. There was about six, seven of them. Whoa!

I walked over and talked to them and said, “Now, you know this is nonviolent.” “Yeah, yeah, we’re going with you.” And then, there was this really – there was this guy, this real dark-skinned guy. All these guys had nicknames. One guy was Popo, Pop, Pop Mouth, Hot Dog, all these nicknames. It took me a long time to try to figure out their real names. And he was supposed to been the *real* bad thug; he would fight in a minute. He said, “No.”

He told Bill Hansen and Mr. Grinage and all them, “No, we’re going in. We’re going down with you on this one.” He said, “When it’s all over with and things done cooled off, we’ll get our – we’ll get our punches in then.” Said, “What you mean?” He said, “Oh, yeah, well, we know how to get back, you know. It might be six months later, but we know how to get back.” [Laughs] I said, “Well, look here. Don’t bring none of that while we –.” He said, “Oh, no. We’re going down with you. There ain’t going be

no fighting, no talking back. We're going with you." And so, they are. They did that.
And that was the first arrest.

JM: Some of the, uh – some of the, uh –

JB: I'm going to pause for a second.

JM: Okay, yeah.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're back on. Just didn't want the file to get too big.

JJ: Okay, okay.

JM: Some of the things happened pretty close in time that are both very significant. One is [clears throat] the first ever – very modest, but the first ever successful integrations at a restaurant table in Pine Bluff in March. But also pretty quickly, that's when the arrests are going to start. There were a lot of people in jail by that March, because the police department switched tactics.

JJ: Right.

JM: And, um, as you were just saying, you know, you get to a point where you think, "Gah, we might now be heading towards arrests." When that moment arrived, um, I wonder how you made your calculation because of what the implications of jails in those places in those times and so forth.

JJ: Um-hmm. I think, uh, that was a fear, a real fear moment. That, that because, you know, we had the beating and all that, but all that was outside. I think when we talked about the, uh, the hotel going to take us down, I think the college people in the crowd was real nervous. But them young guys, [laughs] they had been to jail, [laughs] and they were kind of like an asset. Said, "Oh, man, it ain't no big thing. It's just going

be crowded and nasty up in there.” I said, “What y’all know?” “Oh, we’ve been there before.” And people started engaging a little bit. But I think that kind of calmed people’s nerves a little bit, just that those younger guys had been there.

And then, when Mr. Coleman [principal of Townsend High] came by, and he didn’t go to jail, but he was standing across the street. And I think when people looked around and saw the faces, even though it was a long distance away, it kind of made you feel a little better, so we kind of got a little support.

But what going to jail did was amazing to me – is that is when the jail – the jail thing is when the *old* black people came out. And we was in jail, and they had a meeting at Reverend Allen’s church. There wasn’t no college students, nothing like that, but I was told that church was *packed!* [1:05:00] And, um, and they was talking about having to bond us out and all that. And Mr. Brown was there. He said, “No, I’ll go it.” And they tell me, said them little old ladies had little rolls of money in their bras, and some had it in their shoes, bringing in their money to bail us out.

And I think when that church group, that old population, I think that shook the whole city, because, uh – because after that, we saw a lot more yelling and cursing, and white people started throwing objects, but they weren’t that close to us. They would be, “You niggers! You niggers,” and were throwing at us. That was a big change, because at first they was in there knocking you down. And so, we were, “Oh, I think that’s going to have some impact here.” Because the old people didn’t come out and march with us, but they would come to that church, and then they started things – they started doing things like going to the jailhouse, asking people in the jailhouse, “Can we bring the kids some food?”

And at first, they said, “No.” And I don’t know who changed that, but I know Reverend Allen and some members – and, uh, when they brought the food down there, they let us out in this big old – you know, that part where, when they lock you up, they hold you in that big old holding cell before they send you to way in the back where, you know, little tight bars. Uh, so those people brought – they actually let us eat. You know, they had all these big old fat chiefs standing there like they’re going to kill somebody, but they let them bring their food in. And, uh, and I think that calmed people, because from that point on, every time we would go back, we would see a few more people coming and stuff like that.

And then, the – one thing happened that was a little scary is [clears throat] on campus somebody had said that if we don’t stop demonstrating, the football team, the sports team, was going to lose – they’re going to take all their money. I think that was a scare tactic. But, man, we, uh – when we were bonded out of jail, there was a lot of girls and things from Pine Bluff were coming to see us. And, man, them big old football players came down there, just shoving folks out of the way and threatening to bust our skulls. And that was scary! Because I think some of them guys did take that serious. “Yeah, y’all go back, and if I lose my scholarship, I’m gonna kill you myself!” Yeah, so that –

JM: So, it wasn’t just no sports; it was no scholarship for sports.

JJ: Um-hmm, so that was kind of scary. That was pretty scary there.

JM: What was the – how did your case ever get – what was the resolution of your legal case in a narrow legal sense?

JJ: Well, the attorney for us was – what was that guy’s name, right there in Pine Bluff?

JM: Wiley?

JJ: Oh, Wiley Branton took the big stuff, everything.

JM: Yeah.

JJ: It was a – it was a young, real small black guy had a law firm. And everybody said, “No, no, he’s not going to participate. He’s really got a good law –” but, um, I think, way later, I think maybe Bill Clinton or somebody appointed him to be a federal judge. Little bitty guy! And, um, and he walked into church – that’s on a Sunday afternoon, church. We’d all gotten out, and just tons of people came. “Oh, we just love you!” Yeah, right! And he came in there, and he just walked in and told Reverend Allen, “I’ll handle the case,” and just left, just like that.

And I’m not sure what happened to that case, because I don’t remember going to court. I don’t know if it was thrown out or what. Because the big stuff that my man was handling, he was the whole discrimination, uh, civil rights, rights, and he had a big, just a big case, and he was appealing his to the federal level. So, it kind of started [1:10:00] calming down. And so, we went, we went to, uh, Woolworth again. And what they had done is, I guess, they had told all the white people don’t come in at a certain time, [laughs] so we went ahead and ate.

And we went back to, uh, the hotel, and the guy told us it was full. And they didn’t tell me, but I was told later that, uh, they told some people that, uh, “To keep my doors open, uh, and to keep me off the lawsuit, and to keep white people, because if the white people get mad, they’re going to destroy my hotel and all that kind of stuff,” he

said, “Could you tell your people to come down here after dark at night?” [Laughs] So, I don’t know if that happened, but I know during that time we did go down to the Holiday Inn and we had a little thing, and they let us use a room. I never went there to – I didn’t go there to, uh, to just to spend the night. So, it, it settled a little bit.

JM: Did you ever [clears throat] – I want to make a transition of a sort towards, um, [clears throat] towards what will be your decision to take a formal role with SNCC and, ultimately, head into the Delta. And also, um, before that, did you ever circle back around – did you ever have any kind of closing conversation or meet again in some later sense with, uh, Chancellor Davis?

JJ: No, no. We were *banned*. We couldn’t even go on campus or nothing.

JM: Not years later?

JJ: No, no. Now, there were – that first, uh, wave of suspensions, now there were three or four kids who were suspended and stayed with us a while, now they went back to school a year later.

JM: They issued an apology, I think. That was his condition.

JJ: Um-hmm. But, uh, I never did go back. Uh, my wife was suspended; she didn’t go back.

JM: When were you married?

JJ: I got married, uh, May 16, 1964.

JM: Okay.

JJ: Yeah, yeah. She wasn’t in the arrest group, but she was with us when we went to, um, the very first one, Woolworth. And she, um – and we went – where else did we go? Because we was arrested in, at the hotel, because she didn’t get arrested, but she

was in the group of that first group, my wife was, and a homegirl of hers. But, uh, she never did go back. Joanna never went back. There was about seven or eight of us stayed the course.

JM: Yeah. Let me ask you about something that's going to become very, very important in the SNCC Arkansas story in a space of a few years. But in this early phase, spring of '63, moving forward a little ways, you mention that you meet the woman who will become your wife. Uh, Bill Hansen will meet the woman who will become his wife out of all of this context, Ruthie. Um, and so two things I'm interested in: One is what it's like to be with other people in such relatively intense circumstances and reflect about what that –

JB: Let me pause for a second.

[Recording ends at 1:13:57 – part 1 of 2]

END OF PART 1

INTERVIEW CONTINUES IN PART 2