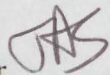


MEMORANDUM

To: Tim West

Fm: Joe Sinsheimer



Re: Interview With C.C. Bryant

Dt: February 12, 1999

Enclosed is an interview I conducted with C.C. Bryant, who was branch president of the McComb, Mississippi NAACP from 1954-1985.

In the interview, Bryant discussed: 1) Amzie Moore's role in sending Robert Moses to McComb 2) voter registration classes in McComb and Amite County in 1961 3) the murder of Herbert Lee 4) working with Robert Moses during the 1961 voter registration campaign 5) civil rights activity in McComb during the 1964 Freedom Summer project 6) McComb's reaction to white civil rights workers in 1964 7) and the role of the U.S. Justice Department in Mississippi civil rights activity.

Interview with Mr. C.C. Bryant
McComb, Mississippi
February 7, 1985

Joe Sinsheimer: Well if you want to just go ahead and start.

C.C. Bryant: Okay, first I would like to give you my name. My name is Curtis Lee Bryant or Curtis Conway. I am branch president of the McComb branch of the NAACP. I have been branch president since 1954. We have been actively campaigning, you know, trying to get people to register and vote back as far as the '50's. We had, I was involved in the Negro Democrats that was one of the first Black Democrats, you know we couldn't be involved in either party so we did held the Negro Democrats Party. We had a charter for that.

We made attempts to get people registered. The way it was you had about twenty, I think twenty-five, twenty-six questions to answer. And it was almost impossible to get anybody registered. We were involved in all of things, you know, eliminating discrimination in all phases of life. Since the first time, I was elected in '54 and in '55 I went to National Convention, the first time the (McComb) branch had sent a delegate. That was in Atlantic City shortly after the Supreme Court decision.

We made efforts to start integrating the schools. We had no, you know, a minimum of success. Where there were persons who attempted, they had reprisals, loss of jobs, harassment, and all of these kind of things. We, in the area of unemployment we sought to get people employed, to end discrimination in all the facets. You had really no laws on the books until the passage of the Civil Rights laws.

Sinsheimer: What kind of jobs were you fighting for?

Bryant: Well all kinds of jobs, you know, wherever there were jobs. Back in, well in the 60's after the passage of the 10925, we tried to get people to register under that law. In other words you had laws to try, we were, the biggest thing that you were trying to do, we were trying to get, lobbying to get laws on the books. In 1956 I went to Washington lobbying for passage of legislation, in order that you could get these kinds of things. I was involved in unions, and trying to get, you know, in that respect. They had certain jobs that blacks were able to hold, and fought to get those jobs through the union and the NAACP.

Wasn't until the passage of the laws, in other words we had separate local unions, and all these kinds of things existed. We really had no tools to work with until the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1965. Back in '63 we saw where Bob Moses and others were coming through the South to try and help people get registered. As students,

Bryant (cont.): you know, for a period of about a month or something of that sort. We had people that knew, and we asked him (Amzie Moore) to help Bob (Moses) to come in, and it was through our efforts that Bob Moses came to McComb or to Mississippi.

Sinsheimer: Right.

Bryant: He first came to McComb, and he was supposed to go to Cleveland, Mississippi but they didn't have the facilities, so we came back to McComb. I think this was in August of 1963.

Sinsheimer: Was it in '61 maybe?

Bryant: I mean '61, yeah. August of '61.

Sinsheimer: Now did you write a letter, had you met Bob Moses at that point or?

Bryant: No I had not met him, I had never-- another friend, one of the guys who was one of the vice-presidents of the state conference (of the NAACP), a guy named Amzie Moore. Through Amzie Moore we were able to get this organized. Although as you say it was in '61 that we made efforts to get him. He came here in August of '61, he went to Cleveland and stayed two or three weeks, and wasn't able to get the building that they anticipated, so he came back and we started to get churches, and get places for him to stay in. Things of that sort.

And we went out into Amite county and to the home of (E.W.) Steptoe. It was I who carried him out there and got Steptoe involved.

Sinsheimer: Now was Steptoe involved in any ...?

Bryant: Well, he was the president of the NAACP at that time. He was one of the persons that went to Washington. In other words he was a branch president. But in Amite county it was, well it was bad in McComb and in Pike county, but it was still worse in Amite county. It had all kind of reprisals. And we went out there and we started getting persons, started registration out there. And they had-- I think the first time he went out there, the first day or two he (Bob Moses) went out there, I think he was beaten up.

And as I stay we went out to, we stayed out in the home of, with the home of Steptoe and his wife and a couple of guys from here who worked with him for awhile.

Sinsheimer: Do you know who they were?

Bryant: Yes, one was Izziel Bennett and J.C. Curry. Emma Jean what was that Curry boy's name? Was it J.C. (Calling out to his wife).

Mrs. Bryant: I don't recall.

Bryant: Curry, he was a Curry. I don't remember his first name but that was They were some young college, I think they were college students. They worked for a couple of weeks and then they had guys from Jackson come down to work with them. Went out into Walthall county, got registration there. I had an uncle out there, and they stayed out at my uncle's house. And I had some cousins from Jackson that came.

This was the beginning of one of the big pushes in, you know, because we had, we provided, without the NAACP's efforts they could not have gotten into here. People were very reluctant to accept strangers, and we got churches opened, and we got places for them to stay, and things of that sort. The Masonic Hall where they had classes, registration classes.

Sinsheimer: Classes were at the Masonic Hall?

Bryant: Yes. And in teaching them how to register ...

Sinsheimer: In which city?

Bryant: In McComb.

Sinsheimer: In McComb.

Bryant: McComb was really the headquarters. They had more really active activity, was McComb was the focal point and they moved out into the (local) areas, because in Pike, I mean in Amite and Walthall county, it was just, the people were just frightened to death, you know. But we had the Masonic hall and we had the meeting, training program. Drew up parts of the (Mississippi) constitution, sections of the constitution. And the person that you had answer, you know, go over those questions and try to go in and try to register. Had very little success in that effort.

Later in the year there was a man killed in Amite county, two of the registration workers-- I think he had been one of the presidents of our branches, who was killed.

Sinsheimer: Herbert Lee?

Bryant: Killed on the courthouse lawn. I don't think today there has been any convictions. After that they started, you know, SNCC came in. Various students came in _____ areas. They conducted student sit-ins, you know, training of how to go about, you know, the various things (direct action training). But the real thrust-- the original plan was to get registration, that was the original plan.

Sinsheimer: Now when Moses and some of the others were moving around did they do that only at night, or were they able to do some during the day?

Bryant: Well, they went into the areas in the day time and then at the Masonic Hall we conducted registration classes or, you know, how to register and vote, and things of that sort. All along with that they had classes where, you know, the students were involved. And this resulted in the arrests, mass arrests in '61-- in the walk-out, school walk-outs and things of that sort.

Sinsheimer: What caused the school walk-out?

Bryant: Well, they had various protests asking for certain things at the school. They marched on the courthouse, many of them were beaten. In other words I say they came here in mass numbers. And this led to unrest, and the kind of things that resulted as a result of that. Shortly thereafter they, having I think around, nearly two hundred arrests, they moved out, in and out, spread out into other areas of the state-- in Jackson, and Greenwood, and other areas. But it originally started here.

And that brings you up to the date, to the original plan of SNCC. SNCC really started here in McComb, that is where it had its _____, its origin. You know I said I don't think they had anything else other than-- until such time as they had a -- well it was called the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. And that was precisely what it was. They came here and naturally their tactics were a little different from ours, you know we would set goals and objectives, and you could not-- well the techniques that involved, made it hard to I think in '55 we did have a law where-- intimidation, where if you interfere with a person trying to vote. But when you got involved in other things it made it very difficult to prove that it was Okay that brings you up to, that is the story on SNCC. After the arrests and things of that sort, they had a tendency to spread out into other parts of the state. But the original plan started here.

Students marched out, walked out of school, they, many of them went to Jackson. But it was a program, plan of the NAACP-- we tried to get them to integrate the schools then. And we didn't feel that the walk-out was sufficient enough to, we supported the stand that they wouldn't sign a pledge (students were asked to sign a pledge stating that they would not be involved in civil rights activity to be readmitted to school) to get back into school. But we offered assistance to get schools integrated. That was a goal and objective of the NAACP. Then as is now. Rather than disrupt and do these kinds of things we took the position then that in order to correct certain inequities that you had to integrate the schools. After the Supreme Court decision that says that separate but equal is no longer constitutional. We offered legal assistance, you know, in whatever we did until we could get the people to integrate the schools. It was not until later years that we did file complaints, you know, to

Bryant (cont.): get people integrated. But this was the first effort that we offered, positive steps to try and get the schools integrated. While most people were talking about walking out, we said rather than use this, go into the schools and integrate them and become a part of the system. Instead of that they moved out into near Jackson, I think. Hollis Watkins was one of the youngsters, the man that you had said you had talked with. He was one of the persons involved in the walkout. And he left McComb and probably if he had integrated, he may not have been where he is now. But he moved from here to Jackson and other areas and was working with SNCC. This is how a lot of that spread. I remember-- well probably to good advantage to get the people spread out, rather than just to be in one central area.

But it was really a reign of terror during that time. You were harassed by the city officials, law officials, and all of the forces came down. It was really kind of a rough time.

Sinsheimer: Tell me about Mr. Steptoe?

Bryant: Well, he, as I indicated provided for students to go into Amite county, and, you know, it was our focal point where they lived. His home was a place where they could come in and stay and carry on registration and whatever problem they had. He had harassment, as I said he was president of the NAACP. But he became somewhat inactive after he became involved with the SNCC.

He sold milk, I think he had a milk dairy and he had problems, all kinds of problems there. And he had threats and all those kinds of things. In spite of that they still had meetings and they still tried to get people registered. Now he has a son here-- they did an article in the McComb Journal, I think in December about, you know, if you could get that article, you could ... Be about him as much as you could find, he is dead. His sons are living, I think he has a grandson that is an attorney here in the city. I don't-- but I think he has a son living in Summit. That was our involvement in that regard as we-- we set the meeting, in other words it was like boy meets girl. We carried Bob (Moses) into Amite county, to his home. From there they got started to doing, registering to vote.

Sinsheimer: Right.

Bryant: There was another guy-- Louis Allen-- was also active in, he was a member of the NAACP as well. I think, I am not sure, but I think he was president when he got killed. But these were the persons that were active and we had some people who first tried to register in Amite county about, most people were members of our branch even though

Bryant (cont.): they lived in Amite county. First few people that tried to register were members of our branch.

Sinsheimer: Do you have the names?

Bryant: Oh ... right off hand I can't think of the names of them right now. That was as I say when Bob Moses was beaten up that day, and later on _____ Mr. (Herbert) Lee was killed. A couple of guys were killed. When guy was killed going into his home, you know, he was a member of the NAACP, and he was also shot down. He was opening the gate to the _____. And he was killed also.

That is about the story, you said that you have got the story on the hot summer.

Sinsheimer: Well, we can go into that in a few minutes maybe. What did you think of Bob Moses when you first met him?

Bryant: Well, he was very dedicated youngster, very mild. He stayed here with us. We accepted him into our home and we had a brother that was staying with me and a son, behaved just like they were brothers, you know, they just He was a very nice person. Really brilliant, he had a photostatic memory. I think he was one of the most dedicated guys we had come in here. I think his goals were as ours. If we had resorted to the registration, as we had it, it probably would have been a whole lot easier. Because out in Amite county and Walthall county one of the guys was beaten up out there trying to register. John Doar came down and there wasn't a whole lot that he could do. Because as I say things were so involved. Certainly Bob Moses was I say a very brilliant young man, and very dedicated. Wasn't a vocal man, but he was insistent on, continued to follow, in spite of the things that he had, you know, the intimidation, the beatings, and all of those things. He still pursued his goals and objectives. He is not, he may not be acclaimed as a whole lot of other fellows, but I say he was a very, he was one of the persons that started the whole thing. Through his personality was able to get into the communities. In other words you might say he was the forerunner, man who got the show on the road. Along with he took our members of our branches and went out, and helped to raise money, and all these things. They had a, I think he had a little stipend or something, about twenty-four, twenty-five dollars a week there I think that he got out of Atlanta to, you know, help to conduct this. But other than that, you know, the churches and things like that gave money for printing material and things of that sort.

Sinsheimer: Right.

Bryant: I had a barber shop and we printed the little questions and answers and got things on the constitution, you know, so that they would know how to vote, interpret the constitution. You had to interpret the constitution to his, to the registrar's satisfaction. If you are getting too hot we can go into another room?

Sinsheimer: Okay. It is getting a little warm.

Bryant: Yeah it is getting a little too warm, we can move into the other room. (Break)

Sinsheimer: Do you know the name of the registrar at the time in Pike county?

Bryant: Yes, he was named Holmes, Wendell Homes I believe it was.

Sinsheimer: And you said at the time you had a barber shop.

Bryant: Yes.

Sinsheimer: How long did you have that?

Bryant: Oh for many years. I can't recall how many years, several years. (Inaudible portion) I don't remember now when I quit cutting hair, but anyway when he (Bob Moses) was here we used the barber shop as a place preparing the materials and stuff like that.

Sinsheimer: Was there a dry cleaning, or cleaning store that you might have used too. Was it Nobles?

Bryant: Nobles' cleaning yes. Well at this point, you know, you probably are getting into some of the areas where the COFO-- this is the SNCC-- you had two areas, he was more or less involved with the COFO, even though he was along with Moses, after he quit staying here, then he-- they were persuing him and he was moving around from one place and hiding around more or less.

Sinsheimer: Right.

Bryant: At that point this where the barber shop came in. But it was our branches and our offices started to work with him from the very outset. It was NAACP and our staff who carried him around and introduced him. And these other people that you read about and hear about came along after the show was on the road.

Sinsheimer: Now had young people ever been involved before?

Bryant: Well we had a youth branch of the NAACP, yes, we had a youth branch. This was one of the reasons why they were able to get involved, we had a branch, youth branches. This is why we had the accessability, you see. You call them SNCC, you call them,

Bryant (cont.): but they were originally, they were our people. But they came in and did the work and they got of being SNCC'ers. See what I am saying.

Sinsheimer: Right. So somebody like Hollis Watkins might have been involved in a youth branch?

Bryant: I am not sure whether he was a member of a branch, but originally you know as I say, we started with our youth and other young people here as the thing grew they met, and they started, you know as I say, the Masonic Hall, they started meeting at the Masonic Hall. And you know how it is when youth get involved they start issue things. Brenda Travis, one of the girls that led the walkout, she was a member, actually the president of the McComb branch. See what I am saying.

Sinsheimer: Right. Okay.

Bryant: Yet she would wear the name of SNCC.

Sinsheimer: Right.

Bryant: See what I mean. These are the facts, you know. So it tends to, the facts tend to kind of conflict there. Originally I say by Steptoe-- Steptoe was the president of our Amite county branch of the NAACP. And they couldn't have come in here unless somebody on the inside let them in. When they came in they started their own press releases, they more or less ran their own show. These are facts, you know. So this is, as I say you want it from the horse's mouth, these are facts. Moses, I think Moses would tell you that.

Sinsheimer: Were there some people here who thought, who disagreed with the strategy, or thought it was too fast or were people ready for that or?

Bryant: Well, wherever you have, in all movements you have this kind of thing. As I told you on the walkout, our position (NAACP) was, we didn't see where it was profitable. I called Mr. Wilkins, Roy Wilkins, talked with him. We had, our position was rather than the walkout, walk in, integrate. We felt that, in as much as we had planned-- it was NAACP thta filed a suit, Thurgood Marshall-- we had made plans on integrating the schools and we had the lawyers and all of the, rather than having to go to Jackson and other places, try to finish school, and stay where they could, best they could. Rather than walkout we urged them to go to school, stay in school and get a education. That was the NAACP's position. It was then and it is now. See what I am saying. We have a program and

Bryant (cont.): policy, and this is not a part of what the original plan was for. We originally asked them to come in and work with voter registration, getting people registered. That was the thrust at that time.

Sinsheimer: Tell me how did you get involved with the NAACP originally. You said you were president in '55 but were you a member ... ?

Bryant: '54.

Sinsheimer: '54. Were you a member before that?

Bryant: Well I became really active in '54. I had, you know as I say, I had done things in the area of civil rights but I was not actively involved with NAACP, you know, as an officer until '54. That was when I was elected president and I worked under the auspices program and policies of the NAACP. Whatever we do we notify our state office and we notify our legal department, and this is the way NAACP operates. Then and now.

Sinsheimer: Who was the statewide president at that point?

Bryant: I think it may have been Charles Barden. In fact I am sure it was. A man named Charles Barden (Barton?).

Sinsheimer: And were their people from the statewide, who were traveling and talking ... ?

Bryant: No, we had a field secretary. Actually the movement was a local movement. They supplied the manpower for what, as I say, it was about three weeks program originally. That was the plan, of the objective. It was in Jet magazine that their were students who would be out of college and across the summer, you know, during the early summer period. They would spend about three weeks or a month in Mississippi. that was the original plan.

Sinsheimer: So it was in Jet magazine?

Bryant: Yes it was in Jet magazine. Back in, oh in the 60's I think. As I say one of the guys out of Cleveland, Mississippi (Amzie Moore)-- he is now dead, I think he died last year. Anyway we got in touch with him and he had Bob to come here. Bob (Moses) first time he came to McComb drove out in front of my house. Never been to McComb before.

Sinsheimer: Same house?

Bryant: Yes, we have had additions to it, but same house. So these are the, you know, as I say you had a lot of stories-- and one of these days, I give you so much, I give others-- but I have facts that I am going to put in my memory. See what I am saying.

Sinsheimer: I sure do. (laughter)

Bryant: I can't give you all of the, if I do I won't have anything to put in my book (laughter).

Sinsheimer: Okay, fair enough.

Bryant: I have got letters to support the facts. I wrote to Amzie Moore, and all that kind of stuff.

Sinsheimer: When did you first meet Amzie?

Bryant: Oh we became, you know, he was a state vice-president (of the NAACP) back in the fifties. In fact I was a vice-president, I don't know whether it was fourth, fifth or what, we had about four or five vice-presidents. And he and I were both vice-presidents, very active in member registration and things of that sort. He worked for I think the post office department and was interested as I was in being associates, you know we called and wrote each other. I wrote our field secretary a letter informing him about this. I didn't get his approval. I didn't get the state's approval, at least the branch didn't. But we did inform them after the fact.

But as I say our officers and our members actively participated in helping them to get, finding places to stay and getting churches opened, and Masons. I was a Mason at that time and I was a Mason on the trustee board of Masons, of the lodge. Through that we were able to get doors opened. See what I mean. These are facts. You can't come in here and start, somebody has to bring you.

Sinsheimer: Sure.

Bryant: That is the way it was then. But, you know, read the news stories you don't get the ... it was NAACP that helped get the show on the road, provided the mimeograph machine, all the materials, all the kind of things. But I was working, I had to make a living, and they had, as I say they were students, and they got I think about twenty, twenty-five dollars a week. And whatever else they could get for lodging and things of that sort they did. But he (Bob Moses) had access to our home. But they had so many to come we just couldn't accomodate the whole, you know, everybody came we couldn't take care of all of them. See what I mean.

Sinsheimer: Right (laughter).

(Bryant) p.11

Bryant: Everybody came and wanted to come here and hang out. Well we didn't have a hotel (laughter).

Sinsheimer: Bryant hotel.

Bryant: So this is how it spread out. We provided, in other words we-- they came in by the carloads. But we helped to provide, we provided the very first thrust, we opened the doors.

Sinsheimer: Well, let's see that was in August of '61. When did civil rights workers come back to McComb?

Bryant: Well, they stayed in here until I think late up in the year, say maybe September, October, September, somewhere along in there. It was in October when I was arrested. Up until October, this is when they had the walkout, October 19 or 20 I think it is. Story in Time Magazine when I was arrested. I was charged with contributing to the delinquency of a minor. I had no part in it, because our, my, the NAACP's involvement was to get people registered.

As I said they had another thing where they met with the students, and they formulated that. It wasn't our program, nobody asked us, nobody sought out our advice. I think Marion, Marion Barry from Washington, was one of the persons who was instrumental in getting students organized (from the direct action wing of SNCC).

Sinsheimer: Right.

Bryant: See when they started making arrests, court actions, and all those fellows moved out, including him.

Sinsheimer: And you all had to stay.

Bryant: We stayed here. We remained here to carry on the, to get the schools integrated, to do all the kinds of things that you have now got. This is what, these are the facts, they don't take a back seat to anybody I don't think. As I say, if we had done the kind of thing, as I say these were students, there was nothing in the original plan to have walkouts or things of that sort. Was in our program and policy to integrate schools.

Sinsheimer: Did the walkout make things worse in terms of the white community's attitudes.

Bryant: Well it aroused them. It didn't help the attitude, it tended to bring pressure on a whole lot of parents and things of that sort. It had a tendency, it certainly had an effect. It was a thing that aroused parents, parents who should have been having their kids integrate. If the parents had done what they ought to have, what they should have done, then you wouldn't have needed a walkout. So I have to admit that they took the lead in showing parents what that they, the

Bryant (cont.): clamor for justice and equality. This led to walkouts and demonstrations throughout. But if the parents had supported their children in integrating and doing the kinds of things-- as I say a lot of these students had to leave, they stayed in homes or wherever they could to try to finish school. Rather than to go back into the school system, and to take the kind of things.

They (the school administration) wanted them (the students) to sign a pledge that they wouldn't demonstrate anymore. We supported that. That was the extent of our involvement. We urged them to go back to school, but we certainly didn't agree that they would, should sign any pledge that wouldn't be involved in anything else. That was our, as I say, we had differences there and we made them known. And as I say I contacted our, Roy Wilkins and talked with him, and this kind of thing. I remember meeting with Marion and urging them to go back to school.

Then we made efforts to recruit all of those students and anyone that we could get to integrate the schools.

Sinsheimer: Right.

Bryant: It certainly aroused, was a beginning of a change. And he said, "a little child shall lead them." And I think in effect the masses were not giving the kind of support that they needed (to). And the kids put their bodies out, in order that they would bring about social change. I think this was one of things that led to changes, you know, that we got. Youth, with support of parents, with the parents, in a large measure to the point where they would be against the advice of their parents-- and all of these things, you know, they were able to, committed to change. And as I say finally parents came into support them. So in that regard I think it had a good effect.

Sinsheimer: Have they or when they did they integrate the schools here?

Bryant: Oh yes, well they were supposed to. You know you still have problems, in any school they may have what you got. But you have testing systems and things of that sort, we still don't think that, you know, the different kind of diplomas and things (inaudible portion). We have, they have accelerated programs and I think that is more or less aimed at kids, fast learners, and there seems to be not enough emphasize on helping the children who are disadvantaged.

The education act, circuit education act was I think designed to support children, black kids usually have a problem in math, in English and things of that sort. You live in a different culture, culture when you use tests, tests tend to be culturally biased. You have been to

Bryant (cont.): college, you know what I am talking about.

Sinsheimer: Right.

Bryant: (Short inaudible portion) It is just a different culture that we live in. But our school system on the whole I think is ... indicated to in recent articles and studies has shown that kids on the whole are not performing as they ought to. We don't have quality education. We don't have the kind of education that is going to keep us competitive with other countries, black and white. American kids don't study enough. I think in Russia they get about eighteen, spend about eighteen hours, and Russia and Japan both spend more time in their kids than black kids, than American kids do. This is a quest for survival, that we have got to raise our education, and have got to make it accessible and available to all children, regardless of whatever. With modern technology and things of that sort, we have got to have it. So when you say you have integrated education, you know, when you have expulsions, you have suspensions, and all these things; these are deterrents. Every child ought to have a chance to go to school, wherever, whatever. Find a place, a way of keeping them in school. Okay what else do you ...

Sinsheimer: Tell me about, I guess we should talk somewhat about the summer of '64.

Bryant: Summer of '64. Well, summer of '64 all the organizations got together what you called COFO to make a thrust after the passage of civil rights law, which made it as I indicated earlier, it had keyed in getting registration. After having these laws on the books, then we sought to make an overall push to get mass numbers of blacks and minorities registered. That was one of the goals that we set out. That again was home-based, NAACP provided the vehicles and the outside students, others came in and got involved in other things that led to deterrents to getting people registered. That would be my interpretation.

In other words under the law you have certain guidelines. If you are going to engage in registration, you have got to, if you get involved in arrests and all of these things, tends to slow you down. Certainly that was one of the biggest thrusts you had after you had the Supreme, you know, the civil rights law. The NAACP was involved in getting people registered. Some of the other things that, the mock vote, I didn't really participate in. I didn't really feel that it was necessary. I felt that, and I felt then and I feel now, that our goals and objectives should be able to get on the books and not have mock registration, and mock elections. You know become a part of the system. And these are some of the things, tactics that they used, having mock elections and you know in I think '65 (1964) they formed the Freedom

Bryant (cont.): Democratic Party and set delegates to the National Convention. Which led to in a large manner of having the effect of opening up the (Democratic) Party. To that extent I think it had a good effect.(Break)

We did finally organize what you call the Loyal Democrats. I was a part of that.

Sinsheimer: Of the what?

Bryant: Of the Loyal Democrats. After the Freedom Democratic Party, then you had a coalition of different organizations that drew up what you call the Loyalist Democratic Party which was seated in 1968 as opposed to the old Regular Democrats. I was a part of that, I was an alternate delegate to the 1968 Convention in Chicago. I was also an alternate to the '72 Convention in Miami. Participated in party politics and became a, well I was vice-chairman of the Loyalist Democratic Party in the county. I am a member now of the county executive committee. You know we have one party now, we have done away with the ... under one of those Governors that brought the Party together.

But the sixties led to adding a number of people on the rolls. It also led to a whole lot of other things that were very damaging to the community, black community, white community, what have you. But certainly the numbers on the rolls was insurmountable. Later years, well some time later, we dissolved ourselves from the Democratic, Freedom Democratic Party, and in the sixties we started a registration drive that was wholly conducted by the NAACP so we could conduct the policy of nothing but registration. So you could use the law in order to, to full effect. The persons, we had volunteers come into Mississippi and some other states, that we started to get the South, and Mississippi was one of the first ones.

We had our lawyers to come in, and those that came in worked in under the auspices of the branches. They didn't go out into their own fields in pursuance of other things. We had a goal of registration, that was what we felt. And we feel that we were, was very effective goal. Because those that worked worked under the auspices of the NAACP and plus if they had a car, they left their car in Jackson, and stayed with branches, you know, places ... worked under the program and policy of NAACP. So that we could, you know, if their were violations and all, we could have a very close way of dealing with the violations. Say for instance, I say if you were involved in registration in '60 if you had, you drove your car up out there, when you got out there there would be a guy following you. A strange car, you might have got your head beat. Do you see what I am saying.

Sinsheimer: Right.

(Bryant) p.15

- Bryant: If you had been involved in voter registration, you most assuredly would have gottem ... do you understand what I am saying? But he was armed you had an out of state tag, if you rode around you rode in a tag in Pike county. He couldn't single you, he couldn't see you-- do you see what I am saying-- he couldn't single you out.
- In other words our legal department and the whole national department made a policy on how we could get the most out of what you were about to do. I think this was one of the most effective registration things we have had.
- Sinsheimer: When was this?
- Bryant: Well, I think it was '66, or between '66 and '67, somewhere along there. Anyway, after the hot summer.
- Sinsheimer: Right.
- Bryant: Because it involved, as I say, it involved getting involved in litigation and other things that the NAACP wound up having to carry. Port Gibson case and a whole lot of folk involved in that. But NAACP was left holding the bag. You come down here and get involved in registration, you know, you are working _____. If you are getting ready to go home, what are you running COFO for. You go back-- where are you from-- North Carolina. Do you know ... well I will have to ask you that later on at the end. Is there something else you want to ask?
- Sinsheimer: Okay. Tell me about the, what was the community's reaction to the white volunteers who came down.
- Bryant: Well the black community accepted them. The white community became inflamed. Many times I think it was, you know, customs You had a law on the books that prevented blacks and whites from socializing, you know, the law. And many times they come down the street hugged up, black and whites; these things went against the tradition, not the law, well the law at that time. And those kind of things really aroused the black-- white community. And the fact that-- the South, I am sure that you know about the South. You are calling a person that is out of another area, a yankee, you call them a damn yankee. They resented him just because he was ... just working here they resented you because you were an outsider. He would call you an outsider whether you were black or white. This is the way the South thought, without any doubt. If you were working with blacks then you were an outsider and you were an agitator. The way it came down on you. You got the same treatment that blacks got, you know. That was the price you paid. In that regard certainly the

Bryant (cont.): white community was very hostile. And there were a few who worked with whites, but on a mass basis they resented it. I don't think you had a lot of reprisals from blacks. Blacks are more easily to accept a lot of the whites. Blacks were grabbing at the chance, we had, you know as I say, there were intimacies on the part of blacks, and a lot of the blacks were happy to be sociable and intimate with whites. You know what I mean. But the wrath, the biggest of the wrath came from the white community.

Sinsheimer: What was the white newspaper at that time, what were they, was it moderate, harsh?

Bryant: Well, they were ... let's say it this way-- the paper is a monitor for the feelings of the community. Sometimes they venture, and sometimes speak the opinions of the public. A good newspaper is aggressive. And sometimes they have to be very ... to maintain their circulation they have to-- yet in some of their articles they wrote were far reaching, and one of the gentlemen, the editor's son, I mean the manager's son was. I think a Harvard graduate. I think he went to school with Bob Moses. Oliver, Johnny Emmerich. He wrote some articles complimenting Moses. The McComb Journal hasn't been as bad as a whole lot of papers. It has now become, I think, one of the -- the stories they wrote in December are about as good as you will find in any newspaper, in any paper anywhere else. The coverage of the sixties, some of the people I would say who put the names in there were not actively involved in civil rights. You understand, but they gave the facts as, you know. A whole lot of people who actually worked, actually they were on the firing line should have been included, and some of the people who were mentioned should have been excluded, but I am not, it is not for me to say how you editorialize, how you seek out the facts. You have to decide that. I gather you are in journalism or you are planning to go into journalism.

Sinsheimer: Right.

Bryant: Good journalist has to seek out and try to get the most for the money. Sometimes people will point out certain persons that you ought to contact, you know. If you haven't done something I am not going to tell you that John did such and such a thing. I think the community as a whole is responsible for having I would think, say (Hollis) Watkins, if he had told you to talk to me and I hadn't done anything I think he would have done an injustice. See what I am saying. Or Bob Moses. But I think they gave you the facts. What I have told you tends to prove what they say. Right?

(Bryant) p.17

Sinsheimer: Right.

Bryant: Now in all cases that is not the case. This is what I am saying. This sometimes makes you not be able to get the full story. It is not my job to tell you what you ought to print, or who you ought to interview. You see what I mean.

Sinsheimer: Right.

Bryant: As a, you have had training in, you know, certainly you will be able to get the story right. As I say if you went to the Enterprise-Journal and got a copy of the 60's you would be able to get-- they have got some young journalists there who will be very happy to meet with you and talk with you.

Sinsheimer: So this was in December of this last year?

Bryant: Yes.

Sinsheimer: Okay.

Bryant: You will get some very good information on some of the persons, and as I say there may~~nt~~ be one or two of them who really weren't civil rights workers that could have been, time could have been given to other persons who acted. But by and large~~e~~ most of the persons mentioned, they mention, had done something. But their were others who had done more who were not included.

I think they probably would have gone in more depth but they had an editor that said enough, "Why hatch this, why you want to bring this stuff up." But they have done, as I say, one of the best, best coverages on what has happened in this area that you will find in a newspaper in the nation that has covered it.

Sinsheimer: Okay.

Bryant: I can assure you of that.

Sinsheimer: So I am going to try and see Reverend Bowie later in the week, was he an NAACP member.

Bryant: Yes he is a member, but he was, you know, he was one of the COFOer's. And one of the Delta ministry. As I say they had their own show and, you know, they were not under our auspices. You want facts.

Sinsheimer: That's right.

Bryant: He, you know, he was involved and I say, he and the guy at the cleaners (Earnest Nobles), you will find write-ups about those guys. You will find Mrs. Quin, there will be a write-up

Bryant (cont.): about her. Those persons actually were involved in civil rights. Now you have a couple of other people who were covered, who were really participants in it in either one of the ... (NAACP or COFO) ... the time could have been, editorials, I don't know who gave them their names. It seemed to me if you want to produce facts, history is something that you go back. Today has occurred here, and tomorrow it will be history. If you are going to make history then you ought to state the facts. Or seek for-- I wouldn't, I would rather tell you nothing than to fabricate to you, or tell you anything that wasn't true. I don't think I would be fair to you, and you are recording what I am saying and usually I take my own tape recorder, but I have done it so much ... (laughter) I have been interviewed so many times.

We have had a whole lot of people that have been involved and it is impossible to give everybody credit. Here again as I say, if you seek the Enterprise-Journal you can get as much facts as you will, some of the things you may have, it is not for me to say-- you may have some, well some of the facts may have been doctored over.

Sinsheimer: Okay.

Bryant: You see what I am saying. I would be the last person to say what John or Jean had not done, it is reserved for history to judge, not me. You see what I am saying? Am I being fair.

Sinsheimer: That's fair. That's real fair. Tell me, how-- another name that came up was Bobby Talbert.

Bryant: Bobby Talbert, yes, he was involved.

Sinsheimer: Okay. He lives in the area still?

Bryant: Well, he lives in Magnolia I think. Did he give you his phone number?

Sinsheimer: No I don't think he did.

Bryant: You might find it in the phone book. How long are you going to be in this area. ~~We~~

Sinsheimer: Well, I will be in the state until a week from tomorrow. Then I will probably be back again in maybe April. But I am going to go talk to Joe Martin at 3:00, and hopefully some other people as well. Who else do you think I should talk to?

- Bryant: Well, a lot of our members who were involved are no longer living. Ben Hill, these are some of the persons-- he was our treasurer-- fellow by the name of Web Owens-- now these were our stalworth members. These were people who were out there making the way. That had the thrust. Some of them were Masons, some of them were, you know, people who were able to, who had reputation, and we put our best people out there to provide. They can't speak for themselves so I can't tell your interview. You understand?
- Sinsheimer: Tell me about the Masons Lodge, what principles was that founded around?
- Bryant: Well, the Masonic Hall, that Mason's, that's Masonic Hall. It is ... all it did was to provide a meeting place, The Masons have a, committed to helping humanity, its a secret order. A good thing to join. Whether they are black Masons or white Masons if they know each other they can give signs, and they are obligated to help each other if they are in distress, you know, different things of that sort. So if you happen to grow up, I say you are about twenty-five, twenty-four, or twenty-three now?
- Sinsheimer: Twenty-two. I will be twenty-three next month (laughter). You are a pretty good judge.
- Bryant: So that is why I say "when you grow up," you are just getting your feet wet now. (laughter)
- Sinsheimer: Right.
- Bryant: You have got some young editors at the McComb Journal. I would urge you to meet -- there is a young, red-headed, little lady-- the young lady that wrote that story. And she will introduce you to others, I think there is one guy from New Orleans. These are some of the-- well, the editor Dunnigan-- I have good relations with all of them, and this one of the things that ...
- Sinsheimer: Do you know the woman's name, the red-headed one?
- Bryant: I can't think of it right now. You just ask for a red-head, there isn't but one there.
- Sinsheimer: Okay (laughter).
- Bryant: Mr. Dunnigan, he is the manager, you know you ought to talk with him.
- Sinsheimer: Does the Emmerich family still own the paper?

(Bryant) p.20

Bryant: Yes, his son is I think a-- I really don't know. I think his son, see he has a son ...

Sinsheimer: John.

Bryant: John. I think John, he still writes occasionally. I think he is still, you know, part owner.

Sinsheimer: Someone told me that he may own a paper in Greenwood (Mississippi) as well.

Bryant: Greenwood Times.

Sinsheimer: Delta Times.

Bryant: Delta Times.

Sinsheimer: And he lives up there you think?

Bryant: He writes articles and it is possible that he could live there, but you talk with Dunnigan, tell Dunnigan that you talked with me.

Sinsheimer: Okay.

Bryant: It is not like it used to be, just tell him that-- as I say, I take the position that-- I took it then and I take it now-- that quiet diplomacy and respect for all men tends to get you more than anything else. Respect people and deal (with them) on a professional basis, and I think you can get a whole lot done. Any stories we, public service time, we get all the public service time we want, and usually it is not edited too much. But as I say if you meet him and some of these other people that write. As I say there is this young man from New Orleans, use to work in a newspaper in New Orleans. These young people would be some good young people for you to meet. Plus the young lady that I told you, the red-head.

Sinsheimer: Okay.

Bryant: You might be able to talk with them personally. It is always best to, you know, when you want to talk to anybody to get them by themselves, I don't think I need to tell you that though? Anytime you want to get people's views you want to be alone with them. You get the best interviews-- sometimes you have somebody with you, you have somebody interfering or interfering their ... I had guys come and bring somebody along, I said, "Look, I am giving this interview now. You can't tell me how I want to tell it." You see what I am saying. These are some of the things that you run across when you have maybe a guy bringing you around, and he knows why and he is going to tell ... Gosh, I think I know as much about it as anybody

Bryant (cont.): else, because I have been here long, and I have done ... I will give you the facts and I don't think anybody else can give you the facts-- those come from the man that is behind it. I know who did what. If he didn't do it I am not going to tell you that he did it.

Sinsheimer: Okay.

Bryant: If you are getting a little cool we can go in there (the kitchen) and warm up now.

Sinsheimer: All right, do you want to do that now? All right.

Bryant: Okay. (Break)

Sinsheimer: Well, let's talk some about the summer of '64.

Bryant: Well, the summer of '64 was what you call the long, hot summer. There was an all out effort after the passage of civil rights law, which, you know, the Voting Rights Act. And all organizations came together and in the South, and in other areas where there were large numbers of voters who had not been able to vote, Mississippi was included. Everywhere throughout the state, began to carry on registration.

Many people from outside of the state came in and they had what you call a lot of the time, had what you call (a) Freedom House. This means they stayed together in the, communal living. These things seemed to me, I would say, tended to inflame the society, customs that you..... Customs and things are hard to break loose from. As a result you had bombings, and you had terror. The Klan bombed churches and bombed homes, and you know, there was just a number of homes and things that were bombed in this area. Churches and what have you. Anywhere that, anybody that tried to work in trying to get registration in that effort, they came down with a wrath. And the Klan was, you know, at its peak in that time.

Sinsheimer: Did they have Freedom Schools here?

Bryant: Yes, they had Freedom Schools, I think all over the state. As I say they had people from other areas and all over to work for the Freedom Democratic Party and the NAACP and other organizations joined together to get out the vote. There was certainly a great number added to the voting rolls. This was change, the beginning of change. We got black elected officials. I think Mississippi has one of the largest number of black elected mayors in the states.

Sinsheimer: I read it (Mississippi) was number one before a couple of years ago. I don't know whether it still is.

(Bryant) p.22

Bryant: I think it still is.

Sinsheimer: Do you remember a fellow named Dennis Sweeney?

Bryant: Dennis Sweeney? I can't place the name now.

Sinsheimer: White kid from California.

Bryant: Very possible that I did. Because I knew-- I think Governor Brown had a niece that was here. I am sure I would remember him. We had guys from all over, California, all different areas. One German girl, lady worked during that period.

Sinsheimer: Where was the Freedom House located?

Bryant: The Freedom House was located in Burglundtown, that is in the north part of McComb.

Sinsheimer: North part of McComb. Was it in a black part of the community?

Bryant: Yes, in the black community.

Sinsheimer: So you think that there could have been, looking back on it, some efforts to, things could have been done differently to inflame people less.

Bryant: Well, here again I say when you are not part of a thing you can not say so easily how it ought to go.

Sinsheimer: Right.

Bryant: We thought it should have gone other ways, and for that reason we severed relationships. As much as NAACP as an organization has branches, as all civil rights organizations have... And you know we have branches and whenever one branch can get the whole national office involved in things, we have to be a little cautious, I mean more, because we have accountability. We have branches, we have roots. People who move in don't have those. It is not out of here but we plan according to our program and policy, program and policy if we are going to get in litigation, and we are supposed to notify our legal department. This is the way we operate. We are going to-- its just like a man if he is going to buy something somebody has to pay for it. And if you get involved in litigation than somebody has to pick up the tab, somebody has to represent you. And these are the kind of things that we, our lawyers and our legal department, and the national office, has grown up. This is the way we operate.

Certainly the bombings and the things, you know, and the news media had aroused-- say for instance the assassination of Medgar Evers and some of the guys you mentioned in Amite county, killing Vernon Dahmer one of our (NAACP) presidents

(Bryant) p.23

Bryant (cont.): over there, one of our members over there who was conducting voter registration in Hattiesburg, outside of Hattiesburg, was burned during that period, you know, burned his house up, and he was killed on the inside.

A whole lot of things that went on all over the state. The Klan-- the Schwerners that were killed during the 60's, all of these things went on unabated to the point that the government had to act. Had it not been for these things I doubt whether you would have had the civil rights laws that you now have on the books.

Sinsheimer: What was your attitude toward the Justice Department at that time? Do you think they were helping?

Bryant: Yes.

Sinsheimer: If somebody like John Doar came down here, I mean do you think he did good or do you think he was just ...

Bryant: Well, John Doar, well I met John Doar in '61, and I knew him over the years and even to the time when Medgar was killed at the funeral where he (Doar) met the mob and helped to squash the mob. And there would have been a problem there when Medgar was killed in '63. And he put his-- I was there-- and he put his own body up. I think he was one of the best attorneys we had in the Department of Justice.

Sinsheimer: So there was a white mob outside the funeral or?

Bryant: No, at the funeral, after they took the body to the funeral home. After they had the, the funeral was held at the Masonic Temple. And marched back down to the funeral home, I think that was on Lynch, no _____ Street. Marching down there they called out the National Guard, they had helmets and things over. Blacks and things were throwing bricks and rocks and things on them. And this almost resulted in a riot, because they felt that they were part of, part and partial of, Medgar's having been assassinated, you know. As I say being there in the crowd I heard, I wasn't one of the persons who threw the bricks or things of that sort, but I was there where I could see. And they threw-- those helmets, and riot guns and all that stuff-- in spite of that they still, you know, were insistent-- and this could have easily erupted. And John Doar and others intervened, tried to cool it down.

As I say I first met John Doar in '61 when Bob (Moses) came in here. Earlier when he came into McComb (Moses) he wrote John Doar and told him that he was coming into McComb. From that time on he had, you know, whenever something happened I would call Bob (John) Doar in Washington. I had very good relationship with the Department of Justice. The

Bryant (cont.): local officials were the ones that, you know. The Civil Rights Commission, you know, after that, made an investigation into all different kinds of things. The local, county, and city officials, did not, including the state officials, just really did not do their jobs. And if it had not been for the outside forces, including nationalizing the National Guard and things of that sort-- the case of James Meredith when he entered the University of Mississippi. If they had given adequate protection they wouldn't have needed to nationalize the National Guard. So, you know, just the failure-- the Civil Rights Commission report points it out-- the failure of the local and county and state officials to do their jobs. The breakdown of law and order. You had _____ anarchy, wherever it is.

Say for instance now you have, whatever the motives are, you have the anti-abortionists. Those who are coming out bombing and burning abortion clinics. I don't think that is the way to, you have to stop that kind of violence. Whether it is against a group or individuals or whatever. I don't think that is the way to solve problems, you have got to have law and order.

That was the case in the 1960's, the protection of life and limb, and home and property, people were not protected. It seems that a lot of the local officials were a part of the conspiracies.

Sinsheimer: Going back to James Meredith, did the local NAACP chapters, did you all raise any money or were you all supporting that effort at all?

Bryant: Well, yes, all branches were supporting What happened was that the legal department, I think _____, general counsel. In other words the national office, the general counsel was supporting it, because they had put in a lot of money to, you know, eliminate these things. The legal department, and lawyers were coming into the area-- you had a real pouring, outpouring of funds through corporations, foundations, or what have you in order to file these kind of suits. You don't have that now. But every kind of effort that was necessary was provided Meredith and others to get into the University, in a college. It's part of-- the government didn't do its part, NAACP's legal department did everything that they could. But they are not, we are not a law enforcement agency.

Sinsheimer: Sure.

Bryant: So that is why all we do-- as I say we are not a violent organization, we press for change through legislation, sometimes that is not always the most expidious way of getting it. But I think He said that the wheels of justice grind slow. But unless we can rely on the courts, the judicial system, then we can have anarchy. You know we have-- it seems to me that the courts are going back on some of the decisions that are made there, you know. It remains to be seen-- I think we are at a very critical point where-- if the Reverend (Jerry) Falwell can get Supreme Court Justices to his liking, you know and what he said, those are very serious challenges. No one can tell what can happen in the future.

Sinsheimer: Sure enough.

Bryant: Well, is there anything else?

Sinsheimer: Well, I am trying to think ... I don't think so.

End of Interview.