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MEMORANDUM

To: Tim West

Fm: Joe Sinsheimer

Re: Interview With Sam Block

Dt: November 19, 1998

Enclosed is a lengthy interview I conducted with Sam Block, SNCC's lead organizer in the Greenwood, Mississippi area in 1962-1963.

In the interview, Block: 1) discusses his childhood experiences with racism in Mississippi 2) his "recruitment" into the civil rights movement by Amzie Moore 3) developing a voter registration campaign in Greenwood 4) Cleveland Jordan's role in developing the Greenwood movement 5) Reverend Aaron Johnson's decision to open the First Christian Church to the movement 6) working with SNCC field secretary Willie Peacock in Greenwood 7) developing a voter registration campaign in Itta Bena, Mississippi 8) Bob Moses' role in the Mississippi campaign 9) the role of SNCC Executive Secretary James Forman in the Mississippi movement 10) the difficulty in getting black churches to open their doors to the movement 11) SNCC's relationship with the NAACP in the state 12) the psychological effect of the 1963 March on Washington to the Mississippi movement and 13) the need for greater staff education in the Mississippi movement.

Interview with Sam Block
Montgomery, Alabama
December 12, 1986

Sam Block:

My name is Sam Block. I was born and reared in Cleveland, Mississippi. Cleveland, Mississippi is located 110 miles south of Memphis, Tennessee and 110 north of Jackson, Mississippi. There is a question that you have asked: How did I get involved in the civil rights movement or what prompted to want to get involved, do the things that I have done?

Well, as I said, it is quite a history itself as to how I got involved. And it goes back from when I myself was a teenager or not in my teens then but approaching my teens, probably nine or ten years old, something like that. My mother worked for a federal district judge in the state of Mississippi. And this was our livelihood. My father was sort of unemployed because of accidents he had sustained, injuries he had sustained in accidents at the federal compress where he used to work pressing cotton in Cleveland, Mississippi.

Well, I used to mow the lawn of this particular judge every weekend.

Sinsheimer: Can you tell me his name?

Block: Yes, Judge {Eddie} Green. And this particular Saturday that I am speaking of it had rained and I was unable to go to the judge's house to mow the lawn. Usually, he would pay me something like \$2 or something like that for what almost looked to me like five to ten acres of land. It would take me all day to mow the lawn.

But my mother had always taught me that this particular judge and his family really loved us because she was able to bring home all of the leftovers in food and clothing--everything that his kids wore that she thought we could use at home. And we did. As a matter of fact all of the bacon grease and the food that was left over, that is how we made it most of the time because at that time my mother was only making about \$2.50/week.

Sinsheimer: She was a cook?

Block: She did everything. She reared the kids. As a matter of fact she spent more time with his children than he and his wife did themselves. So I wanted to go to a basketball game because I couldn't mow the lawn. And I needed some money to go to this game, it was a tournament at our high school. I went to the judge's house, which was about perhaps four or five miles from our house. And I walked the distance from our house to his house which my mother walked every day to and from work.

So I didn't think about about what I was doing, I just walked to the house and went to the front door of the house and I knocked on the front door. So the Judge himself came to the door and he said, "Sam, what in the hell do you want." And I looked and I said, "Judge, I wanted to know..." He said, "Wait a minute, first thing you know that you don't come to my front door of my house for any goddamn thing. Now you get your little snotty-nosed black ass away from this front door and go on around to the back and knock and I will come and you will tell me what you want."

I really didn't think about that. But what stuck in my mind most vividly is my mother had always taught me that here is a man that loved me. And he struck me, he really hurt me sort of, but I didn't know how to deal with it psychologically or mentally.

I did go on around to the back door and knocked on the door. Judge came to the door and said, "Yeah, now what do you want?" I said, "Well, Judge Green it is raining and I wanted to know if I could borrow the \$2 I would have made mowing the lawn to go to a basketball game, the basketball tournament at the high school. He said, "Well, Sam, right now I am busy. You go back home and call me back in about two hours." This was in the early morning, say perhaps around 7:30 or 8:00 that morning.

So I went home. We didn't have a telephone at our home but across from our house, about 500 feet away was a seed company warehouse that had a warehouse on one side of the street and the office to

this particular warehouse on the other side of the street. So I slipped in this warehouse--this is how we would make our phone calls. And I called the Judge. I told him who I was. He said, "Well, Sam I am still busy. Give me the number where you are and I will call you back in perhaps another thirty minutes." I gave him the number and sure enough he did call back in perhaps fifteen or twenty minutes.

But there was a person who was in the office of this particular seed company that I didn't know about. They had adjoining phones so when the phone rang in the warehouse it also rung in the office. So he picked up the phone at the same time that I did and he answered by saying Pace seed company before I could say anything. So the Judge said, "Oh hell, I think I have got the wrong goddamn number." And the man in the office said, "Well, who are you calling? Who is this?" "Oh, this is Judge Ed Green."

So everybody in Mississippi in small towns like that knew each other. "Oh, Judge this is Glen Otis down here at Noble Pace Seed Company." He said, "Oh, how are you doing." He asked about Mr. Pace and so on and so on. He said, "Judge, who are you calling for?" He said, "Oh, I was calling for a little snotty-nosed black nigger boy. His goddamn old Mammy been working for me all her goddamn life. And you know how niggers are. They want to know if you can give them something or they can borrow something." He said, "Oh, who are you talking about?" He said, "Sam." He said, "Oh, I can run down there and get him Judge." He said, "No, no, no."

And at that time tears had begun to come in my eyes. I was really really hurt emotionally then. It just seemed like my whole attitude changed immediately. It was so hurting (sic) because my mother was still with the feeling and belief that this man loved us. And for him to have said just what he said about her it was hurt me most.

Sinsheimer: What was the name of the seed company?

Block: Pace Seed Company. So I eased the phone down on the receiver and I got behind a stack of seeds-- which has 100 pound sacks and there were 20 sacks to a pallet. And I got behind

one of those sacks of seeds and I cried like a baby. And I really didn't know how to handle my emotions then. And I made up in my mind over a period of time, from that incident, from that first incident there, that if I ever got a chance to do anything to help people, especially black people at that time, that I was going to do it.

So as I grew up with this in mind there were things that happened that kept reassuring me that I really wanted to do something. I really wanted to do something.

Sinsheimer: When you said things happened to reassure you...?

Block: Yes, well I mowed the Judge's lawn on Saturday so I go back around the town way, through main street. And I saw white kids and everybody sitting on the stools of the fountain in the Rexall drug store there. And they were eating ice cream and everything. And I just decided that I wanted some ice cream so I went into the drugstore myself and sat on the stool and the next thing that I knew a man and a woman came and grabbed me by the collar and pulled me to the backdoor and said, "You know damn well that you don't come here and order any ice cream. If you want anything you get your ice cream here." And they knew me there because the town was so small. So I told them that the only thing that I wanted was some ice cream.

I left and I went home. But when I got home they had already driven down to my house--we didn't have a telephone and told my mother what happened. So my mother made me pull off my clothes and she took an ironing cord and almost killed me because she said she would rather do it than have them do it.

And it was things like that--that particular incident-- that stuck with me and kept reassuring me. Does it really have to be this way? Can something be done? Why can't I have eaten ice cream at the fountain as the other kids were doing? I just didn't see color because I felt if it was true that if this man loved me like my mother said, it really didn't make any difference of color. But I was wrong. I was wrong. These lessons and there were many more, reassured me that there was a very distinct difference between

races and people. And it made me take another look at my own environment and my own surroundings in which I live. I began to notice that the railroad tracks separated the black community from the white community in our little town. And I began to notice that things were really different.

And what really happened, what really brought things to do a real boiling point in my life is we lived right on the railroad track--our house was perhaps about 200 feet from the railroad track. And every day the Mississippi State Penitentiary would bring the prisoners over to unload gravel and asphalt. I was very sickly, always had asmata and many days I had to stay out of school because of asmatic condition. But what I really couldn't understand, what really brought things to a boiling point was when I saw black prisoners in stripes from the Mississippi State Penitentiary up there unloading the car boxes of gravel and asphalt and stuff, and I saw white prisoners standing there on the ground guarding them with shotguns and stuff like that.

I just didn't understand that. Why did that really have to be. And I grew up wanting to do something. And what made me realize that I had to do something was when Emmett Till was killed. And it happened right there in Leflore County {actually right outside the county}. I was rather young but I had reached my teenage state of life.

Sinsheimer: When were you born?

Block: I was born in '39. This happened in '56, '54 or '56. So I wanted to try to do something then but knew that I couldn't. And going through school and supporting myself and leaving immediately when I finished high school--going to St. Louis, entry into college, staying there, and then going into the service for a while, the air force, and seeing there how racial prejudice really kept men separated also even in the airforce the government, which showed me a another dimension that I had not seen.

Sinsheimer: Where did you go when you went into the air force?

Block: Lakeland Air Force Base, San Antonio, Texas. And at that time the civil rights movement had begun.

Sinsheimer: And what year did you go to San Antonio?

Block: This is in '62.

Sinsheimer: So you graduated from high school...?

Block: Graduated from high school and went to college, Harris Teacher's Collge in St. Louis, and then went into the air force. I didn't stay very long because of my medical condition. But I was trying to get out anyway because the reason why wasn't my medical condition.... The reason why I wanted to get out was because what I had dreamed about being involved in all my life was happening. Students were being beaten for riding the front of the buses, the Montgomery thing was going on, Jim Peck and other Freedom Riders were thrown in jail and what have you. And I just wanted to be a part of it. ...To be part of a movement that was doing something to eradicate the conditions that I had been forced to live in all my life but wasn't able to do anything about.

So I did get out of the air force in '62. I only stayed about 20 days or something like that and I got out. That was the best thing-- I was happy. So I went back to St. Louis and stayed a day or two and I came back to Mississippi to my mother's house where I lived in Cleveland. And I wanted to find a way to get involved in the civil rights movement. But about that time most of the people were in prison in Mississippi State Penitentiary and everything had sort of quieted down a little.

Sinsheimer: You don't remember what month this was do you?

Block: Yes, this was around October of 1962. So I worked for my uncle. My uncle had a service station, well he and Amzie Moore owned the only two black service stations in that little town, Cleveland, Mississippi. So I entered then into college, Mississippi Vocational College.

Sinsheimer: Let me interrupt you for a minute. What were the other black owned businesses in Cleveland? Do you remember?

Block: Churches. I don't even remember their being at that time a black restaurant. Churches-- yes there were. There were two black restaurants but they weren't restaurants they were little dance halls where we ate out and everything else. But those were the only black businesses that I can remember.

Sinsheimer: So aside from the ministers, Amzie and your uncle were about the only two that had any property. And then the people with farms.

Block: Yes. But we always owned our property also for as long as I can remember we owned our own land.

Sinsheimer: Was that rare?

Block: Yes, it was rare. But the reason why we owned our land {was because} my grandfather was white. He was Jewish and before you could even get a job in the little town I was born and reared in you had to go through him to be sanctioned to become employed. My grandfather also was an engineer for the railroads and he was able to acquire and accumulate a lot of properties that were left to the family and the kids.

Sinsheimer: So your grandfather had lived in Cleveland?

Block: Yes, sure. So that is how we accumulated the properties that we had.

Sinsheimer: Was he born and raised in Cleveland?

Block: He was born and reared there.

Sinsheimer: And then became an engineer with the railroad?

Block: Yes, he was white, Jewish.

Sinsheimer: He married a local black woman?

Block: He married an Indian woman. So after-- well not after but while working for my uncle at the service station I was commuting to and from college, Mississippi Vocational

College. This was the first quarter that I had gone there. That is in Itta Bena, Mississippi, seven miles from Greenwood. So I met a lot of people from Greenwood while I was in college. And one of the things that I would always question them about was Emmett Till, what people thought, what did they think about the death, and what would they have done. And many of the kids were just as angry as I would but knew not what to do.

So what happened that made me really leave my uncle's service station was he had a white customer who mowed lawns also. My uncle was gone fishing this particular Saturday and I was running the service station. He came and it was very hot that day. And he said, "Boy, it is really hot today, isn't it?" Now I was angry having gone through St. Louis, college in St. Louis experiencing a different way of life, angry from my childhood, mad, tired of being called a nigger and "boy."

I blew up and the thing that I said to him was "Yes, boy, it is really hot isn't it." So it seems as if it shocked him. He dropped the can of gasoline and looked like sweat just poured off his face and he said, "Nigger, what did you call me." I said, "Look, I am not a nigger. You called me boy and I called you boy." He said, "Look, don't you put another drop of gasoline in nothing I got." He said when your uncle comes I am going to tell him exactly what you have called me, what you have done. So I said tell him. He left and later on that afternoon my uncle came from fishing and usually what would happen is I would go home and change clothes, wash up and everything and eat around 5:00 and put on my clothes for the evening to go in the streets to the little dance joint with the other kids where we would all meet.

And I came back from eating and my uncle was standing in the door of the service station waiting on me. And that was very unusual. And I saw him and something made me feel that something was wrong because he was just standing looking. And when I got in approach of perhaps about twenty or thirty feet away from the door of the service station he jumped out after me. And he had a knife in his hand, his pocket knife, and he started yelling at me saying, "You goddamn

son of a bitch, you done run away my best white customer. I am going to kill you ass Sam, Jr." That is what they called me. Said, "I am going to kill you."

And he was running after me behind me with this knife in his hand and it sounded as if he was crying. It looked as if he was gaining on me, looking back, and I ran into a ditch and he too ran into the ditch and fell over me and some kind of way his falling through him further away from me. And me being young and him being old I got up and I outran him and I never went back to his service station.

So I was then approached--I was in school-- I was approached then by Reverend James Bevel, Amzie Moore, and Bob Moses. James Bevel and Amzie Moore at that time were the persons who were mostly responsible for me getting involved into the civil rights movement.

Sinsheimer: They approached you over Mississippi Vocational?

Block: No, there in Cleveland.

Sinsheimer: They came up to see you?

Block: No, Amzie lived around no more than let's say a block away from my house or so and he was a very good friend of our family. As a matter of fact Amzie lived next door to my uncle that tried to kill me with the pocket knife. And apparently Amzie had been told about what I had done to my uncle's white customer by my uncle. And they asked me to come around to the house which I did and told me that I should be involved and it started from there.

Sinsheimer: So Bevel and Moses were there that first meeting?

Block: So we decided that we would work with SCLC training--which was Dr. King's organization at the time-- setting up citizenship classes in the state of Mississippi, teaching people their duties and obligations and responsibilities of citizenship under an alledged constitutional form of government.

So I did, I got involved and set up citizenship schools.

Sinsheimer: Where did you do that?

Block: There in Cleveland, Mississippi, all over Cleveland. So Bob said that....

Sinsheimer: So these were underground?

Block: Sort of, yes, sort of underground. So Bob {Moses} said, Bob had been spending a lot of time down in McComb, Mississippi and he felt that the movement in McComb was sort of dying because of what had happened to Steptoe and everything, people were just furious about what could happen I imagine. Because of the beating that Bob had received himself. And he felt that there was a need for a change and we needed to spread the movement out. So he asked me where would I like to work. And I said, "Greenwood, Mississippi."

Sinsheimer: What was the reason behind that? Because you knew so many people?

Block: Emmett Till. I wanted to do something in Leflore County. So we to Highlander Folk School, training center, up with Miles Horton and Guy Carren and Candy and spent a week or two up there training and came back and it was Bob Moses, Hollis Watkins, Curtis Hayes, someone else and myself. We had Amzie's old '49 Packard car. In route it seemed like the happiest part of my life. We were driving through the backwoods and the highways in Tennessee trying to get back around to Hattiesburg and Jackson, Mississippi around that area where Hollis had worked.

And there was just a new enlightenment, a new part of my life. And I was so impressed with the songs that Bob taught us as we were singing. And one of the songs that stuck with me most was the song by Woody Guthrie, "This Land is Your Land, This Land is My Land." And we even began to make up songs and we sang as we traveled in this old '49 Packard. And we reached Hattiesburg, I think we put Hollis out in Hattiesburg and we came up to Jackson-- we put Hollis and Curtis Hayes off in Hattiesburg. And came on up to Jackson and put the other person off I can't remember.

But one of the things that they all were asking me in route into Mississippi was did I really want to go to Leflore County. It was dangerous. And Bob told me, "Now, Sam do you know that the possibility is on that you could be killed?" And I said, "Yes." He said, "Well, you know where you are going?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Okay, but I want you to be sure that you really want to go into Greenwood." And at that time it looked like tears starting coming out of my eyes and I told Bob, "Yes."

So I got to Greenwood and the first thing that I had to do was find a place to stay.

Sinsheimer: Did you have a car then?

Block: No, no.

Sinsheimer: They dropped you off there?

Block: Bob dropped me off. No car, no money, no clothes, no food, just me. And the first thing I had to do as I said was find a place to stay. And I knew some students that attended Mississippi Vocational College with me who lived there. And J.J. Jones, and his father was the only black jeweler in Greenwood so I went to J.J.'s house. J.J. was once a student himself at Southern University and there at been a movement started at Southern that he was a part of and he had gotten kicked out of Southern University and was attending Mississippi Vocational. And So J.J. found me a place to stay with his next door neighbor whose name was Mrs. McNease. Mrs. McNease was the principal of the elementary school in Greenwood on Broad Street, not Broad, on MacLaurin Street, MacLaurin and Avenue G.

So she really didn't know why I was there and we didn't tell her why I was there. But J.J. had been kicked out as I said of Southern and I would assume that his father had told him he didn't want him participating in any movements period because he always kept his distance from me. But the first thing I did was Mrs. McNease took me in and we sat down and we talked and I told her I was a student at Mississippi Vocational College and everything. And She said, "Well, you are welcome here. When you get on your feet you can start paying me

rent, the rent was going to be \$5 a week. And I will see if I can help you out with food, I know how you college students are."

So she really didn't know then why I was really there. So as she would go to school in the morning I would get up too. And I would canvassing, just talking too people in the community about voter education and registration. And sort of just really testing the pulse of people.

Sinsheimer: Now, was that sort of informal, that wasn't door-to-door, that was sort of....

Block: Informal like. Hanging out in the pool halls, wherever people were, the laundramat, run around the grocery stores, meeting people. I was aslways introduced as a student at Mississippi Vocational College and that sort of thing. But I used it. And I found that there were a lot of angry people in Greenwood. And I found and learned too that there were a lot of frightened people in Greenwood too. Angry because of what had happened in the middle fifties, the Emmett Till murder. And angry also because those men were living right there in Itta Bena, Mississippi. Angry also because many of the teachers at the high schools there in Itta Bena and Greenwood--checks went to Milam and Bryant's store. And they had to go to the store to get {their checks}.

Sinsheimer: They were the folks that killed Emmett Till? They were living in Itta Bena {actaully the two men left Mississippi for Texas in 1957 and did not return untilk 1972, although they Bryant's family continued to run Bryant's store}

Block: Yes. They had a grocery store in town.

Sinsheimer: Do you remember the name of the store?

Block: I don't remember.

Sinsheimer: So they had to go there to cash their checks?

Block: Yes, their checks were sent there instead of to them.

Sinsheimer: Just because...?

Block: Because they wanted to make sure that those men survived, the power structure did.

Sinsheimer: Like if you were a main in a home they would send your check.

Block: This was just with the school teachers.

Sinsheimer: They sent the school teachers' check.

Block: Well, not only the school teachers, people who worked on plantations in around in Itta Bena and Greenwood also. Their funds were being put there also. And they to had to go there to shop in order to pick up their funds, their wages. I learned all of this from talking to people and I found how angry they were.

Sinsheimer: This was a good seven years afterword and they were still doing that.

Block: Sure they were. They were angry because they didn't know how to do anything about it, fearing that they would be a victim themselves because they knew nothing had happened. Because too they knew local blacks were also being killed in Leflore County and around in areas like that and nothing was being done about it. Emmett Till's death was just one of those that got publicity but there were many Emmett Till's in Leflore County.

I found that the people who were most receptive to me were the older people. And I began spending most of my time talking to them because too some of them, the older {ones} were unemployed, were always around home, and were at that time were the most angriest. They then decided-- and this is where I met the gentleman by the name of Mr. Cleveland Jordan. Cleveland Jordan sat me down and gave me a whole history of what had been going on in Leflore County. And he had told me about how he had decided to start a voter education movement and gave me the names of those persons who were involved in that and the names of those who he felt also were still interested in getting a voter education movement started.

Sinsheimer: Do you know when Mr. Jordan might have tried

that...?

Block: Oh yes, that was in the early fifties. I would assume-- they still had an organization that was sort of inactive that would meet sometimes-- the Leflore County Voters' League, that organization was still in existence but sort of inactive. They were a few people that still got together.

Sinsheimer: That was the by-product of Jordan's effort?

Block: Yes. So he welcolmed me. And told me that anything he could do in terms of giving me food, helping me find a place to meet, he would do that. And he did. Finally, we were able to get for our first meeting about fifteen or twenty people together and we met at the Elks Hall. Mr. Jordan was an Elk.

Sinsheimer: Did he arrange that?

Block: Yes. And another gentleman who was considered to be the powerhouse, who was black, in dealing with the Elk's club was Mr. Bishop.

Sinsheimer: Do you know his first name?

Block: No, I always called him "Daddy" Bishop. But Mr. Bishop welcolmed us through Ed Cochran who owned the only hotel in {black} Greenwood at that time. And so we met....

Sinsheimer: Welcolmed you through Mr. Cochran, I didn't quite follow that.

Block: I was welcolmed also by Ed Cochran, through Daddy Bishop. So we met for the first time and we began to set up some sort of an organizational structure, gave people responsibilities, let them know what I would be doing, ...to sort of watch out for me, they knew the history of Greenwood, and asked them for suggestions of things that they felt I should do, places that they thought I should go to, and people whom they thought I should talk to.

And they did and I did. I spent all my time on the streets eating out of garbage cans most of the time trying to make sure that I survived. And finally able to get up, well increase our members....

Sinsheimer: Let me ask you a question. When you talk of the first fifteen or twenty people. What type of people were they? Were they student friends?

Block: No, no, no. No students, all older people. As a matter of fact students and other people, I mean the younger people, when they saw me coming would automatically get on the other side of the street. I would go into pool halls and I was no longer welcome in the pool hall. As a matter of fact they just completely separated themselves, divorced themselves from me period. And the movement in Greenwood was not built with young people, other than myself at that time, but with older people who were angry, who were looking for some kind of direction, for somebody who could give form and expression to ideas and thought and things that they had had in mind for years that they wanted to do and just couldn't bring together. It was those people who made up the movement in Greenwood in the genesis.

So our next meeting was held again at the Elks Hall and I began teaching people Freedom Songs that Bob had taught me and what have you. And it seemed to me that they liked those songs, they identified with them. And from there-- and what happened there was because we were singing freedom songs we were kicked out of the Elks Hall so we didn't have a meeting place anymore. And we had to find a church or some place to meet. And when Mrs. McNease found out why I was really there in Greenwood and what I was doing I was kicked out of Mrs. McNease's house.

And I found a place with a gentleman who was employed by the federal post office there in Greenwood who was black, in a janatorial position. His name was Mr. Burns. And Mr. Burns welcomed me saying that he had been to the war, to the army, fought in wars for his country, and he saw where black men lost their lives as well as white men and yet when he returned to the country they were still called "nigger" and "boy." And he wanted to do something. Though Mr. Burns was uneducated, couldn't hardly read and write his name, he wanted to do something. He was angry, he knew there was a

need for change.

Sinsheimer: Was this the same Mr. Burns who was later put up on bigamy charges?

Block: Yes, on Avenue I.

Sinsheimer: Is that where you were staying?

Block: Yes, on Avenue I.

Sinsheimer: What kind of building exactly was it?

Block: That was a brick two story building. Mr. Burns had a photography studio, he knew photography and he would take pictures in schools and churches and what have you. My room where I slept was right above his photography studio overlooking the street which was Avenue I. I finally called Amzie and Bob and the others--well I did keep in contact with them and let them know the progress I was making, that I had been kicked out of the Elks Hall. I wrote Jim Forman and Ruby Doris in Atlanta and told them I needed some money, no food, no nothing. I was tired of eating out of garbage cans but if it took that to survive and get the job done I was going to do it. So I stayed. And Bob told me that there was just no money no place, anywhere. They were trying to get money and transportation for people who were working but had not been able to do anything at that point.

So I told Bob also that I needed some help in Greenwood because we were going to take our first group of people down to the courthouse to attempt to register to vote. And I didn't know what was going to happen and I needed some kind of back up help. So he said okay I will bring Lawrence Guyot and Luvaughn Brown in the next few days to help me. That night we met, our mass meeting was sort of publicized word of mouth. We found a place, Reverend Aaron Johnson's church, he was the first minister to open up his church to us.

Sinsheimer: Do you know why he opened up his church to you?

Block: Yes, he too had gone to the army and also his church, his church, his religion, his

faith was very liberal in that area of thinking and were involved in doing some things of that nature.

Sinsheimer: It is funny he also told me ... that you had had one small meeting in the hotel....

Block: That was the Elk's Club.

Sinsheimer: And he said the real reason he opened up his church aside from having a commitment to the movement was that he didn't think it was proper {to be meeting in a hotel}. {Short break}

Block: Well, I didn't know that. That night, that meeting was very successful.

Sinsheimer: So this is your first mass meeting?

Block: This was our first mass meeting.

Sinsheimer: At First Christian Church.

Block: Yes.

Sinsheimer: Now was Guyot there?

Block: No one was there but me. Mr. Bishop was there, Cleveland Jordan was there. We had a good time. I taught them Freedom Songs and later on while I was there. And Mr. Jordan spoke and told the people, "Well, we got somebody now that is going to help us do something. We have been wanting somebody now here he is. I want you all to give him all the support that you can. Don't be afraid of him--he didn't say afraid-- don't be scared of him. Treat him just like he is one of us because he is. We have been wanting to do something for a long time and now is the time. We just can't sit back any more and let things go on that have been happening in Greenwood all our lives. We have been living in fear, afraid to do something. It is time to do something. The time is now."

So it was through Cleveland Jordan and Aaron Johnson that the movement really began to take hold into the community, take hold and people really began to understand my reasons for being there in Greenwood. The next day as I walked the streets I met a lot of people. And the thing that they

remembered the most about that meeting that we had that night were the songs that we were singing. And asked when we were going to have another meeting and sing those songs. And I began to then see the music itself as being a real important organizing tool to really begin to bring people together. Not only just as an organizing tool to bring them together, but also as an organizing tool to serve sort of as an organizational glue of holding them together.

And I would give people responsibilities, you know, of thinking about a song that they think they would want to sing that night and changing that song, you know, from a gospel song. And think about freedom, interjecting your own feelings and your own words into that. And through that-- out of that at least grew a lot good freedom songs that we would sing in that meeting and across Mississippi later on.

But we decided that we would go down to the courthouse-- this was after our second mass meeting. And we had about twenty-one people that were willing to go down there and attempt to register to vote. And the ages of those persons ran from anywhere from 40 some years old up to 70 or 80 years old. And the thing that stuck most vividly in their minds was that I had told them unless you are a registered voter, unless you exercise that right through voting, you are still and will ever remain a second class citizen.

And the reason that struck me so hard in remembering that was that there was an old man with whom I had spoken with about going to the courthouse who agreed who was almost 60, {no} 70 years old. His name was Mr. Ledbetter. He came up to me and said, "Mr. Block, I want you to put my name on that roll." I said, "Yes, sir." He said, "You know why?" I said, "No, I don't Reverend Ledbetter." He said, "Because I am tired of being a second class citizen. All my life I have wanted to go and I ain't been able to. I am glad that you are here. I am going to register to vote."

So I took the first group of people down....

Block:

Yes, still alone. Took the first group of people down to the courthouse and we went into the front of the courthouse and we met Mrs. Martha Lamb. And the first thing that she did when she saw these people coming in there was call big Sheriff "Smitty". Sheriff "Smitty" came in with his pistol and his handcuffs and ordered us all to disperse and nobody moved. So he stood there looking and he didn't do anything at that point.

So old man Ledbetter was first in line and he walked up to Mrs. Lamb. And he looked at Mrs. Lamb and said, "Mrs. Lamb, now you have been knowing me all my life. I have been knowing you all your life. I am down here and I want to register to vote. She said, "Now Ledbetter, you know that you can't read and write." And a lot of people wonder where this came from the phrase, "How many bubbles in a bar of soap." He said, "I know I can't read and write Mrs. Lamb, but I get a check every month--about seven or eight dollars-- yes I do." She said, "Yes, you do, I know that." He said, "Now in order for me to get that check from the government I have to sign my name don't I." She said, "Yes, you do." He said, "Now you know, I can't read or write." She said, "No, you can't." He said, "Well, what do I do." She said, "You sign an X on your check." He said, "Well, that is what I am going to do on this voting role. I am going to sign a X. Now whatever question you want to ask me since I can't read or write you go and ask me the question and I will just sign my X and you will know its me."

Well she got so mad Mrs. Lamb asked Reverend Ledbetter she said, "I don't know many questions that I could ask you that you could answer but how many bubbles are there in a bar of soap?" So old man Ledbetter stood back and looked at her and scratched her head and said, "Mrs. Lamb, you know what, I don't really know but I don't want to go through life being an ignorant man all my life. I have heard that question asked before. If I don't answer this question I am going to flunk this test ain't I?" She said, "Yes, that is your question." He said, "Well, Mrs. Lamb I don't know the answer and I am going to flunk the test." She said, "That's right." He said, "Well, to keep me

from being ignorant the rest of my life Mrs. Lamb how tell me how many bubbles there are in a bar of soap and when somebody asks me again I can let them know."

Mrs. Lamb was so angry she called Sheriff Smith in there again. He came up to me-- we were outside, we had gone outside because we had seen all these whites coming and we knew they were moving in on us. So we were standing in front of the courthouse and Sheriff Smith came and he spit in my face. He said, "Nigger," and took his pistol out, and he shook his pistol in my face. He said, "Let me tell you one goddamn thing. I don't want to see you 'round here the next day, the next hour, the next minute, or the next second." And the spit was still there and I stood there listening to him. He said, "I want you to pack your goddamn bags and I want you to leave Greenwood, Mississippi."

And all of the people were standing around wondering what I was going to do or say. I said, "Sheriff, if you don't want to see me around here the next day, the next hour, the next minute, or the next second, the best thing for you to do is to pack your bags and leave because I am going to be here." And it seemed as if that alone gave the people who were with me all of the courage that they needed to really begin to get out into the community themselves and round up people for mass meetings and become involved in this movement. So I went back home...

Sinsheimer: Let me interrupt. So Ledbetter was the only one that attempted that day?

Block: Well, no they all were there.

Sinsheimer: But he was the only one that Mrs. Lamb ever talked to?

Block: Yes. She called Sheriff Smith in after that.

Sinsheimer: Then you all left after that incident?

Block: We knew the Sheriff was coming in and we saw white people coming around on the outside and what have you. Two of the people who worked there had left out for some reason, apparently what they did, they had gone to get other people together. But anyway she

called Sheriff Smith and Sheriff Smith was coming in and all the people so we went outside where if we had to fight we were there. But we also been taught the nonviolent struggle, the nonviolent movement, you know.

So as we went back home to our respective living areas the Sheriff and the highway patrol and all of them would drive behind the cars of people and as people would stop and let one out to go in the house they would take his name down and address down. Just a form of intimidation. And some of the people actually shouted back to them and said, "You don't scare me no more. You don't scare me no more."

And I called Bob that evening and told Bob what had happened and what we had done. And Bob then Luvaughn Brown and Lawrence Guyot to come up immediately.

Sinsheimer: So that was the second time you had asked for help or the first time?

Block: The second time. So Luvaughn and Guyot got there about 12:30am that night. And I had one of the taxi cab, black taxi cab drivers who I had gotten to be friends with around in the community to pick them up at the bus station late that night to bring them to the office there where I was living, Mr. Burns' building. We were-- it was about 1:30am I would say and we were sitting and talking and mapping out strategy about what we were going to do the next day. And about fifteen minutes later we heard a dispatch radio downstairs and we peeked out of a window of the building and there was a policeman sitting there talking to somebody, telling them yes the light is on, so on and so on.

And I told Luvaughn and Guyot that something was fixing to happen. So they said, "Well, what do we do." I said the thing that we should do first is try to call Bob, try to get through to Bob and Amzie. So we called Bob and Bob said, "Well look, the thing that you should do right is call John Doar of the Justice Department." By that time up drove looked like the way it was converging upon this office-- tires screeching and all that. Men jumping out of cars with ropes and chains and shotguns and everything else. And they didn't know how to

get upstairs- there was only one way to get upstairs to where we were and that was the back entrance.

So I said, "Look, we had better put some chairs and stuff behind this door." Which we did and I called John Doar and John Doar said, "Well Sam, ain't nothing I can really tell you to do. I will call the local FBI agent who was stationed there, his name is George E. Everette, he has been there since the death of Emmett Till. He is a good man, we put him there to investigate Emmett Till's death and he found out things for us and you can call him at home. I am sorry Sam, we can't do anything. The Justice Department cannot really act until a crime has actually been committed."

So I hung up and by that time looked like people were trying to break into Mr. Burn's front door and apparently somebody discovered that the way to get to us was through the back stairs. But anyway I called George E. Everette and he said, "Oh, I will come down there. They ain't going to do nothing to you, they are probably just trying to scare you or something." And it seems at that time they were trying to break into the building. We went out of the back door window.... crawled to the back of the, down on top of the cafe, crawled to the back of the building and went down the TV antennae--about the size of my arm-- and we went to Andrew Jordan's house, Cleveland Jordan's son. Andrew Jordan is now a city councilman there or something.

Sinsheimer: Andrew Jordan or David Jordan?

Block: David Jordan. Went to David Jordan's. We called Bob and told him what had happened, that we had escaped a lynch mob. So Bob said, "Well, I will call come right over. I have got a person with me who has just finished Rust College. I wanted you all to meet, he wants something to do." It was Willie Peacock. He said, "I will bring Willie on with me. We will leave right now." He said, "Where are you going to be Sam?" So we told him that we were going to be at David Jordan's house.

Anyway David Jordan decided that we couldn't stay there. He said because he taught school and it would jeopardize, put

his wife and family in jeopardy, and he didn't want to be a part of anything like that. Couldn't afford to lose his job. And he put us out. And we went to his father's house and some other people's houses until the next morning. We came back to the office early that morning and all of the records had been-- little notes and stuff-- had been destroyed, thrown all over. The windows were open, the door was open. And Bob and Willie were in the front office asleep.

So we continued to work. And Bob stayed there for awhile but he left Willie there. And Guyot stayed and Luvaughn Brown stayed. Later on they arrested Mr. Burns and charged him with bigamy. They wanted us out of the building. And that was a way of putting pressure on Mr. Burns to make sure we were thrown out of his building.

And another lady by the name of Mrs. Hattie Mae Smith who owned a beauty salon had sent word to me and told me to come over, she needed to talk to me right away. So I went to see Mrs. Smith. She said, "Look, I know what you young men are doing. I have heard about you and I am a part of it. Oh I am so glad to see you. Now all of you can stay at my house." So that is how we got our first Freedom House.

Sinsheimer: Where was that located?

Block: That was on Short Street, Short Street and Avenue L, in that area off of Broad. So Bob decided then that there was a need to sort of intensify the movement there in Greenwood because we did have an ongoing organization and people there were really willing and ready to do something. So we decided that we should spend all of our efforts, right now all of us, in the streets talking to people everyday, trying to get people back down to the courthouse again to attempt to register to vote. And we did and people then began to turn out in masses.

And one of the reasons too why they turned out is because-- well Luvaughn and Guyot left for a while-- but Willie and I began to go in the backwoods of the plantations and we organized a food drive. And we were bringing food for Clarksdale, Mississippi

where Aaron Henry and _____ was, back to Greenwood and we were feeding people.

Some of the plantations that we went on-- and we sort of used this {particular} plantation as a focusing point because it had so many blacks there that we knew were enslaved and they wanted to leave but there was no way out. What is the name of that?

Sinsheimer: Egypt plantation?

Block: No, this is right outside of Itta Bena. I was trying to think of the name of the family, the first black family that we met. Anyway we went into this house-- Willie and I did-- and it was cold, I mean cold, and you would be in the house and look at the ground. There were holes and stuff in the house. What really struck and hurt me the most was there was a baby lying in the bed there and there were some springs, there was no mattress there. But there was a coat on top of these springs and this baby was lying there. And they had covered there and there was no food.

So Willie and I worked very close with this family and finally--The Vassels-- finally they began to talk to other people on the plantation there and they began to come out in droves from the plantations, began to talk about voter registration, coming to the mass meetings. We brought Bob in several times to speak. We brought Fannie Lou Hamer-- we had found Fannie Lou Hamer by then. By that time Charles McLaurin, Jesse Harris, James Jones, and Charles--God what is Charles' last name-- Charles Cobb-- they were working in Sunflower County. And Fannie Lou Hamer had come over, we would work with them, we would sing.

It always seemed to have been the music that really served as a drawing card and the organizational glue that always seemed to make people want to come back and be a part of whatever we were doing. Besides that they saw the sincerity that had been demonstrated by me in the genesis and by the others, by Peacock who was there, as well.

Finally we found an office on East MacLaurin.

Sinsheimer: Let me back up and ask you how did you guys

go about the plantation organizing?

Block: Well, we would slip out. We would borrow an old car or something and we would go back and slip onto the plantations while people were at work or late in the evenings or early, early in the mornings, taking a chance. We had been told that if we go there we were going to get killed because everybody knew that this man who owned this plantation was known for killing blacks. But we said this is a chance we had to take because we knew what was going on, we knew that we had helped. Some of the families of some of the people who lived on the plantations lived in Greenwood-- they had family members on the plantations-- and they too were the ones that begged us to go out there to help them.

By that time too we had found a place on East MacLaurin Drive, on MacLaurin Drive.

Sinsheimer: Mr. Sander's building?

Block: No, we were at Mr. Campbell's building first.

Sinsheimer: Who was Mr. Campbell?

Block: Mr. Campbell was a man whose father was white, he was black and he owned quite a bit of property there in Greenwood. He owned a cleaer's, owned several cleaner's there in the black community. And Mr. Campbell was an old, old man who feared nothing, who feared nothing. So we used that office....

Sinsheimer: Now did he offer that building to you or did you go see him?

Block: He offered it himself. What happened was there was a barbershop in this particular building also. And I would go there to get my hair cut by the black barber there and we got to talking and this man....

Sinsheimer: This wasn't Reverend Allen or Reverend Johnson?

Block: No, we already had Reverend Johnson. I was trying to branch out and bring other people into the movement. And one of the means of

reaching people was being able to sit down and talk to them in their own setting, their own environment. I met this particular man who owned this barbershop, C.D. was his name. John and C.D. two brothers, but I spent a lot of time talking to John and John said, "I think Mr. Campbell would let you all have it because he has been saying that he wants to meet you, really admired you."

If what we are doing now doesn't help him it will help his grand kids. For that reason he wanted to be involved. He said he couldn't march or do anything like that because he was old but whatever he could do he wanted to contribute. So he did, he gave us an office there, rent free. It was a three room building on the first floor and by that time the movement had grown so, people had heard so much about we were doing, people were very, very involved and not only older people but the younger people also had gotten involved. We would spend time at the little restaurants where they hung out and go around the school campus, Broad Street High School, talk to people and got them involved. We got five students involved first.

Sinsheimer: Is there anything that you remember that really got the younger people involved or sort of changed that?

Block: Yes. Well we talked to about five students and got them to go to Clarksdale, Mississippi with us. One was Jolie Edwards, one is a doctor now.... I have forgotten the names.

Sinsheimer: You got five students to go to Clarksdale to do what?

Block: Well, we went to a mass meeting there. This is a meeting where we were also going to begin to talk about organizing COFO. And we wanted to get them involved, to get their feet wet and introduce them to Bob and other people around other areas who were doing things so that they could see that we weren't the only students involved. There were other people like ourselves who were involved in other areas. So they came and

that same night--one of the persons who was with us was Dewey Greene Jr., Dewey Roosevelt Greene, Jr.. And through Dewey we got some other students involved and his family also.

But what happened was that after the meeting we were headed back to our areas, coming back to Greenwood and some people were going to Cleveland, Greenville and other places where we were working. And just as we were leaving Clarksdale we were all stopped and arrested and thrown in jail.

Sinsheimer: For violating the curfew?

Block: Yes. And I can't remember exactly, I think we paid a fine or something later on and got out. But those students then saw themselves what had illegally took place in their lives right before their face. They knew that there was no curfew that we had violated and the first charge that they put on us in the genesis was speeding. And there was no speeding or nothing like that. So we paid a fine and left. And from that it really stirred them to get involved and want to do something themselves and they began to talk to other students. And Dewey himself decided--he and I talked about it-- that he would go on and try to enter Ole Miss. This was right after James Meredith.

From there people began to organize because they began to hear about what was happening in Greenwood and students began to organize all across the country in support of Greenwood. One group of people out of Chicago sent a train load of food down and we were unloading--by this time we had also acquired transportation, people had gotten us cars stuff. You know really begin to throw in and build a movement themselves, it really became a people movement.

So this particular night-- I had asmatha, I am an asmathic-- we are at the church and I said, "Look I have to have my medicine." Peacock said, "Man, do you have to have it right now." I said, "Yes, I have to have it right now." So we got in the car with his girlfriend and my girlfriend--they were two sisters. I was driving, we drove back to the office across the tracks over to MacLaurin. And my girlfriend said, "Sam, look don't get

out of the car, please don't get out of this car." I said, "Why?" She said, "I just feel that something is going to happen." I said, "Look, I have got to have my medication."

And I went to open the door of the car and six white men drove up in a stationwagon and fired into the car shooting deer slugs at close range. Shot directly through the front window and the bullet went into a house and there was a lady and a baby lying in bed there and it went directly into the mattress. Had the shots been fired just an inch or so higher they would have killed those people because the deer slugs did not spread until they got out. But Peacock hit the floor and I hit the floor and said I had been hurt, been shot. I just had glass and stuff in my face.

Anyway we called the police. And one thing, the first policeman to arrive was Captain Usser and he told Peacock's girlfriend,, said, "Essie, you know I know you." She said, "Yes sir, I know you do." "Don't you know these two niggers right here are going to get you killed?" She said, "Well, yes sir, I see now." "You had better stop hanging around these two niggers right here. If you don't you are going to end up dead." So the police came then and instead of taking us to the hospital they wanted to take us to jail because they accused me of plotting the shooting to receive cheap publicity. So we went to the hospital and the glass was removed from my face and we came back and continued to work and people began to give out the food and stuff and people were going down to the courthouse then in mass droves.

What really happened is that I went in first myself, we had a big registration drive. And I went in first and I was the first person to sit down and try to register to vote. And what happened was-- my case was one of the cases that the civil rights commissioners used as a test case wondering why they failed me because the question that they had been asked of me was so correct. And all of the questions that they were asking me, the answers were right there in the book themselves. So all of the other people followed and people then would want to go on down on their own because the

students themselves then had become very involved in the movement.

One family, the Nero family, three girls, were very involved and they were both Catholics. And they were responsible for bringing in Father Nathaniel of the Catholic Church there who began to slip us bulletins-- he would type up our bulletins and print them. Anyway he could help underground they did it, he and Sister Kate. So we became very close to them because we knew that if we needed anything, even a hiding place, we were offered if there ever came time when we needed that we could go there.

The movement then had taken a different phase. Instead of us really trying to do everything people themselves had taken over and really it was sort of directing itself. But this is one of the things, one of our intentions from the genesis, and my intention going in was to go in to organize the people and eventually move myself out, work myself out of a job and move on to another area. But it didn't happen that way.

A week or so later I think it was-- I can't remember dates going back this far. But so many people had gone to register, we had had such great success. Randolph Blackwell--I think we was from SCEF.

Sinsheimer: From the VEP {Voter Education Fund}?

Block: Yes, Randolph and Wiley Branton had come over to Greenville and they wanted to get a first hand look at what was happening in Greenwood because Greenwood then had become really the focus of attention. It was the movement, nothing else seemed to have been happening anyplace else other than Greenwood. Greenwood was the real hot spot. Not only Greenwood had become quite involved, quite a success in terms of people involvement but Itta Bena itself had also.

Sinsheimer: Let me interrupt you again. How did you guys get things going in Itta Bena?

Peaccok: Well, one of the plantations that we were talking about that Peaccok and I were going out on on days and night and getting people food was there located in Itta Bena. And we

met some people there--the Vassel's themselves got very involved. Those were the people who lived in Itta Bena. And Willie McGee, he became a SNCC field secretary.

But the movement began to spread so that people began to come out of the woodwork and tell us their problems and things that they had experienced. Like one lady, Mrs. Laura McGee, she had all kind of land and stuff in Greenwood and much of it had been taken away from her by the white power structure there, And one of the reasons that she was having so many problems herself, her brother by the name of Gus Coats had also attempted to register to vote I think it was in Belzoni, Mississippi and was shot in the head. And Gus had to be out into a casket and shipped to Chicago. And Mrs. McGee had offered us her farm and offered that for any reason if we needed to use that farm it was open to us because the Federal Land Grant Bank was trying to take it from her. Amzie and Bob Moses then got involved in that special project there in saving her land. And we raised the money to stop the Federal Land Grant Bank from taking it away.

And hr sons then became very involved and were the first two students to go down to the local theater.

Sinsheimer: This is Willie and Silas? Okay? She owned land outside of Itta Bena?

Block: No, outside of Greenwood?

Sinsheimer: But she was the sister of Gus Coats? Okay, got you.

Block: One of things that we did right after that.... I might have skipped something. No, I didn't. People then came into Greenwood from everywhere which began to really give national attention to what was happening there in Greenwood. Pete Seegar, Theodore Bickel, Bob Dylan, Jackie Washington,

.....

Sinsheimer: This was after Jimmy Travis' shooting that you were....

Block: Yeah, I was leading up to Jimmy Travis you are right. Okay, that's correct. Bob and

Randolph and Jimmy came over from Greenwood and about 8:30 or 9:00 that night Bob and Randall and Jimmy decided that they would leave and go back to Greenville. But Bob told us that he felt we should leave and close up the office. But what happened before then is they left the office. Bob had noticed this car circling the block prior to their leaving but he didn't tell us. So they left and stopped at the 82 Grill to get something to eat and the car trailed them and it was then Bob called Willie and I back to tell Willie and I that we should close up the office and try to go on home immediately because he had noticed this white car with four men in it wearing dark shades circling the office quite frequently and he didn't know what they were up to.

So they left and they took a back road into Itta Bena going on to Greenville. And just as I understand they got, approached Itta Bena, the car pulled up aside them, went by them at a high speed and recognized them and went up the highway and turned around and came back and fired at the car with a submachine gun. And Bob called us from the hospital--called Willie and I from the hospital and said, "Sam, Willie and you need to get to the hospital, Leflore County Hospital immediately.... Jimmy has been shot. Somebody passed by us with a submachine gun and sprayed bullets into car. We don't know whether he is going to live or die.

So we went to the hospital and by the time Willie and I got there Jimmy was lying on the table and I understand they refused to wait on him because they said they didn't have proper facilities. But one of the persons who was there said one of the reasons was they really didn't want him there anyway. And we had to take him to Jackson. So we didn't have any money to get an ambulance. We had to wait until the next morning. The man wouldn't transport him to Jackson, it was a black ambulance driver, unless we had the funds or something. Anyway the next morning we took him to Jackson and that is where Jimmy was operated on.

From that sure enough people poured into Greenwood by the droves. And people were singing in the streets, then it when we had

the folk festival in Greenwood. Theodore Bickel and Bob Dylan--from there I think it inspired Bob Dylan to go back and write the song he wrote, "Blowing in the Wind."

We had other people then willing to do other things, go into other areas. And one of the areas we wanted to go into was Belzoni. I went into Belzoni with some other people and we got them off the ground. And the other area was Tchula, Mississippi. We had...I forget his name, but anyway he and I went into Tchula first and we took the first group of people.... Cottonbow? What was his name?

Sinsheimer: Turnbow?

Block: Turnbow began to get really involved in the organizing....

Sinsheimer: This is in Holmes County?

Block: Right.

Sinsheimer: Let me back up because then you had a series of marches in Greenwood before--if I have my timetable right Travis was shot in March of 1963, March 1, March and April were the series of marches and what I can tell from the newspapers and other things you took the first group in Holmes County to attempt to register after you all had been releases from the county jail, eight of you have been in county jail. Can we go through that series of events?

Block: Right. What happened after Jimmy's shooting, I got on the road a lot and began to raise money, spent a lot of time around Chicago and New York and California speaking to raise money for the movement and to try to get other people involved.

Sinsheimer: Tell me a little about that. The Atlanta office of SNCC would set that all up?

Block: Yes, Roberta and Fay Bellamy and Ruby Doris, some people.... John Lewis was there then.

Sinsheimer: Did you travel with...?

Block: I traveled by myself.

Sinsheimer: Traveled by yourself and you would speak to pre-arranged groups? Do you have any idea how much you would raise at events like that?

Block: Oh, sometimes \$3-4,000, \$2,000.

Sinsheimer: A night?

Block: Sometimes. People would commit themselves and send money later?

Sinsheimer: Did you enjoy that?

Block: I did it because it was necessary.

Sinsheimer: Did you feel like you wanted to be back in Greenwood?

Block: I wanted to be in Greenwood. But they thought too and felt that I had become battle fatigued. I had almost been killed by a speeding truck, I had to jump behind a telephone poll to escape death. Oh, I had been beaten in the genesis in Greenwood real bad, been pushed under a car and left for dead.... {Short break}

The people themselves did not want me to leave but it was a necessity. They felt that if anyone could tell the story about what was going on in Greenwood it was me because it was my project, I was the first to go into Greenwood. From there, as you know, we got Dick Gregory and Harry Belafonte and Sidney Poitier and others began to pull food into Greenwood. And the mass marches really began to take place then.

Sinsheimer: So you were absent a lot of that time? I was wondering why you weren't in the papers.

Block: Yes, I was absent a lot of that time, raising money.

Sinsheimer: Did it help having all that activity going on while you were out raising money?

Block: Yes, it helped tremendously. And at that time too in '63 I think it was about the time Look magazine had just come out with a three page story on me. I was in demand across the country.

Sinsheimer: So do you remember the, at the climax of the series of marches they arrested most of the SNCC leadership-- Forman, Moses, Guyot....

Block: Peacock and some local Greenwood people.

Sinsheimer: And then there is the famous Greenwood deal where the Justice Department agreed to drop the injunction. Do you remember that?

Block: Vaguely. I know that we went to Washington after the arrest and we filed suit against the Justice Department because they had failed to protect the rights of civil rights workers in Greenwood. At that time too I was still on the road a lot. The irony of that was that it never really got any press. It was one thing when I got to New York that night we saw one little thing on it, that's all. It was completely almost blacked out. When I came back to Greenwood that is when we went into Holmes County.

Sinsheimer: Let me ask you a little bit about-- I know it is hard to talk about other people-- but your relationship during the early part with people like Forman and Moses. What did you think of Moses when you first met him?

Block: I didn't believe Moses. A man who had gone through the kinds of things that Moses had gone through and with the educational background that Moses had. You know here is a man who really didn't have to be in the South. But who was there and committed. I always wanted to pattern myself and mannerisms as Moses himself was. I saw the man go through a lot of things that were just unnecessary, a lot of frustrations, a lot of problems placed on him and he endured it all.

I just felt that here is a man that has been, a person who grew up in the churches, you know. Here is a man that as my mother and father would have said was God-sent. I just saw Bob as being that person, you know, who was really just like Moses who had gone in the Red Sea. Today, I respect Bob Moses in terms of all the people who went through the movement more than I do anyone else. The man was truly committed, truly committed.

Sinsheimer: When you say some of the burdens were unnecessary. You thought too much stuff was put on Bob?

Block: Everything was put on Bob. If people-- almost if people wanted to go and eat, little things like that, or when it came to trying to get money in, or when it came to trying to get people into Mississippi for the Mississippi Freedom Summer Project. Anything that had to be done Bob would be the first person to be approached instead of Chuch McDew. or John Lewis or Julian or James Forman. Bob was the person. And he carried all the responsibilities of the organization, of the movement. And not only of the movement, {But} of all of us who were SNCC field secretaries. We looked to Bob. If we wanted anything to be done and we needed something, if it wasn't but \$15, we would look to Bob. And he tried. He would never say no. He never said no. I never heard him say no.

Sinsheimer: What about Forman? What kind of presence was he within the organization?

Block: Forman's presence wasn't as visible, wasn't as highly visible as Bob's. Forman would spend a lot of time traveling around the state of Mississippi and other parts of the country, speaking, raising money, food what have you, and bringing other people into the movement. All of the organizational skills and strategies seem to come from Bob. He would be the initiator. And people would follow because he seemed to have innate leadership qualities. And the things that Bob would say would be the soundest, and the most practical, and the most wisest thing. And because Bob had spent time in McComb and things, you felt that Bob had learned a lot. And Jim seemed to have been the kind of person who would be more concerned about technicalities and bullshit like that vis a vis Bob.

Sinsheimer: Let me go back to Greenwood for a minute. It seemed from talking to some people that after Reverend Johnson's which was the first church the next churches to open up were the

Methodist churches, but you all had trouble with the Baptist churches.

Block: We had trouble with all of the Baptist Churches in the genesis. The next church that opened up was Turner's Chapel. And they had a young minister there, a young Methodist minister there who became a part of the movement.

Sinsheimer: This is Reverend Tucker?

Block: Reverend Turcker. And what really brought other people closer to the movement was when they saw the police sick the dogs on Reverend Tucker. Here is a man who goes up in the cloth, as a child of God, and they sick the dog on him.

Sinsheimer: There is a statement on the "Story of Greenwood," the album that was put together, Mr. Jordan talking about how it changed people's minds.

Block: It really did, it really changed people's minds. It gave them a deeper feeling for the movement itself. And it made people want to be involved who were not even involved. And one thing that happened too was....

Sinsheimer: Do you think it was dog or the fact that he was a mister, or just the combination was so extreme?

Block: I think it was a combination of. Here is a man who teaches right and you got here a wrong that is attacking a right. But the other church that opened after Reverend Tucker's church was a Baptist church and that was Reverend McSwine's church. And Reverend McSwine's children got involved that is one of the reasons why-- well his son was involved from the genesis. What happened was his son was in jail and it was I who went into the jail and found him there and he had been beaten. I went down to get him out.

Sinsheimer: This is Welton?

Block: Welton McSwine.

Sinsheimer: That was very early on.

Block: Right. But I think that Reverend McSwine sort of felt a commitment dating back from that incident. He knew that we were real but I think what Reverend McSwine was really waiting to see was how his congregation itself was going to take us, more so than him because I don't think he felt he wanted to lose those few dollars that was coming into the church. With him being a black businessman too.

Sinsheimer: He was in business also?

Block: Yes, he owned a mortuary.

Sinsheimer: He didn't want to risk his reputation?

Block: And his livelihood for his family and him and everything else.

Sinsheimer: I managed to talk to him and his memory wasn't all that good but he told me that the thing that convinced him, the thing that pushed him over the edge in terms of opening his church was when Dick Gregory came to town and said something about "Isn't it a shame we can't get a single Baptist church in Greenwood to open up, " and he felt publicly embarrassed and that was what....

Block: Yeah, he was embarrassed, I totally agree. But you know what I didn't understand was understanding the Methodist Church, growing up as an AME and I knew the history of the AME Church and why it divested itself from the Methodist Church in the genesis...Bishop Allen....
I didn't think that the Methodist Church in Greenwood, pastored by a Reverend Black {actually Reverend Rucker} at that time would be as difficult to get into as it was.

Sinsheimer: He pastored the AME Church there?

Block: No, the Methodist Church itself.

Sinsheimer: I am a little bit confused.

Block: The AME is African Episcopal Methodist Church, the Methodist Church is under the

global ministry and it a part of that particular organizational structure.

Sinsheimer: Okay, so Reverend Black is part of the traditional Methodist Church?

Block: Right. And we caught hell getting hos participation and cooperation. As a matter of fact he fought the movement in the genesis more than the Baptist churches did themselves. The Baptist Church did maintain a silence, but he was just vocally open about his resentment about us being there.

Sinsheimer: Do you think he felt threatened?

Block: I really don't know, I haven't analyzed it. But yes thinking back, looking back, knowing now the Methodist Church structure and who runs the Methodist Church.

Sinsheimer: Their is this argument that historians have been putting forth lately that part of the opposition-- let me back up. One thing that I think is fascinating is that I think that there is a myth that exists that all black churches suddenly threw their arms open to the movement.

Block: No, sir.

Sinsheimer: Yeah. which you all certainly realize. But I think that a lot of people want to believe that. But the argument that people are putting forth was that they {ministers} had always been traditional leaders and suddenly here was somebody was new--you and Moses and everyone--challenging for leadership in the black community and that they basically felt threatened, defending their own turf.

Block: No. They didn't feel threatened by my or Moses being there. They felt threatened more by the white power structure itself as an economic thing. Most of the ministers who ran small churches were also employed by some whites there in the town. It was all about economics. Their wives either worked across the river for someone who was in local government there. It was a means of survival and it threatened that economic survival for the wife or that minister

himself having us into their churches because many of the ministers I learned later on had been told that if we were let into the churches that the church would be burned. And many of the churches they did attempt to bomb them. Burned them down and everything else.

But that was when that ultimate sacrifice came. It was not because the ministers themselves threw their arms open, it was the people in the community saying, "Hey, this is our church. Now whether you want us to have a meeting in it or not we are going to have it." And it was because of that pressure from the community itself that forced them to open up whether they wanted to or not. It was the people.

Sinsheimer: How about Reverend Rucker at Wesley Methodist?

Block: Reverend Rucker was an ass⁸

Sinsheimer: Do you care to elaborate on that?

Block: I think Reverend Rucker was more against the movement itself period. We had a lot of problem with Reverend Rucker. As a matter of fact the way his church was opened is that we had to go to his Bishop.

Sinsheimer: Bishop Golden?

Block: Who came down and said if you won't open the church than I will.

Sinsheimer: He actually came to Greenwood.

Block: And it was that from the Bishop himself, who came down, it was that pressure that the Bishop himself applied on Reverend Rucker to force the church open.

Sinsheimer: Yeah, Hollis had remembered that story. Again, the same thing, fear?

Block: Yeah, fear. And also Reverend Rucker's church was located more, well closer to the white community than the other churches. Whereas the other black churches that we were into then were sort of protected in the community. Whereas Reverend Rucker's church,

right there behind his church, two or three blocks over, you get into the white residential.

Sinsheimer: So he was the most vulnerable?

Block: Yes. But the thing is see even though we couldn't get into his church, Reverend Rucker himself never attended any mass meetings outside of that church of his.

Sinsheimer: He really played it cautious then?

Block: That is right. And the other churches that we couldn't get into, as a matter of fact when I left Greenwood I don't remember getting into the Holiness churches other than Reverend Johnson's.

Sinsheimer: Was there a--excuse my ignorance-- was there a philosophical difference between the Methodists and the Baptists that explains that? I mean why did the Methodist churches {open}?

Block: The Methodist Church was run by a black organization itself, the AME is totally black.

Sinsheimer: So Turner's Chapel was under the Methodist....

Block: No, Wesley was under the Methodist structure. It was Reverend Black and then Reverend Black was over at Turner's Chapel but we never got much support from Reverend Black still when he came to Turner's Chapel. But Reverend Rucker, his church is under a different organizational structure.

Sinsheimer: So AME is a black off-shoot of the traditional Methodist so it made sense that Reverend Tucker's church would open up. Now, Wesley Methodist is under the traditional white Methodist structure? So that would have made it harder for Reverend Rucker?

Block: Yes, Reverend Rucker had to....

Sinsheimer: But he had a black Bishop didn't he?

Block: Yes he did, but that didn't mean anything.

Sinsheimer: In other words, there were two separate hierarchies?

Block: There were two separate hierachies. And he had to {get along} also with the other white Methodist ministers in that area which made me think at times the way he would act that he had to, he moved and did what they told him to. I don't think he was responsible for his own actions.

Sinsheimer: What about the Baptist Church? Opposition there was again just too much pressure?

Block: Too much pressure and their national leadership was not at all an endorser of the movement.

Sinsheimer: The black Baptist national leadership.

Block: Yes, Reverend Jackson. As a matter of fact some of the ministers would say when our national organization votes on it we will come a part of the movement but right now our national organization has told us to stay clear of all this.

Sinsheimer: Who were the leaders of that?

Block: Reverend Jackson.

Sinsheimer: Where was he located?

Block: I don't know where Reverend Jackson was.

Sinsheimer: Well, that helps to explain that. What about, you mentioned Reverend Johnson and Mr. Jordan as some of the people, but what about other people that made contributions that mattered in Greenwood?

Block: Mr. Sanders.

Sinsheimer: After you moved from Mr. Campbell's building
....

Block: What happened with Mr. Campbell's building is I was in route to Jackson to a meeting with Medgar Evers and Bob and some other people. And it was about 6:00pm that afternoon, it might have been a Saturday....

Sinsheimer: Is this before you left to go on your speaking engagements.

Block: Yes. It was about 6:30. Had all of these fire trucks in the community and we looked out of the window and there was the office, Mr. Campbell's building up in smoke. So I rushed out of the house and over to the building and when I got there I was arrested for arson and thrown into jail. But that too took on another dimension of the movement because we weren't at that point I don't think getting as many people out as we really wanted to get out into the community and down to the courthouse or what have you.

But them throwing me in jail and holding me like that and charging me with arson, people came from everywhere, out of the cotton fields with dirty boots on. And they had my trial in a little kangaroo court one of the things that-- most of the people who were there, they had packed the courtroom and around the courthouse, the little jail, were people who had come out of the fields. And that is when the movement really began to take off. And one of the things that they offered that really solidified the movement more and our participation there and staying there, was that one of the things that they offered me was that if I would leave Greenwood and not stir up any more trouble they would drop all of the charges against me and let me go. And I refused to leave. And that again enstilled the faith in the people that were there around me.

Sinsheimer: It also made them look tremendous hypocrites?

Block: Yes, it did, it exposed them.

Sinsheimer: And then after the arson attempt, after the arson....

Block: After the arson Mr. Sanders offered his building. Mr. Sanders himself had been employed by the city to build manholes in the city of Greenwood and all that, and was well known. Had properties everywhere. He offered his building free of charge at that time and there was a little church in the

bottom of his building about the size of this room here and we began to use that church as little meeting places for SNCC and the community organizations that began to organize themselves-- the NAACP Youth Group began to organize. All of this came out from the students that had been involved with us in Clarksdale.

And what happened too in Mr. Sanders building. We went in, it was an old shell, and we decided to make a library for the community and have offices there and everything else, place for us to work out of. A lot of people came down from all parts of the country to donate their time. Students at Michigan State and everywhere began to donate books. Ivanhoe Donaldson began to drive stuff down. He had some aspirins and some over-the-counter drugs and they said he was transporting narcotics and arrested him. Just all kinds of things happened.

And Mr. Sanders, though he was always set in his own ways and you couldn't tell him anything--he sort of wanted to run the movement by us being in his building-- he gave a new strength to the movement. And that new strength was even though the government and the people of the city felt that they had burned us out, they had run us out, Mr. Sanders gave us that staying power that we needed. He helped us to further the cause by offering his building and opening up not only his building, he opened up his house to us and so did his family.

Sinsheimer: So he sort of became an embodiment of that philosophy of staying. Was he someone who was active in Mr. Jordan's attempts.

Block: Yes he was, earlier. As a matter of fact, Mr. Sanders was very active throughout, he was one of the persons who was active throughout the genesis of my being there and doing whatever little things he could.

Sinsheimer: What about-- there was not an NAACP chapter when you came to Greenwood. Was one formed by Mr. Jordan's son shortly after you arrived?

Block: No, that is not what happened. His son

didn't really form an NAACP chapter. The students really began to start that. I pushed some people telling them that they should have an NAACP chapter and they began to get that started. And through that Andrew Jordan got involved.

Sinsheimer: These are high school students?

Block: Yes.

Sinsheimer: And he was just elected president?

Block: Yes sir. I remember what had happened too is that he got involved in the movement somewhat but he had gotten kicked out of his job.

Sinsheimer: Andrew Jordan?

Block: Yes.

Sinsheimer: Tell me about your relationship with two people. First Amzie and then Aaron Henry. I guess you had grown up knowing Amzie for years?

Block: Yes, I always knew Amzie and always knew of the things that he was doing, his involvement with the NAACP. And my thing was I always liked to go and talk with Amzie. I spent a lot of time at times talking to Amzie about various things that were happening. I had expressed the feeling that I wanted to do something. He was a man that I really, really respected. Because around in the town in Cleveland the only person who was really addressing any issues period no matter how small or large they were was Amzie himself. Here was a man who sacrificed himself in the post office. Had a good job but they busted him down to a janitor of the post office and gave him a few hours a day because of his activity.

Sinsheimer: When was that, was that in the '50's?

Block: Yes, that was in the '50's.

Sinsheimer: And that was primarily, Moses mentioned that it was primarily because he was working in Mound Bayou.

Block: Not only that but he spoke out very heavily about what had happened in Emmett Till's case. Very, very heavily.

Sinsheimer: He was basically one of the few people in the Delta that was willing to take stand in the '50's.

Block: That took a stand in the '50's. He was one of a few. Now Aaron Henry....

Sinsheimer: Now--to stay with Amzie-- some people had talked about that it seemed like Amzie and Bob sort of had a special relationship.

Block: They had a very, very special relationship. They understood each other. The ideologies were the same. I think that Amzie sort of served more as a teacher to Bob than anything else. Not just about Cleveland, Mississippi and all of the injustices that were going on throughout the South, but {also} about the state of Mississippi. He was well traveled throughout the state of Mississippi. He knew people in areas and could get Bob into doors that Bob could not have gotten into himself. Amzie was really the father of the movement.

As a matter of fact Bob spent most of his time with Amzie. Anytime he had a question that he couldn't deal with, he would call Amzie.

Sinsheimer: Was that true when you get as late as the summer of '64?

Block: Yes. One thing that Bob and Amzie differed on and that was about bringing all of the white students into Mississippi all at once to converge upon the state of Mississippi. I think there was a difference in that but it really didn't surface or show but there were a few of us that knew about it because like Peacock and myself, Peacock and I were very close to Amzie too. And I was adamantly against bringing all of the students be it black, blue, white or green into the state of Mississippi. And at that time especially whites because I didn't think that the timing was right.

And one of the main reasons that I felt

that we shouldn't have brought them in--and Amzie sort of agree, well Amzie did agree--was that we felt they were coming in to sabotage the movement. And it was going to be infested and infiltrated with CIA men and FBI men and everybody else and the movement was going to be taken over by that group of people. It is going to be destroyed.

Sinsheimer: Did you all verbalize that as one of your arguments?

Block: As a matter of fact that was one of reasons why Peacock and I sort of became sore thumbs in the movement. Sort of pushed us to the side. Stokley had come in then also and Stokley really wanted to take control over what was happening in Greenwood because of the magnitude of the movement itself, the activities. It was exciting, not only exciting but exciting in a way where we could see progress being made.

Sinsheimer: And what about Aaron Henry?

Block: Aaron Henry, honestly, I never really had that much respect for, and I still don't. I just never saw Aaron as being that person who that was that committed to the cause itself per say. But I saw Aaron, Aaron's commitment more of selfish thing and more of an egogistical reasons for being involved than Amzie. He stood out just like a sore thumb in my opinion. And also Amzie was concerned about all groups working together, not caring who gets the credit, whereas Aaron Henry was just the opposite. He wanted everything to be done under the umbrella of the NAACP. And that's when finally we all agreed that COFO would serve as the umbrella organization.

Amzie always-- not Amzie but Aaron always even fought that. I rarely remember Aaron Henry coming into Greenwood or other places to speak, other places where he was requested and needed. Whereas Amzie was always there. Anytime day or night, I don't care if it was 3:00 or 4:00 in the morning if you call Amzie he is there. And Aaron Henry was just the opposite.

Sinsheimer: Did he put any pressure on you while you

were in Greenwood? Did he ever communicate with you in the early stages?

Block: Who Aaron? Sure, he put pressure on me.

Sinsheimer: Was that one of the reasons why you formed the NAACP chapter?

Block: Well, the reason was is that we needed some kind of catalyst or some kind of organization that young people could really begin to identify with other than just SNCC itself. You had more older people involved in SNCC in Greenwood and then you had youngsters. So we needed something that we could get them to organize around, to bring other youth into the movement, to further the cause.

Sinsheimer: Did he come down to meet with them?

Block: No, Medgar did.

Sinsheimer: What was Medgar's relationship first to you all and then to the people?

Block: There was a serious resentment because SNCC had come in and had been able to do some of the things I think that the NAACP had wanted to do and had not been able to do.

Sinsheimer: So you felt that Medgar resented you?

Block: In the genesis yes he did but Medgar in my opinion was much, much sharper than Aaron Henry politically. And his coming into Greenwood and speaking at mass meeting was more political, for political reasons and personal politics than anything else, to show his commitment. He couldn't allow himself to be outside of that organization. So it was political.

Sinsheimer: So he came basically to inject the NAACP's endorsement of something that was beyond his control, was in fact jealous of.

Block: Right. He had no control of it, nobody did.

Sinsheimer: How did the people respond to him?

Block: He was accepted because they didn't know the intra-politics that was going on. Anything that happened like that we always kept it in the closet. Because we knew that if there was any way for us to destroy the movement....

Sinsheimer: If you communicated with Henry or Medgar what be the nature of the conversation or what would you talk about?

Block: The need for food and clothing. They would give us a little bit.... But Medgar would come and give speeches. Medgar was an eloquent speaker and he come in and he could help rally people at times. And he could help also by just being there. People who were committed to the NAACP across the country, could broaden its support that we needed in Mississippi that we weren't able to get to ourselves as SNCC field secretaries. What it did it showed more of a cohesiveness for the organization itself, the organizations instead of just SNCC and we need ed that broad support because we didn't care whether a person was an NAACP member, CORE, or what. We knew there was a need to broaden the support through whatever means necessary, you know that we could.

Sinsheimer: You said earlier that you thought to osme degree that Henry fought even COFO.

Block: Yes, he did.

Sinsheimer: Do you think Medgar did?

Block: I don't think Medgar did. There was a difference, there is as much difference between Medgar and Aaron as there was between night and day. They didn't agree on a lot of philosophies themselves.

Sinsheimer: After you came back then from your fundraising tour you went back to work in Holmes County because Greenwood was what too hot...?

Block: Greenwood, the people had taken the movement on there. And you had a lot of people who had come in from other areas that had been pulled out of other areas into Greenwood. It

had become the focus point and all of our efforts were going to be concentrated just in that area but at the same time I saw that there was a lack of What was his name...? Anyway he had been in Holmes County and spent some time down there talking to people and he asked me to come in and organize. He was from Greenwood. So I went in and worked with him in Holmes County.

And I think that because of what had happened in Greenwood people were a lot more receptive to me than they were to him.

Sinsheimer: Because you had been able to get something going in Greenwood?

Block: Right.

Sinsheimer: Was there a difference working in a more rural county like Holmes?

Block: There was a difference yes. Though Holmes County, the majority of the population were black and they were land owners--I had a lot more fear in me in going in those areas than I did when I was in Greenwood for some reason. Though I knew that I was more supported-- the people in Holmes County supported me more right from the genesis than those in Greenwood but that was because of the history that had already been established. But for some reason I just never felt comfortable in Holmes County and I have never yet thought about trying to put my hand on that reason.

But I guess I had gotten to the point where I was battle fatigued. So much had happened to me and I had sort of getting to the point where I felt that I might be killed at any minute and I just wasn't ready to die. Fear of death began to come over me. But as far as work, no, there was a lot of support. Didn't have the problem getting into the churches in Holmes County that we had in Greenwood.

Sinsheimer: Even the Baptist churches?

Block: No. See most of the people in Holmes County were farmers themselves and they owned their own land. Economically they were much more stable and they owned their own churches

they didn't have to adhere to anyone.

Sinsheimer: So you did that through that summer? Then you had the Freedom Vote campaign.

Block: Yeah, we had the mock election.

Sinsheimer: Now did you work in Greenwood during that?

Block: Greenwood, Holmes County, Belzoni.

Sinsheimer: What did you do, anything specific?

Block: Dealt with issues. Issues.

Sinsheimer: Was there much discussion about putting Henry on the slate?

Block: In the genesis there was yes? Not many SNCC people really liked Aaron Henry and not many people who were working with the NAACP really liked Aaron Henry. So yes there was quite a bit of friction and discussion and some people in counties like Leflore County and Holmes County didn't know very much about Aaron Henry. He hadn't been as visible as an Amzie Moore or as a Medagr Evers or a Fannie Lou Hamer. People just seem to have that back-mind skepticism about Aaron Henry at all times. {Short break}

Sinsheimer: Was there much discussion about putting Ed King on the ballot?

Block: Yes, quite a bit. Ed was very respected because of his early involvement in the movement. Spent some time in Greenwood. There was some skepticism about him being white and from Mississippi and people weren't just ready to come out and place the trust in him that I would want them to have or Peacock or Bob Moses wanted them to have. People had not just gotten over the fact that.... {Short Break} In my opinion I think that Ed King in Greenwood and Holmes County and in some areas did get a lot more suport for things that he was doing than Aaron Henry.

Sinsheimer: When I was in Greenwood I was able to get some sense to the white community's reaction to Beckwith's assassination. What was the reaction in the Delta to that?

Block: He was looked at as a hero>

Sinsheimer: I am talking about in the black community now.

Block: In the black community? They hated Beckwith. They hated the government. They wanted to riot.

Sinsheimer: In the Delta too?

Block: Sure. Oh yes, people were furiously angry especially him living there in Greenwood, in the Delta area.

Sinsheimer: What did you all do...?

Block: Held mass meetings and talked to people and explained that it is not the time, this is not the time, this is not the thing to do. Not the thing to do. Medgar had just left us, you see, the same night that he was shot. He bid us farewell and told us that he had just stopped by, he had heard about all of the great things that were going on here in Greenwood and he stopped by to let us know that he was 200 percent with everything that was going on and if there was anything to do just let him know and he will come running anytime day or night and he would be there. He let us know that he loved us and keep up the good work. It was a short speech and he left and went into Jackson and later on thaty same night... I guess he had just gotten home.

Sinsheimer: What about your reaction? Did that bring a new element of fear?

Block: Yes, yes because see the shooting of Jimmy Travis was not meant for Jimmy Travis. It was meant for me. When they beat me when I first arrived, pushed me under the cars and thought I was going to bleed to death. They didn't kill me then, they didn't kill me with the Jimmy Travis thing. They didn't

kill me when they fired into the car with a double barreled shotgun. And the speeding truck that they tried to run me down with, they didn't kill me then. And I realized that I am not a cat. They say a cat has nine lives. And I just felt that my lives were running out, my chances of surviving were running out.

But yet I still was committed to staying in Greenwood. I was more committed to staying in Greenwood than I was any place that I had worked or did go to to work. It was a home.

Sinsheimer: How did Medgar's assassination affect your thinking?

Block: My thinking? How did it affect my thinking? The thing was I just felt that since Beckwith--well I didn't know that he was from Greenwood at that time--but of all the things that I had gotten from people afterwards from the maids and the cooks and cab drivers and from the white mailman, who I got to know very close who helped the movement a lot, Mr. Walls. They had been talking, "Look Sam, the Ku Klux Klan is meeting. The only thing that they talk about is the death of you."

Quite naturally that too is going to enstill more fear in your heart. I am human. And quite naturally I began to get a lot more frightened and I thought a lot more then about my life. And I was afraid because what is happening now is the same people who were so happy to have me there and were begging not to leave, were telling me that for the best of myself I should leave to protect my own life. They didn't want me dead. We didn't need another martyr. And that began to frighten me and I didn't want to die. I didn't want to die.

And I think too that that really had a very serious effect on my productivity, is because people, I just didn't see them just being concerned for my life and them telling me to leave. Though it was-- it was out of pure concern for my life, for my safety that they wanted me to leave for awhile, that things died down. They didn't want me there, they thought that much of me, they loved me very much. And I didn't want to leave that

love, I guess either.

I found the people who had confronted a system and the problem of racism and everything else, and segregation that I had been forced to live under all of my life and who was trying to do something about it. And I didn't want to leave that.

You know right now being here in prison some of the things that I often think about doing when I get out of here is going tback to Mississippi and working....Because I think that the problems are still just as alive now as they were in the '60's. As a matter of fact I think that in the past five years we have lost so much more than what we had gained.... It seems to have gone downhill and the problem that I address now-- the problem is when you have got a man like Aaron Henry who won't support a black candidate like Espey, that scares me.

And it shows me also that there is an immediate need for some kind of political organization there dealing more with human rights and serious political issues. There is a need for something like that. And if there isn't a move, if someone doesn't make a move soon to begin to address these issues we will be back where we were in the '30's instead of in the '50's. And i have been thinking about just going back. I got away from a lot of stuff. ... You know, even in California I have worked in community organizations, most of the work I have down is to work with people. But I feel that I am needed in some ways. I may not be, but I do believe that.

Sinsheimer: I know that Hollis {Watkins} and MacArthur Cotton have spent a lot of time with the Rainbow Coalition down there. Do you think that is a viable means?

Block: I hope so. I still think that, I still think that Jesse has too much influence, Jesse Jackson has too much influence over the Rainbow Coalition for it to be a viable means dealing with political issues for it to be the typr of organization I am talking about.... I think that, and I hope that I am wrong, that the Rainbow Coalition is more about boosting the ego of Jesse Jackson in my personal opinion. But if Jesse himself

can get to the point where he do some things bringing about any kind of political change wherever he is than I am for it. But right now I see the Rainbow Coalition being more about Jesse than anything else.

But I still think that it is needed because you don't have any organizations out there that are really doing anything.

Sinsheimer: Isn't that, what you just said, go back to one of the questions that SNCC asked itself? How do you sustain an organization that has the ability to raise enough funds and attract enough publicity and at the same time is able to do the work that it is needed to be done?

Block: Well, you see, what I see is that people are just going to have to recommit themselves. I think that there are many people who feel like me and even though we do have families and kids now or what have you, but I think there are some people who are really committed to just going back to the stages and days of SNCC, those techniques and doing without you know and getting some things down, making some sacrifices. That is what I am talking about. I think there a lot of people who are still committed to that ideology. That takes time to do. I still think it is feasible.

I hope, I really hope that MacArthur Cotton and Jesse or Hollis-- I don't think that Peacock is that involved--but they are committed to more than just Jesse Jackson.

Sinsheimer: My sense, and I haven't spent that much time in Mississippi to know, but my sense was that the Rainbow Coalition was perhaps stronger in Mississippi-- certainly there was something more there outside of Jesse Jackson. I think that is partly the result of people like that.

Block: True, I believe it is but there is a reason why. And the reason why it is because people in Mississippi are still looking for something to do. The problems in Mississippi are not over yet, they have not been solved. People are looking for a means, a viable means of dealing with those problems that they are confronted with. The NAA{CP} is not

as stronger now in Mississippi as it used to be. You don't have a SNCC or a CORE or other organizations that were there back in the '60's. You know the only thing that they have to grab, to hold onto is the Rainbow Coalition that is really talking about addressing the issues that they are concerned about. So quite naturally if you go in there with any organization now and you can sustain yourself and you are addressing the issues of the people. But I still think the Rainbow Coalition could be doing more in Mississippi now.

But I think too that everybody, right now the political timing is not really right. It hasn't been right, but it is getting right. And I think that what people have been looking at too over the past five or six years or so is that you are finding many many black leaders now being picked off and thrown into prisons throughout this country. Black politicians, black organizers, men and women, civil rights activists. Look what has happened here in Alabama, you know, and the _____ Spivey cases and all those other kind of cases.

And I think that political timing has been wrong, people have sort of gone underground right now, you see and they are still waiting. But I think there is going to be a volcanic kind of eruption sometime in the very near future. People are just going to be out there and you are going to find them at the Rainbow Coalition. It will become the viable arm because it is already there, that is what they identify with. But people themselves are going to explode, they are tired, they are tired of being underground.

Sinsheimer: What effect do you think Espey will have?

Block: I think that people see Espey's election as a victory. It is another first in the South. I think that since they see Espey's victory as victory there will be more interest and I think that Espey is going to be forced to support those, you know, the moods of the people. And I think that he is going to be able to do a lot of good, by being openly involved in whatever organization that will be ongoing or is ongoing there. And I think

that he is going to turn a lot of heads in Washington and a lot of people in Mississippi because of his being black coming from Mississippi he is going to carry a lot of political clout even though him being a freshman.

Sinsheimer: There is some talk-- and this is more conventional politics but it may work out for the best-- there is some talk now that Stennis may actually run again which in some ways would be good because with him being the Appropriations Chairman, if he was to want to run again he can deliver a lot to Espey's district if he wants to. And with Whitten being the other Appropriations Chairman, there are some ways.... But I don't know how all that is going to play out.

Block: That remains to be seen.

Sinsheimer: He has a full day's work ahead of him.

Block: But I think that it is going to force the hand of Stennis and Whitten to do something because you see Espey just wasn't elected by black votes you see. And that is going to carry tremendous amount of weight on things that Stennis does....

Sinsheimer: The nicest thing about that election was... what's his name, the guy who Espey beat? He was Hardy Lott's son-in-law.

Block: Is that right?

Sinsheimer: Yeah. I interviewed Hardy Lott>

Block: In Greenwood?

Sinsheimer: Yeah. It told me--I didn't think he would tell me anything {but he did}....

Block: Did he say anything about me?

Sinsheimer: Oh yeah. You are really the only person that he is focused on. I mean he sort of remembered all of the other names but he remembered you. "Old Sam Block used to lie, used to make up things like fires and shootings."

Block: {Laughter}

Sinsheimer: A couple of interesting things. One was-- I don't know how recently but sometime in the past five years-- Lott still is attorney for the school board and filed suit against David Jordan who is now a principal. And basically a lot of the white community moved away from him because they thought he was going to lose. And he did lose but what was so fantastic about it was that a black lawyer beat him.

Block: Is that right.

Sinsheimer: Several people, several of his social friends, said that hurt Hardy Lott more than anything else. To lose the case was bad enough, but to lose it to a black lawyer. Which is nice before he dies. Before he dies his son-in-law gets beat. So I got a lot of personal satisfaction out of that.

Block: Right.

Sinsheimer: What I am hoping to do with Greenwood. When I first went down there, I spent two weeks, I was just terrified about going to do interviewing in the white community. But finally I decided to just wing it and see what would happen. And I wrote a bunch of letters. People were willing to talk and I guess the thing that I found most interesting was that there was some division in the white community about what to do. Buff Hammond and.....

Block: Is Buff still there?

Sinsheimer: No, Buff is not still there. But the city prosecutor was Gray Evans. They seemed to be part of a much more moderate faction.

Block: Is that right?

Sinsheimer: Well, even then, what people were telling me is that there were sort of two factions. Both of them violently, I shouldn't say that, vehemently opposed to the movement. One faction though advocated the use of violence much more which was Citizens'

Council, Lott, that group. And there was a small group, but silenced for in some ways the reasons why blacks were afraid to speak up. Silenced because of economic pressures on them. Gray Evans obviously wanted to have a political career in Greenwood. But there was that group.

I found out--poking around, people telling me stuff on and off the record whatever that means-- that actually Sampson, Mayor Sampson and Buff Hammond actually got in a fist fight over the McGee brothers going into the Leflore Theater.

Block: Is that right.

Sinsheimer: They actually got in a fist fight in City Hall one night which was fascinating.
Basically Hardy Lott hates Buff Hammond, just speaks ill of him.

Block: Is that right?

Sinsheimer: Probably the presence of that moderate faction didn't influence anything that was going on necessarily but it was fascinating to know that it existed because there is a myth that the town was completely monolithic {in its opposition}.

Block: No, I didn't think that. That is one thing I never thought that it was completely unified. The reason why was because the white mailman, Mr. Wells....

Sinsheimer: Do you know his first name?

Block: No, I have forgotten the man's first name. Anyway Wells would come, he was a postman. All of the mail that would come in that day from wherever it was coming from--letters of support, money, or whatever-- they would hold it almost sometimes for at least week or two. Now we wouldn't know anything about the mail being there.

But one day I was walking down Broad Street and I met Mr. Wells and this was the second white man who spit in my face. And what happened was that he had been so brainwashed that my real reasons for being there was to take over Greenwood and take all the white women. And he just you know

didn't see it even though he was screwing black women in the black community just like Sheriff Smith, Big Smitty. Big Smitty had about seven or eight black kids. As a matter of fact I had to get them out of Greenwood because, Nancy Brand was the name of her-- I will get back to Wells-- Nancy Brand went down to register to vote and Big Smitty whom she had kids by told her that if she didn't go down there and withdraw her registration that he was going to kill her himself.

Sinsheimer: Nancy Brand? She had actually had children by Smitty?

Block: Oh, she had eight or nine children by Smitty, house full of them. So we had to slip her out of Greenwood and move her to Detroit, Michigan. Mr. Wells....

Sinsheimer: Okay, what is popping through my mind is somebody coming up to him {Smitty{ and saying "You can't even keep your own whore from registering to vote." Is was that sort of social pressure you think?

Block: Yes, yes.

Sinsheimer: You sent her to Detroit?

Block: Yes. To get back to Wells. After Wells and I stood in the street and talked at least thirty minutes after he spit in my face....

Sinsheimer: He just walked up and spit in your face?

Block: Yeah, he told me that he was mad and I took the time and I stood there and I talked to him and he got to know me. And he said, "You know you are a different person than what I have been led to believe." And from then on when there was mail in the mailroom down there he would tell me. So and so and so took this mail home tonight. And they were actually taking our mail home, steaming it open and bringing it back when they got ready. And that is how I began to get on top of that problem.

After that Mr. Wells was one of the whites who stood up and said that the theaters in Greenwood should be integrated. Here is the white who when they put federal

registrars, deputy registrars into the state of Mississippi to begin to register people he was one of those whites who became a federal registrar. But later on what happened is Thatchall Walt, he was working with Thatchall Walt, Greenwood Daily News or whatever it was {actually Greenwood Commonwealth}. Thatchall Walt stood up with Wells but Wells got the shit beat out of him, got his arm broke and all that and they ran him out of Greenwood.

Sinsheimer: They ran Thatchall Walt or Wells?

Block: Both.

Sinsheimer: Do you know when?

Block: This had to have been around '65.

Sinsheimer: I heard about Thatchall Walt. From his writing in your day he didn't seem so....

Block: But he changed.

Sinsheimer: Really?

Block: He changed.

Sinsheimer: Father Nathaniel seemed to have changed a lot. I did get a chance to meet with him, he is a fascinating man, very interesting perspective. You know in '68 and '69 he becomes the leader of the Greenwood Movement, out front marching which was quite different from where he was in '63. He said that it was assassinations that just sort of piled up--Kennedy's and Medgar's and Martin Luther King's-- he said King's assassination, each of them was sort of like his eyes just kept opening more and more. Anyway.

Block: But he was always in the background. And truthfully speaking had it not been for the Catholics for awhile I don't know how I could have gotten along.

Sinsheimer: So Wells was also able to tell you what the white community was talking about?

Block: Sure. Whenever there was a Klansmen meeting or the White Citizen's Council would meet

and whatever was going to happen. That is how when they were talking about having dogs in a certain place when we were supposed to march and they would think they have gotten the routes and all that kind of stuff we were able to plan different things or go on to different ways. They were expecting us today and we would come the next day. It was because Wells was telling me what was going on.

Sinsheimer: How did you all deal with the reverse of that in terms of-- Hollis {Watkins} was telling me that in almost every community there were black informants and that it was very difficult to deal with in terms of developing strategy. Did you have that problem in Greenwood?

Block: Dealing with black informants? Oh yes, sure.

Sinsheimer: How did you attempt to deal with that?

Block: I let the community deal with it, told the community about it. Best strategy in the world in dealing with informants in the community is to let the community itself dispose of them. Eventually some of them were made to, things got so hot for them that they had to leave. It wasn't because we put pressure on them it was the community.

Sinsheimer: Do you remember an example of that?

Block: Well, I don't want to call any names? Well, I will call a name, Jimmy Baker. He was working downtown and he would run and go tell everybody what he thought was going on. Supposed to have been a friend of mine.

Sinsheimer: Do you know where he worked?

Block: Worked for some little cotton organization downtown in Greenwood. But I just began to expose him, let the people talk about him. When the people talk about doing something to them then they leave.

Sinsheimer: What about the police chief?

Block: Chief Curtis {Lary}?

Sinsheimer: What did you think of him?

Block: Curtis Lary. Chief Lary was a man who always seemed to be in the background of everything. I really don't think that Chief Lary deep within his heart approved of a lot of the stuff that was going on. I think that he was on that side that didn't care for violence at all. As a matter of fact most of the confrontations that we had with the police department most of the time you never saw Chief Lary around even when you got downtown to be thrown in jail he was never there. But you had Buff Hammond, you had Judge Kimbrough, or Captain _____, or Slim Henderson. Chief Lary he is just a difficult man in a way for me to pinpoint but I just never really, I just never really had any problem with Chief Lary. I never did, I never had one confrontation with him.

Sinsheimer: What about Hammond?

Block: Oh my God, he would talk about killing, shooting me. I went up there to get Jane Stembridge out of jail. And I was there talking to Jane Stembridge and I said, "Look we are not going to have you arresting our workers down here and your bull shit traffic tickets. You are going to stop this." Buff Hammond was standing there. I just told him off, I was mad. And Jane, I had gotten her out of jail, so she was standing behind me and she was trying to pull me on. And she saw him getting aangry I would assume but anyway when I finished Buff Hammond said, "Well, have you finished." I said, "Yes sir, I have." He said, "Why you goddamn nigger son-of-a-bitch." He grabbed his gun and I believe that if I had not have run he might have shot me. He hated me.

Sinsheimer: My sense was that he felt embarrassed, that he just, me feelings was in talking to people was that it was the whole element of the town led by Hardy Lott who basically pressured him who said, "You can't control your own goddamn town. You are buffoon."

Block: I don't know but he always spoke out against me. And Hardy Lott, Hardy Lott hated my guts. That man could have in any succeeded

in getting me killed he would have.

Sinsheimer: It is very afraid to-- there is no question that he was the brains behind....

Block: Absolutely.

Sinsheimer: The question is, it is hard to know what his attitude toward violence was.

Block: I don't think it is hard at all because I heard him say many times "if I have my chance I will kill every goddamn one of them." I think that Hardy Lott being a lawyer was just afraid of the legal consequences that he could have very easily suffered with the Justice Department coming in there. He was a very sharp man, smart man. And I think that it was to his disadvantage to come out and do anything or kill anybody.... But I think he wanted to. Like you say he was the brains behind everything.

Sinsheimer: A couple of interesting things. Lott was offered Judge Clayton's federal judgeship before Clayton was. He turned it down basically-- this was '55, '56 and he knew that something was coming and he didn't want to be on the federal bench. He didn't want to play by the federal court's rules. He was smart enough to see it all coming. The second thing that I thought was interesting was that he turned down a chance to defend Emmett Till's murderers.

Block: Why?

Sinsheimer: I don't know, no one could tell me that. But somebody in his law practice, one of his law partners said--it is really hard, I don't know if you can say with 100 percent certainty that Beckwith killed Medgar Evers....

Block: It was more than Beckwith.

Sinsheimer: Yeah, but there was a horrible moment, probably the most horrible moment I have ever had, sitting in his law office with Hardy Lott talking to him....

Block: Talking to whom?

Sinsheimer: To Hardy Lott. Suddenly it was like the wind blew and I looked in his eyes and I knew he knew who killed Medgar Evers. Twenty years later, it was just weird, it was a really weird feeling. There is some feeling that maybe he masterminded it.

Block: I believe he did. That is one of the things that I said also in Greenwood, that he masterminded it.

Sinsheimer: There are some people there who I think I have some respect for, who told me a lot of other things, who emphatically deny that, who say that it just not like Hardy. That they thought that Beckwith was really legitimately crazy, legitimately sick. It is hard to know.

Block: I don't believe it....

Sinsheimer: Were there any other whites in town other than the mailman or Father Nathaniel who ever offered assistance?

Block: Yes. I was real sick-- I am an asthmatic. I called downtown to the drugstore to get some medication delivered. And this was time that the Look magazine article had just come out. And one of the white clerks answered the phone and apparently they had just read that Look magazine article. And she said, "Who is calling." And I told her, "Sam Block." And she hollered over, "This is Sam Block, this is Sam Block on the phone." So the man who apparently who owned the drugstore came to the phone and he said, "Sam." He was quiet. He said, "I want you to know that we support you." And I was stunned. This man whenever I needed medicine would send his driver, black driver out and send me the medicine for nothing.

Sinsheimer: Do you remember the name of the store?

Block: It is the only damn drugstore down there. Damn. It is a Rexall drugstore. "We support you." And that scared the shit out of me, it scared me. Oh yeah, there were some others. There was a doctor there, he was a dentist.

He actually came out during the folk festival. He mingled, he danced. He was a young white dentist. What was his name?

Sinsheimer: I have a question. What effect did two events have? One was what effect did the March on Washington have on the black community? SNCC people had a reaction to it but it seems to have been different from what the local people felt. If you want to start with your own reaction. Did you send busloads of folks up there?

Block: Oh sure.

Sinsheimer: From where? Did you have them meet somewhere?

Block: From all over the Delta. In Greenwood?

Sinsheimer: You don't know how many buses?

Block: No, it was one bus or something like that. There was a number of buses going from different points. Now everyone wanted to go, there were a lot of people who wanted to go of course. They too saw it as being a very historical event. But at the same time too I kind of felt that people sort of began to feel that the March On Washington itself was bringing to an end of the movement itself in a way because I don't think a lot of people in Greenwood and around there really understood the significance of the March on Washington as deep and as well as they should have in the genesis. I think that people went not understanding the real significance and they felt that-- many felt that it would end the problems that we had been confronted with. In a way it hurt more than it helped. And then all the poverty programs came in and what have you.

Sinsheimer: If I am reading what you are saying that they sort of saw the problem as once we can tell the rest of the nation about this, once we can tell the president

Block: Yes, yes.

Sinsheimer: So they saw this huge event, they saw King's speech, they saw it on television, things

are going to change now.

Block: Fooled a lot of people. One way they followed it up was with the poverty programs. I was really against the poverty programs because you see what happened when the poverty programs--Bob was beginning to talk about reparations, I don't know if he told you this--and he felt that the government owed something to.... {short break and inaudible portion}. ... Asking for some kind of program where we could get subsistence for people who were in severe need throughout the Delta and throughout the state of Mississippi. And this information was taken to Kennedy and what happened is Kennedy summoned a socialist... the fellow who wrote the anti-poverty program.

Sinsheimer: Harrington?

Block: No, no, he is not the person who wrote it. Okay he wrote in and wrote the anti-poverty program, Well, Bob had met with him. Bob, Amzie, and Forman-- his name is Paul _____ damn. A lot of us met with him and layed it our what we were asking for. And he went back to Kennedy and came up and wrote the anti-poverty program. But it was blown completely out of context as to what it was supposed to have been and what we had envisioned it being.

My reason for not wanting it to come in to Mississippi at that time was simply because I thought that it was going to do exactly what it did do, was help to destroy the movement itself. Because once you begin to get people like myself out of the streets and in behind a desk and around the conference tables and into a nice car, nice house, and nice family, our commitment will automatically and immediately diminish. And it did. Whereas when I was out there struggling and fighting, committed to the movement, I had to then become committed to saving my job. I had gotten used to a different way of living. Other people were working and nobody was really then concerned about the issues.

And then if you were still committed to being an activist they developed the Hatch Act whereas you then became a federal employee and anybody who then gets out and demonstrates becomes subject to the Hatch Act. It destroyed it, it destroyed the movement. People who really began to benefit then from the poverty

programs were persons who really didn't need it. And I think the government reached its objective. And that is why I was against them and I am still am.

Sinsheimer: I was telling you about Mrs. Palmer's visit to Duke. She turned some people's heads when she talked about poverty programs and she talked about the trickle down theory and how when it got to....

Block: Sure.

Sinsheimer: You can read about that but to hear somebody like Mrs. Palmer just lay it on the line. She is great.

Block: It didn't happen. It set people back ten years almost itself. People who were out there and people who were active and were out there in the community and got jobs. "We have made it." And when those things were scratched out from under those people they found themselves head over heels in debt. They couldn't feed their families, they were forced to leave families. It destroyed families. And I saw that.

I guess you know I am sort of glad I sort of stood out as a sore thumb in the latter years of SNCC and the movement.

Sinsheimer: You talked about that. You thought that began to happen when you and Willie sort of were vocal oponents {of the Summer Project}? What did you do during the summer?

Block: I worked.

Sinsheimer: In which project?

Block: In the Greenwood project, just floating around really, feeling useless. And I felt-- I was even more battle fatigued then because I had been beaten severely.

Sinsheimer: When did that happen?

Block: Well, just before the Mississippi Summer Project. Willie, Hollis, Curtis Hayes, no, Willie, Hollis, Jesse, MacArthur Cotton, and James Black and myself we were headed to Ohio to begin to train the students that were coming into Mississippi that summer. James Black was driving. We left Greenwood, Mississippi around

4:30-5:00 pm. We drove until just about 6:00 pm when we arrived at Starksville, Mississippi. Willie had classmates whom he had graduated from college with that lived in Starksville and I had a girlfriend that I loved who lived in Starksville. Willie wanted to go visit his friends so we went to visit. That night around 7:30-8:00 pm we proceeded to go on to Atlanta. We were going to catch the bus to Atlanta, all of us who were going to drive up, SNCC field secretaries, to the meeting.

As we left Starksville a car drove out behind us, a 1956 black and white Mercury driven by a white man who began to drive almost bumper to bumper with us like he was going to knock us off the road. We got to a place called _____ junction and the man turned off. We said, "Wow, this man has turned off, nothing is going to happen." All of us were afraid because by then all of us had been shot in or shot at or something like that, beaten. We just knew this man was going to do something.

As we approached the city limit which is about five or ten miles further up the road from _____ junction we saw this police light back down the highway. So we decided to pull over. And the man was coming to pull us over. Roy Elders, I will never forget him, highway patrolman. Pulled us over and ordered us all to get out on the right hand side of the car with our hands in the hair and then put our hands on the top of the car. We did. He said, "Jack, if one of these niggers moves I want you to blow their nutsacks out." And we looked back and it was the same man who looked to have been drunk who tried to run us off the road.

He took the car keys, Roy Elders did after awhile, and opened the trunk of the car. We had all of the literature on the Mississippi Freedom Summer Project. He said, "Oh, look what we got. These are the niggers that are trying to change our way of living this summer. Oh, we got them Jack, you are right." He said what we are going to do is call the Sheriff and let the Sheriff come pick up these other four niggers here and let him take them on into jail. You and I are going to take this other nigger who was driving with us and you can show us where he tried to run you off the road. Who was James Black, who was student at Tougaloo.

So they put Black in the car with them and the Sheriff came and handcuffed us all and drove us to jail. And as they were booking us

in about 45 minutes later they came back with James Black. Elders and Jack, the civilian, came back with him and looked like his eye was about to pop out, blood everywhere. And Elders said, "Look at your damn nigger friend here. He couldn't even stand up on his own two foot. He fell up all upside the car and hurt his eye, look at him.

Anyway after that they took us all upstairs and threw us in jail, same cell. About twenty minutes later they came up to the same cell and they got me out and Roy Elders and another patrolman took me in the back of the jail, Columbus, Mississippi jail and ordered to run, pulled their pistols out. I said, "No sir, I am not going to run." He said, "Yes, nigger, you are going to run." And I wouldn't run. The next thing I knew I was hit with a butt of the pistol here (on the forehead) and it sort of dislargoed this eye over eye. I can't see out of this eye at all now. I remember falling down to the ground, I remember being kicked and beaten.

Some kind of way they ordered me up. I don't know how I got up after they got through beating me. Willie said they could hear me screaming and hollering me downstairs where they were beating me. And I crawled back upstairs and I just fell out in this cell.

The next morning when I woke up they had taken all of us downstairs and beaten us. The next morning they handcuffed us together and marched us through town over to the FBI office to mug shot us and everything. And one of the things that said was that they were fixin to take us to the Mississippi State Penitentiary.

Sinsheimer: There was an FBI office in Starksville?

Block: No, this is in Columbus. All of this is in Columbus now. So they marched us throught the town of Columbus over to the FBI office with handcuffs on and came back and put us in individual patrol cars and said, "You niggers won't get a chance to change our way of living this summer. You are going to the Mississippi State Penetentiary." So they took us out in the country to the Justice of the Peace. When we got out there there were all kinds of people out there, farmers and stuff came there. We met in the back of the Justice of Peace's office. And I really believe their intention was to hang us or do something with us.

But they had us all tied in the office, had us handcuffed and had the Sheriff in there watching us. And then the Sheriff asked us said, "Where are you niggers from?" We said, "Sir, we are from Mississippi, we were born and reared here in Mississippi. He said, "You are a goddamn liar, you are a goddamn liar. All of you niggers ain't from Mississippi because we know that we have trained our niggers better than this. We know our niggers. We know our niggers. You aren't from Mississippi." We said, "Yes, we are."

So they took us back outside and handcuffed us around trees in the sun, about 100 degrees. Brought us back in for some reason and the phone rang and the Sheriff answered the phone and said, "This is Judge Whitaker's office. I can't accept no collect call operator let me get the judge." So he went back there-- we were all handcuffed to chairs and stuff and couldn't move-- went back there and got the judge. Judge rolled himself out in a wheelchair and had a patch over his eye. He said, "This is Judge Whitaker. Oh hell no I can't accept no collect call operator, he said wait just a minute." So he put his hand over the phone. He said, "Do you niggers know anybody know anyone named Dillingworth." And all of us were together, "That is our attorney. He found us." He said, "Operator I can't accept no collect call," and threw the phone on the hook.

He said, "We have to get rid of these niggers," and rolled himself back. I guess the district attorney or somebody came out and said, "Fellows we were just decidintg what we are going to do to Mr. Elders who is partly responsible for all this that happened to you all, the beatings and stuff. We are going to let you all go but you are going to have pay for staying overnight in jail and to get your car out of storage." He said, "It is going to be \$28 for jail and \$2.08 to get your car out of storage. It is going to be \$30.08." And that is all we had period.

Sinsheimer: They knew that?

Block: They took our money, they searched us sure. They took our money and when we got across the state line in Mississippi into Alabama we pawned the spare on the car to get some gas to go into Atlanta so we could get medical treatment.

Sinsheimer: So I guessed we started talking about the Summer of '64 and how you were battle fatigued, that beating.

Block: I was just really out of it, I was just really out of it. I was sort of despondent also because we had ordered, we had told Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner, who had talked to us prior to them leaving coming to Mississippi, we had asked them not to drive back to Mississippi together. We told them that it was dangerous and the time was not right for what they were fixing to do. And I had talked to Schwerner myself and told him not to do it, begged him not to do it. Anyway they left came around through Greenwood and they got killed. So all of that had happened and then we had been over in Philadelphia, Mississippi looking for their bodies and stuff and we couldn't find anything.

Sinsheimer: Did you go down as part of the advance team? With Cleve Sellers?

Block: Yes. You know I don't think this has ever been brought out that those old people who were back up from where the church was burned told Dick Gregory and myself and somebody else, "If you want to find those fellows go over where that damn is. Those fellows are dead, you ought to stop looking for them, they are dead. If you want to go find them that is where they are. We got our guns, if anybody come up here we are going to shoot first and ask questions later."

Sinsheimer: This is an older balck couple of something?

Block: Old, old black couples. They knew.

Sinsheimer: Was Dick Gregory part of that advance team?

Block: Sure. Dick Gregory said I am going to ask Hugh Hefner for \$10,000.... (short inaudible portion)

Sinsheimer: What did you think of the training sessions?

Block: I was out of it. I couldn't think of anything. I just knew that wouldn't work. And when the-- was it the McComb report that came out-- said that the civil rights movement had been infiltrated with CIA daughters and sons and all. That is when I began to get relief because

I said, "I told them." Peacock had rank himself into a pure alcoholic by then.

Sinsheimer: Because of the Summer Project?

Block: He would get so drunk he couldn't even stand up. It just almost destroyed him.

Sinsheimer: Before the summer?

Block: Right beginning at, during that time. In a way too I think they wanted us out because we just didn't see it working. Now I am not saying that all of the whites who were there were there to destroy the movement. A lot of them tried to do a lot of good. You could tell who they were, it was that obvious.

Sinsheimer: What did you think of Al Lowenstein?

Block: I never respected him in the first place. This was one of his brainstorm. I think Lowenstein is probably one of the persons responsible for part of the destruction of the movement.

Sinsheimer: Good motivations from the beginng or bad motivations from the beginning?

Block: Perhaps somewhat good in the genesis, perhaps.

Sinsheimer: {Inaudible section} Let me ask you one other question because I think it is important. Bob Moses said and in another interview I read with Dave Dennis, {they} were talking about the post-Atlantic City period. Atlantic City had happened and they both-- what David Dennis said to someone recently he said, "I just didn't know what to do. I didn't know what to do." And Bob talked about it in the sense that he didn't feel there was any program, that there was nothing, no way to sustain what they had. They had the beginnings of a political party but it had no program. And it was almost like they both {felt}, "What do we do."

This is the question. What was the way out of that situation? Was there, what could have been done? If you had history to do over?

Block: Spend more time politicizing the people first. The people themselves were not as politically advanced as to the point that they themselves were ready to deal with that. That was because of lack of leadership, lack of ourselves being

at the level of political sophistication that we perhaps should have been at. And knowing and learning more about the issues and causes and all that and dealing at that level. I don't think we were ready because the homework-- we weren't politicized to the point where we were ready to move from step 1, 2, 3, 4. There was no organization.

Sinsheimer: One possible solution was again something that Bob mentioned would have been--I never really asked him the question-- but he talks about the desire to have greater staff education.

Block: That is correct. That is my point.

Sinsheimer: You felt that was something that was lacking?

Block: Absolutely totally lacking, there was none. Unless you have got a leader of the people politicized to the point where he knows exactly what he wants to do, he is educated to the point what is going to do, how in the world can you move people into doing things that you don't really what should be done.

Sinsheimer: Bob was saying that he thought, I mean given that the Summer had taken place, the only thing that he could have seen a way out of it would have been try to use literacy, a literacy campaign as a organizing tool just you had tried to use voter registration, something that all of the factions could agree on.

Block: I think we should move more toward economics.

Sinsheimer: This is today or back then?

Block: See the problem all of the time is economics. Some of us were hollering that at that time but the timing wasn't right to move to that level.

Sinsheimer: Doesn't what you are saying-- didn't you need to have staff education. I mean economics would have been much more difficult than literacy.

Block: But I am talking more about dealing with economic issues and dealing with programs, getting people into self-help programs and things that they can begin to see something that, and dealing with something that has some longevity to it and that would give some support financially to them. In other words help

them become self-sufficient.

Sinsheimer: Is that completely different from Moses' plan to use literacy as the beginning point of that.

Block: Well, it has to start there. If you don't then you aren't going to have no program.

Sinsheimer: What was the reaction among SNCC workers to Kennedy's death? What was your reaction?

Block: I was angry with Kennedy anyway because we had been begging for Kennedy's protection and we weren't getting any. I can only speak for myself but I didn't really feel that. I guess it was because of my anger.

Sinsheimer: Somebody said there was some discussion about-- you were in a conference shortly after that or shortly before that- and there was some discussion about whether to attend the funeral or send a message to the funeral. Do you remember that?

Block: Yes, yeah. We didn't really think that we should be there.

Sinsheimer: Were there any people that thought that you should?

Block: Not that I remember.... Kennedy was able to do something and didn't.

Sinsheimer: Was there a time when you didn't feel that way?

Block: Sure.

Sinsheimer: Do you know when the turning point came?

Block: Yeah, when we learned that the only way we really get to {Kennedy} was to go through Martin Luther King.

Sinsheimer: When was that specific incident? I mean what are you referring to?

Block: Something happened ... and Amzie had to call King. I have forgotten what it was but Amzie had to orchestrate something through King.

Sinsheimer: And you resented the fact that he would n't talk to anyone in {SNCC}?

Block: Sure.

Sinsheimer: I am sorry this is so random but I am track some things down. Some of the people mentioned but couldn't put a focus on was the incident of the teenage pregnant girl being beaten in Greenwood.

Block: Teenage girl ... oh yeah.

Sinsheimer: People were telling me that that was one of the things-- the dogs and this teenage Do you remember the incident or when it might have happened?

Block: Yes. It was during the march.

Sinsheimer: During that series of marches?

Block: Yes. We were getting ready to go to the courthouse. It was just the day before-- I think it was-- the dog was sicked on Tucker that this happened, she was beaten.

Sinsheimer: During one of the first marches? Okay. So you were there during some of the marches?

Block: Sure. I was in and out. They kept me on the road. SNCC needed money then and I was the main fundraiser then.

Sinsheimer: What did you think of Gregory's role?

Block: Very timely, very needed. Helped one hell of a lot. Because of Dick Gregory a lot of other people came through.... But Gregory was the first. He was committed. You know, he has demonstrated that committment from time then until now.

Sinsheimer: He still seems to be very committed. Every time I see him on TV or something he seems to be that way.

Block: One thing that has never been brought out and people don't know also is the young lady that was in the car with us that Captain Ertia had told that she would be could killed {by hanging around us} got pregnant by Peacock. And she had gone to register to vote and had passed. And they ordered her to come back down and withdraw her name from the voter rolls. And she wouldn't. And they put a fraudalent food stamp

charge on her and sent her to the Mississippi State Penetentiary for a year. She had the baby there. She had a choice. They told her to withdraw and she wouldn't.

There are a lot of stories, you know, true stories yet to be told. A lot of things that happened that I think it is time for the people to know. Eventually I think they will, I hope....

Sinsheimer: I had a chance to go talk to Vincent Harding. And I guess there is-- Peacock and Moses are both heavily involved in yoga. And if you take a look at their activity and if you talk with somebody like Vincent-- they talk about I guess the term that Vincent uses is "spiritual engine." Which I don't think that Moses and Peacock {would disagree with}. Bob talks a lot about how yoga allows you to create that energy inside you.

If you take that concept, what Vincent is saying, talking about a way to have not only staff education but a way to create energy within the staff, recommitment and all of that. Have you thought through-- I mean how do you sustain a group of people like SNCC? Have you thought at all about that?

Block: I would do it now-- I didn't know that Peacock and Bob were into it, but I studied some yoga myself. I am more into transcendental meditation, reading all of the swamis....Into more positive thinking, positive attitude movement to sustain myself. I would definitely recommend if we were together again that we would begin to look at transcesndental meditation, meditation first because I believe if we were students of yoga or transcendental meditation or the art of positive thinking ... I think that many of the problems that we had within ourselves that came out in hostile ways toward each other a lot of the problems would not have at all existed. It would have minimized a lot of the inner fiction that we had to deal with, being together, working together, getting on each other's nerves, not knowing how to handle that. And not knowing how to channel it off you know to a different avenue where we could be confident. You know not having to upset anybody or being upset. I think it would have helped, yes.

Sinsheimer: One of the reasons I ask that is that I guess

I have been interviewing folks for a couple of years now and there are two incredibly strong impressions that I have. One is-- outside all of the acts of heroism, outside all of that-- it is an incredible quality group of people. I mean just strong, quality, good people. I mean if you go down and spend time with Hollis {Watkins} you can't help but feel this is a good person.

The second feeling that I guess I have is that the price has been enormous.

Block: I am still paying.

Sinsheimer: Divorces, alcoholism, early death, to some degree Vincent Harding and Moses are recluse, reclusive. I mean there is no question about that. I mean enormous {costs}. Once while in my writing I think about in some ways-- ...{there are moments} when I feel I am being deceitful when you talk about heroic acts because maybe you aren't telling people about all of the consequences of that. I mean not just during the years but here is a whole history of that. I mean it is difficult.

Block: It is. It is difficult.

Sinsheimer: Cleve Sellers said something that should be a book title one day: "There is no pension in the movement." I guess that was the thing that was most striking about Mrs. Palmer's visit. What Bob did essentially was to lay out Mrs. Palmer's early life, or allow for her to lay out her early life. Lay out the movement but then it was clear to the students who didn't really understand that from 1970 on Mrs. Palmer's life reverted back. She was running a small little washerette. There were other things-- one was the possibility that lies within people that allows someone like Mrs. Palmer to become energized to that point. But then for her to do that and then there was nothing there after '70. I mean she went through the whole cycle with earnest good will-- the poverty programs and everything and all of a sudden it was like

Block: Dead end. That is my point. That is my point. It hurt a number of people. It destroyed a number of people. That is exactly the point. It is enlightening to hear you say that Bob sees that also.

Sinsheimer: It is funny because in some ways-- when I went down there {Mississippi} Hollis was just so nice to me. He opened a lot of doors for me when I was in Mississippi and he told me a lot of stuff. Basically encourgaed me at a time when I needed encouragement. So he has become --well not like my favorite but....

Block: Right.

Sinsheimer: I mean I have really grown to care for him. I mean he probably doesn't even know that. But then I was thinking that one of the reasons I probably feel that way is because in some ways Hollis is the most intact. I know he went through a divorce but I realized that was part of my thinking and I started thinking about everyone I had met was to some degree still playing the price. I mean your's is a lot more visible, you know, here I am. At the same time I see everyone searching for not only opportunities to continue to do things but I guess one of the reasons I am interested in the question of how do you sustain people, how do you find the engine that will allow people, so that the burnout isn't there to quite the same degree.

Block: People first of all should not be made to spend the kind of ongoing time in a movement, you know 24, 25 hours a day, seven days a week. That number one is going to burn you out. But over a period of time in quarters-- you work three months, you go to a retreat for two weeks or three weeks or a month and then you come back. Don't let the movement be built around you. Get community people more involved in rolling and handling the ball in the genesis so they won't have to depend on you. And number three is to have a viable program where people are going to benefit from it economically as well as humanistically. And much of that has been missing. You can't sustain, you just can't expect the same person to continue to go on and on without being forced at some point to become battle fatigued. I don't mind giving out but I do mind them giving up. You see giving out you can always go back and regroup but people are froced to the point, were forced to the point in the movement where they had to give up instead of giving out....

There was no kind of built-in organizational

glue that we could use to sustain ourselves....
There was nothing. And where there is nothing
you are forced to become another Mrs. Palmer.
You will just have a heart attack, it takes its
toll, it destroys you....

End of interview.