

[Dennis]



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MEMORANDUM

To: Tim West

Fm: Joe Sinsheimer

Re: Frank Smith/David Dennis Interviews

Dt: October 25, 1998

Enclosed are two items:

The first is an interview with Frank Smith, a former SNCC field secretary from Mississippi. In the interview Smith discusses: 1) his civil rights activities in Holly Springs, Mississippi 2) Robert Moses' leadership role in Mississippi 3) the role of white students in the Mississippi civil rights movement 4) SNCC's efforts in Greenwood, Mississippi 5) his reaction to assassination of Medgar Evers 6) his experience in organizing voter registration drives in Hattiesburg, Mississippi 7) James Forman's influences on the SNCC staff in Mississippi 8) and Aaron Henry's [head of the Mississippi chapter of the NAACP] role in the Mississippi campaign.

The second interview is with David Dennis, who headed up CORE's program in Mississippi during the early 1960's. The interview was conducted by the historian John Dittmer (currently at Depauw University in Indiana). In the interview, Dennis discusses: 1) the development of the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) in Mississippi 2) the development of the civil rights movement in Jackson, Mississippi 3) the movement's "failure" after 1964 4) his reaction to the 1964 Democratic national Convention at Atlantic City 5) the role of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic party after 1964 6) the rise of black nationalism in the Mississippi movement 7) and the role of white students in the movement

John Dittmer Interview with David Dennis
Lafayette, Louisiana
July 12, 1983

J. Dittmer: ...Well, if we could jump right in. One of the reasons I have come across for the formation of COFO has been the response of the VEP and the foundations not wanting to dole out funds to individual groups. And of course I know that the original COFO was founded a couple of years earlier. But focusing on the group that went through the mid-1960's, was this primarily a response to the VEP or was it something that you had been talking about for a while?

Dennis: Well, I had not been talking about it that much prior to getting into to it. I had just gotten into Mississippi. The idea of the formation of it had been already dealt with. When I got there, I think it was '62... talking to Bob and then one of the primary reasons was that we had so many different organizations... to keep down the conflict that was existing, criticisms, organizations competing with each other, whatever. So the idea was to form COFO.

In terms of the direction of COFO, besides the voter registration projects and things of that nature was one that was formulated as time went on as we developed new ideas and things of that nature.

Dittmer: To what extent did local people identify as COFO people rather than CORE people or SNCC people.

Dennis: Quite a bit. I know that the SNCC people and the CORE people never did emphasize organization. People sort of knew that we worked for CORE or SNCC, a lot of times got us all confused. Primarily most people recognized us as COFO workers once we organized COFO and that is the way we organized. We believed, the primary people believed, that the people should maintain whatever identities that they had, organizations, and try to revive those organizations and let them function. We just didn't need CORE groups and SNCC groups and NAACP groups as far as we were concerned. So we made no attempt to organize a SNCC chapter or CORE chapters....

Dittmer: The question I had, of course, the NAACP felt very strongly about this....

Dennis: Well, they continued to some extent. But Medgar {Evers} began to deemphasize the organization of new chapters to some extent. But they maintained their old chapters. They were already doing that and that was fine. I had no problems with that.

Dittmer: Medgar certainly, and I think from my own reading Aaron Henry very definitely had problems with the national {NAACP} organization having problems with COFO in terms of visibility, in terms of fundraising and things. Did you run into any of those same problems with CORE? Was national CORE more comfortable with COFO?

Dennis: Well, they were more comfortable with COFO than the NAACP was. But you know I caught a lot of flack because what they considered to be our identification with the projects ... wanting to carve out something that we could say was CORE's. So what we did is we did carve out a little section for them and a little section we called SNCC's. Greenwood and places like that. So the nationals would be satisfied. CORE territory was Philadelphia, Mississippi and stuff like that, and in Canton. But overall we did that for their satisfaction per say. Which is to say that other than that it didn't make any difference. Everybody worked together as one big unit.

Dittmer: So your carving up the Fourth District was mainly to pacify the national organization rather than as a structural thing that you thought was necessary. That is very interesting.

Dennis: That is right. There was no political reasons or anything else connected to it....

Dittmer: In terms of your own involvement, I believe you came into Mississippi with the Freedom Rides in '61?

Dennis: '60.

Dittmer: Partly '60. Could you talk a little about that experience? About what your impressions were? What you found?

Dennis: Well, I didn't get a chance to see.... I mean we got on a bus in Montgomery and we were shipped right there into the bus station from there into some paddy wagons and from there into jail. When I got out I was taken to the airport and flown out so I didn't know anything about. So my impressions of Mississippi were just like any other place. A jail is a jail. I mean we were actually arrested in Montgomery and taken down.

Dittmer: What led you to want to come back to Mississippi after your early work with CORE in Louisiana?

Dennis: Well, I wanted to do Louisiana because I was from Louisiana. It was really the national office of CORE, Tom ... what is Tom's last name?

Dittmer: Gaither.

Dennis: Tom Gaither was drafted to the service and ... it was very difficult for them to find a field secretary who wanted to work in Mississippi. I took it because they had a lot of strong people in Louisiana at that time. That is how they asked me to go. It wasn't because I volunteered and said "Let me in Mississippi." Because as far as I am concerned Louisiana had the same problems if not worse. But I decided, I said okay I would, because they had a lot of good people in Louisiana.

Dittmer: When you got to Jackson-- this was in what '62-- I have read that you were, I guess CORE was sharing an office or affiliated an office with the Jackson Nonviolent Movement. And from your field reports back you sort of found that as an organizational structure there were some problems there. I don't know if you care to elaborate on that?

Dennis: I think it was the personality of the people that were there at the time. It had nothing to do with Bob {Moses}, Bob at that time was working mostly in McComb and around the areas there. They had a couple of time working out of the Jackson office. I didn't see-- at that time, primarily my role was supposed to be when I got there was just to coordinate the Freedom Ride activities. After being there for about a month of that, that was ridiculous for me to be sitting there doing nothing. So I

started doing some voter registration work and stuff like that. Got some money from VEP....

And the people that was working in the office, there was always complaints about this and that.... And I didn't particularly like, there was a lot, the NAACP was very much entrenched into Jackson. There had already been conflicts it seemed between the groups. Tom Gaither was very well liked. And I wanted to branch out And I met Bob Moses and I liked what they were doing and I thought CORE should be more involved in those activities. So as a result of my discussion with Bob and others I began to push CORE in that same direction. Getting out of that very formal kinds of thing. When I came in I came in wearing my blue jeans and stuff like that as we would do in Louisiana. Well, Tom was accustomed to suit and tie....

Dittmer: . And also you were working, at least you were on the committee of the NAACP in the series of meetings and demonstrations which led of course to Medgar's assassination. Again, I have a couple of your reports that you weren't totally happy with the way that was going and with John Salter's leadership of that group. At least what I read gave me the impression that you felt they should have been organizing the community rather than going directly into demonstrations and the boycott. Do you recall...?

Dennis: Well, I don't recall exactly what I said there. But when we were doing the projects-- my philosophy has always been that you get people involved in the community. You can take kids from school who don't live in the area and stuff like that but when they leave everything is left the same way. That was one of the problems you had with the great Freedom Summer bit. Summer Project. I think it has more to do with that aspect of it. I believed in organizing local people, local people to play leadership roles. I didn't like although you were pushed into it in situations of being out front. I always found myself to be much more effective if I could work behind the scene. And that is why a lot of the CORE people who worked with me got a lot of exposure. Because I would rather do that, it was much more effective in that aspect. So it had to do more with the way you organize in a community rather than anything very personal

against Salter. I think he did a very good job.

Dittmer: Ed King asked me to ask you if you had seen Salter's book on the Jackson Movement. He loaned me his copy just to show you. It came out a couple of years ago.... One of the things that John argues in the book was that the Jackson Movement was really shot down by the national office of the NAACP personified in the presence of Gloster Current and by implication the Kennedy administration which was trying to get people out of the streets. From your perspective what do you think the major reasons were for the failure of that Movement in Jackson? And a related question which is of great interest to me, and that is why didn't the Movement ever thrive in Jackson as it did in other areas of the state?

Dennis: Well, Jackson was more like a city in its comparison, there was more of the bourgeois middle-class setting. I think it had a lot to do with approaches, you had a lot of the ministers.... The NAACP did and then was what they considered to be the rebel group, you know, the young SNCC people. And I think that in my opinion the real reason was there was never really any real strong attempt by anyone to really organize the grass roots elements of Jackson on a sustained basis as we did in the other areas. I think more or less had more to do with it. Jackson was also much more political in terms of the overlying policies. So personally I think that had a lot to do with it.

I think Gloster Current and the others did any more or any less than to a larger extent than some of the other people in the national organizations, CORE, SNCC and the others, SCLC. They fought hard to maintain, to acquire some type of identity with their own movements. So they would do things. Overall in terms of the NAACP, I looked at it as what was happening in a local area. None of us really gave too much attention, I know Bob didn't and others didn't, to look national. So therefore it didn't bother us. And the local groups and the local leadership we had no problems with really. Sometimes Medgar was forced to do certain things by the national office, but as a whole we all worked together as a family. Aaron Henry never did lead neither did he deemphasize his role in COFO or anything else

that we were doing.

Dittmer: I have seen-- again the correspondence-- tremendous pressure was put on Aaron by the national office. I just came across some stuff in my latest trip to Washington. With Clarksdale demonstrations which too me seems one of the better examples of intergroup cooperation.... Was it Gaither that was CORE's man up there? I am not sure. But I have read reports where he is saying that Aaron is really looking for support from other groups and that he felt very comfortable there. And then I saw a letter from Aaron to {Roy} Wilkins referring to the bawling out that Aaron got from Wilkins on the phone for asking CORE to send more people in. Sort of trying to justify to the national office that this was in the best interest of the NAACP to bring in a broader group.

Dennis: Right. I would not, I could not blame the NAACP or the government to a large extent that they caused the movement to fail.... A lot had to do with after the Summer Project I think a lot of your people who had been working were just burnt out. That is number one. Number two is Bob left and I left and I think that took away a lot. A lot of the other people left. And then they had the people that were staying there, most of them wanted, what they thought was a viable program that they were responsible for through activities in Mississippi, therefore they went into those programs. Poverty programs and stuff like that hired quite a few of the people who were at one time working for CORE and SNCC and groups of that nature.

So that had a lot to do with it. But it had a lot to do with just burn out. And on top of that is during the Summer Projects ... we sort of lost touched directly with the local development in terms of people. And all these people left and left a tremendous void. And there was nothing there to tie it back together. And I think that had more to do with-- which I will not say is a failure. I think it just changed direction and it changed, the movement in Mississippi, from '60 on through. It changed direction quite a number of times.... And the Summer Project of 1964 was one of the main it just zooms, the space age, you know.

Dittmer: So there weren't the veteran troops around to staff, particularly in the new areas being opened up that summer that hadn't had....

Dennis: That is right. And most of the other people who were there had been accustomed to following certain leadership. Medgar was dead. And we had Charles Evers with a totally different philosophy than everybody else's. So that had a lot to do with it. The old veterans and everybody, most of them just got out for awhile and started to do another thing. Some went back to school... that had a lot to do with it.

Dittmer: Did Atlantic City have an impact on you and other people deciding it was time for you to leave or had you made your decision earlier?

Dennis: No I had not made the decision. What Atlantic City did was very frustrating. It had a lot to do with my leaving and trying to evaluate things. I am speaking very personally because it is the whole idea of saying look, what makes this country, what awakens this country. I think that Stokley and those people were much more verbal after that. If you look back in terms of the civil rights bills and stuff like that it wasn't the marching and the murder of Medgar Evers and people like that, it was when people took to the streets in the northern cities.... We had told a lot of people to put down their guns and not be violent in Mississippi and I wasn't so sure that the nonviolent approach was the right approach anymore. And I had to do a lot of soul searching about that. I guess I made the decision prior to that that it was not, but not making any decisions what to do about it.

And then the next step was, what was my role to be you know in Mississippi. It looked to me as if there was a need for something else, versus whether I was the person to try to develop that, having input into it. I just didn't know, there was total confusion. I guess I never did get back on the track after that in terms of participating in the movement....

Dittmer: What about FDP? At what point did it become clear to COFO that it needed a visible political arm like FDP and what did you envision that down the road after it was formed.

Dennis: Well, the idea of FDP, number one, you knew you didn't have the time to try to go through the system as it was. We had done everything possible that we could. The question was how do you make people more conscious about what is really the problem. So instead of going through the red tape, you just do something different. So FDP-- let's go and do it.... Organize and bring attention on the problem. And having a unit that you could work with that was political, and that could parallel and compete with the existing political structures in the state. Showing the contrast... it wasn't because people didn't want to participate, people didn't want to be involved in politics, didn't not want to vote-- but that the structure and mechanism set in Mississippi prevented them from doing so. So it was that kind of thing. The idea was that Mississippi could be recognized and used as a pattern for other southern states in other areas. A very strong political unit, nationally possibly.

Dittmer: Did you see it then in say the summer of '64 as replacing the Democratic Party as the legitimate party in Mississippi? What were your expectations about Atlantic City.

Dennis: The expectation was that it would force the doors open for people to participate in the system as it was, Atlantic City more or less. No one really believed that FDP would totally replace. Some people who just fantasized a dream or something maybe. That is why we were talking about at one time seating half and half. But if not then the alternative was to push hard for it to replace it, hoping that there would be some kind of compromise. It was never at that time-- and a lot of people believe that it was possible that you could work through the system. Now the question is how to get the system to open its doors so you can participate? That was really what it was all about. And the country I think missed a golden opportunity at the time when they decided that no they were not going to deal with that issue and racism.

Dittmer: I recently became aware just of the extent of Johnson's obsession with FDP and Atlantic City. I spent some time in Austin looking through his papers. And of course he doesn't

even mention it in his autobiography. But he was on the phone constantly to Atlantic City during this whole crisis period, talking interestingly to Eastland to Stennis to Russell to southern Senators. I don't think on his telephone log there was one call to anybody in the movement or even a Wilkins. And I also found out-- you probably know this-- that he was using, that they were using the tap on Martin Luther King's phone to convey political information on what the FDP was doing, or going to do next, back to the White House. And that went from _____ DeLoach who was the FBI man on the scene through Bill Moyers to Johnson. I guess if there is a question that comes out of this it is you know to what extent did Johnson's activities alienate you from liberal politics? And sort of related question-- I believe the decision was made at the time not to go public in attacking Johnson. And in retrospect do you think this was a wise decision or not?

Dennis:

I don't think that it was a wise decision on the part of, but that is Monday morning football, quarterbacking as they call it. The idea was to do whatever was necessary to bring about.... And we began to believe about the fact that if you do this then you are going to hurt the {Democratic} Party's chances in there because these are the only groups, people that have been helping to some extent. I would say it was not the only one-- a lot of mistakes were made. Johnson himself no, it was the overall politics. There was a lot of pressure on us from a lot of the political leaders, old line leaders who had a lot more experience than we did. Blacks, white, friends of the group. And we were really helpless. There were people coming in stop them, stop them, all over the place. We got in there so fast and everything moved so fast you never had the chance to really sit down and spend hours or days about what the next move should be or whatever.

And I think we moved faster and were a lot more successful than a lot of people thought we were going to be and that caught them off guard. So Atlantic City was just one big mess at that time. After about a couple of days of that, Atlantic City, I sort of just backed off. That was at the point I just got totally, my frustrations and stuff really just got the best of me. Spent a lot of time walking on the

boardwalk.

Dittmer: When you got back did you see FDP's role then as a third party or were you optimistic about its chances in Mississippi?

Dennis: No, that was one of the reasons why I had to leave because at that particular time if I had stayed I think there would have been a totally different direction gone for Mississippi.

Dittmer: What kinds of things would you have...?

Dennis: Well, I had sort of convinced myself that there was only one way to do that.

Dittmer: One question, a back-up question. I always forget to ask, this is going back. In terms of decision-making in COFO for something like the Freedom Vote in '63 or the Summer Project. What sort of dynamic was at work in making those decisions? To what extent was there participation below the officials whose names were on the letterhead?

Dennis: Primarily what happened was-- and that was a mistake too-- decisions were made and then what would happen is the question how do you get people to go along with it. And make them feel part of it. You didn't have time to educate the people as a whole who were in the groups as to what exactly what was going on. Sort of like, okay this is what we need to do next. Okay, how do we do this when you know you have a problem with this person and that person. Well I think we can do that, I will talk to..... One of those kinds of things.

A lot of people, important people, were against the Freedom Summer Project and the FDP challenge in Atlantic City. A lot of people thought we should continue on the organization of what we were doing. And at the same time to move in that direction slowly.... I think that some of the others felt that do we have that much time. The time is right. It is ready to move it. The country was ripe for it. You had a lot of national support developed.

Dittmer: Is it possible that in the context of grass roots organizing what you were trying to do in Mississippi that events move too fast nationally?

Dennis: Well, we caused it, we accelerated the

movement I think around the country, especially when we brought in all of those kids and stuff. I mean they went back and the Universities were never the same. I think we needed for Mississippi for it to become the model that we had talked about it being. If we had another year, another two years. I think everything would have been different.

Dittmer: The education which is a vital part....

Dennis: So when people left you had things ongoing. Just as the leadership develops in some of the areas through the poverty programs. People became leaders, they became involved politically in their areas and stuff like that. Although a lot of them got caught up in the whole economic aspect of it. As a whole they developed more community organizationally.... Because they moved slowly, although that was not the intent. People began to organize and become dependent in those areas. Then all of sudden they come to decide let's cut back, let's change directions.... In the beginning it was kind of loose and people could do primarily what they wanted to in terms of community organizing.

Dittmer: That was a problem wasn't it. After the passage of the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act, you had these concrete issues to rally the people around. And after that it was what do we do now as I heard several people talk about that. Of course you had left Mississippi before the Voting Rights Act. Did you expect for example the Voting Rights Act in '65, which granted took a while before it was enforced, did you have a timetable?

Dennis: No, we expected it. In terms of it being '65 ... I am not sure we had such a timetable per say. And I am not so sure in terms of the Voting Rights Act was a result of what we did or what was going on in Harlem and Watts.

Dittmer: That is interesting because most of the people that I talk to in the southern movement don't exclude that but they don't mention it.

Dennis: We had been marching, people were killed for quite some time, but as soon as you started burning buildings and stuff in the northern areas and everything and people start taking arms and stuff, and violent groups start

emerging and leaders who at one time had talked about nonviolence were now saying violence, were advocating violence. {Dennis claps his hands in rapid succession} Civil Rights Bill, Voting Right Act, and everything else. And it was getting to be quite embarrassing.

You can hide to a large extent a few incidents that were getting national publicity going on in the South. You could blame it and say it is that little corner area. We are still fighting the Civil War and there is some sections we still have problems in. But when they started, whereby it was not like that. You got problems nationally, in the country as a whole has its problems. And it became internationally embarrassing to the country. And the country had to do something to show that the leadership is not condoning all of this. So let's pass a few laws, instead of saying what we ought to do and should have done a long time ago is enforce the laws that have been there for ages.

Dittmer: Yeah.

Dennis: Until we come up with something else. What the hell, they didn't have no teeth or enforcement or anything else like that. They came up with a whole lot of stuff when blacks decided they were going to be violent in order to protect themselves when the cities turned violent. And to fight back. And then all of sudden there became all kinds of gun control laws and stuff like that based on old laws that they had. And where were those laws when the Ku Klux Klan was carrying guns and shooting and killing people. It was after black people said let's get a gun that those laws came....

And that is why the frustration was there. Because the fact is what I could see all of a sudden is that okay laws are made for the protection of those who make the laws. So therefore it is no matter what the hell you do it is up to those people who make those decisions. So what makes them tick? As long as I turn my butt in the air they are going to kick it. So now I throw a foot back and it seems like I get a little more respect. And that is what I was going through at the time.

Dittmer: You were also in one of your letters to Wiley Branton in early '63, you talked about the counties that you would like to work in. I

believe you mentioned Yazoo, Holmes, and Madison. I am hoping to do a lot of work on sort of the local level dealing with local people and local conditions. And one of the things that interests me and still confuses me is the development of the Movement in both Holmes and in Madison counties where you had a number of similarities in terms of the percentage of black population, the demography, land owners and things like this. That it was much more difficult in Madison county to get something going and you had after you left probably the strongest FDP was in Holmes. Could you enlighten me a little on that? Why is was that there was such a difference there? Was the repression that much stronger in Madison or the community was that much more united in Holmes?

Dennis: I think they were united. And one of the things that happened there is on all levels those people, there was a local involvment per say, as far as I can recall. I think that had a lot to do. See what was able to be done there was not able to be done in a lot of other places....

Dittmer: We were talking about the demise of COFO in '64-'65 when the NAACP decided to pull out. Aaron starts going off in another direction. I have read some of the minutes of meetings the one that stands out is Canton... and they were real bloodbaths. Bob Moses said something that was very interesting, almost as an afterthought at the conference, that the meeting were a real source of strength for the movement and it was in meetings that we tore ourselves apart. Could you talk a little bit more about that aspect of it. You talked about burnout, people leaving the state. It seems to be that you have a new group, at least from reading these minutes, but they are mainly white, mainly northern. And it seemed to me just reading between the lines that they were having all sorts of problems dealing with people like 1) people like George Raymond who was extrememly militant but even with more conservative blacks in the area. What kind of feel did you have for that kind of white involvment? Yours I know mainly was in Freedom Summer but it might give me some insight into that later period.

Dennis: After the Freedom Summer black nationalism

just began to develop... George and the rest of them , I think to a large extent a lot of us did. ... That you can't depend on whites to do anything.... Parents of some of the same kids that were down there were dealing with something different at home. I think that frustrations from the Atlantic City experience, the need to get back into the South you know, those frustrations and the whole black nationalism aspect of it had a lot to do with that.

A lot of the whites came down with a misconception in terms of their roles, wanted to lead. They had more education and felt like they understood more. But they didn't understand the other people, what they needed to understand. And I think that is where the conflicts came about. And I think some just really went out there and were fighting for recognition of leadership against blacks in the area. And those kinds of things had a lot to do with it.

I think that a lot of those meetings as I recall in being in some and then hearing reports from others and everything, and talking to people down there, is that they were, a lot of times there were was a lot of frustration and finger pointing at those people who had left. They were blamed. Mrs. Devine always compared me to a person like a father giving birth to a illegitimate child, not caring or giving a damn about it after you do it. I mean she used to say that to me. You and Bob gave birth to this thing and now you leave your children {laughter}. And to a large extent a lot of those things were going on. It was really people being frustrated, trying to find themselves, had really lost direction. I think a lot of people at one time thought we ought to do this, do that, move this or that way. After the Atlantic City thing it was just... are we doing the right thing? A lot of us felt like we needed to get back into something. I think that was part of the frustration.

Up until Atlantic City, a lot of the the people, even the leadership believed in this country and had fought not against the country, but what we though was that there was teamwork between those people in the movement and the government ot make things better. And all of a sudden Atlantic City showed that wasn't true.

Dittmer: So it was more of a personal decision because of the changes that you were going through that led to your decision and it was not a feeling of confidence that we had started this, we had developed local leadership and they are able to carry on without us?

Dennis: ... I felt goofy about the Canton area and places like that along those lines. That place had been very well organized. George Raymond was one of those people who, he didn't do like a lot of the other workers did for SNCC and CORE, you know you work in this area for awhile and then you move. George just set up shop and did not leave until he developed a bad heart. You know he is dead now.

Dittmer: Yes, I know that. What about other local people that you recall who were instrumental. You mentioned Mrs. Devine.

Dennis: Chinn's, C.O. Chinn. I mean you have to name them in terms of I mean it wasn't one of those situations in that area whereby you said this is a leader. Those people played leadership roles even to a point of blocks in their communities or their farm areas or whatever have you. They were very well organized. They would turnout for everything. I mean they were very much involved. I mean you weren't talking about youngsters all the time, teenagers. These were adults, older people, a lot of time they would keep their children at home when they were participating which was much different than other areas. There was no fear. C.O. Chinn set the stage for that also. Canton was not a nonviolent area at all {laughter}.

Dittmer: Unless you or I got there {laughter}

Dennis: One of the things that we did there early in organizing is we took a stand. It was the first big, the CORE people were fighting the national office because when the national office found out about the rallies when C.C. Chinn would have people out there with guns to protect us they had a fit. And told them okay fine. I remember one incident ... we had Marvin Rich and _____ come down. I felt bad about it I sent them to these really tough areas with the voter registration drive we had. And they went out there to see what it was. And by the day's end both of them had

been beaten. And poor old Marvin Rich, it wasn't long after that he left CORE {laughter}. But after that I didn't have too many complaints.

The fact is when Farmer came down he was glad to see some people around there like C.O. Chinn with guns and stuff, he was scared to death. And I said well that is what you are talking about. Tell us to go into these wooded areas and your driving down a little old dirt road, trees on both sides. Tell us to go out here without guns, and people go there without guns, your a damn fool. If you want to do it you go and try it. And thye did it and it didn't last long. Marvin got hurt very badly and _____ didn't get hurt too badly.....
{Break-- end of side one}

Dittmer: ... What were you feeling about ... seeing people you had encouraged to get into it {the movement} suffer so much {both physically and economically}?

Dennis: That you never get over. Not only from the economic problems people might have, psychological problems people might have, did have. And the death and injuries of people. A lot of people were hurt or killed because indirectly because Bob Moses and I would say go do this and go do that. It is like I feel very responsible to a large extent because I was primarily the key in terms of pushing him to the whole demonstration bit that the NAACP couldn't control. They didn't want to go in but we didn't stop it. Either you join in and move with us or you sit.... Schwerner, Goodman, Chaney, that aspect of it. You don't get over that.... So you don't get over that stuff. It happens, it is part of the ballgame. But the thing that hurts more than anything else is the question that you can't answer. Is whether or not it was worth it for the gains that you got at the time. And if people had to die and you say look what happens as a result of that death ... well hell why didn't he die fighting maybe he would have gotten a little bit more. Some of those things always are going through your head. You never get over that. I guess I will live with it until the day I die.

Like I feel very responsible for Chaney and them. I had gone to take a rest because I had a bad case of bronchitis. But at the same time-- I don't know whether I would have been

able to stop it. The one thing I do know, I feel we would have been on top of it much quicker if I had been there. The people who were there just didn't know what to do. The circumstance were that they were missing. They didn't know Schwerner said I will be back at four o'clock. If he hadn't called in by 4:15 then you had better have some cars up there looking for something. Instead they waited until 9:00. You never get over it. It is just the question of whether or not it was worth it. And I am not so sure at this time that if it was for what occurred. Because I am not sure those deaths and those injuries had much to do with a lot of the changes.

Dittmer: I sort of think they did but....

Dennis: An example of that aspect of it is at the same time this is going in Mississippi you had a lot going on in Louisiana. People dying, people being burned up, what the hell happened here. Not a goddamn thing. And the laws that were passed to help, it wasn't so they just affected Mississippi, they were national. And if you look at the history I think you will see when they occurred. It wasn't right after Medgar Evers got killed that the country started jumping.

Dittmer: Right. Now it seems to be just living in Mississippi and in sort of post-Movement dozen years that the people who gained the post were the ones that risked the least.

Dennis: That is exactly right.

Dittmer: And that is progress of sorts.

Dennis: Right, that is progress of sorts. On top of that is,,I am not saying that is not the way it should have been. What I am saying is that I am not so sure that the FDP and all of that had a lot to do with those changes. I think that the students who came down, and their experience with it, and the anger they left with, caused them to do other things that helped to bring about certain changes. Now that kind of direct involvement and participation.... I would say yes, you see the difference... {Inaudible portion}

Dittmer: That was your own, according to your interview with Howell Raines in My Soul is Rested, that

was your own major reason for bringing whites in.

Dennis: That is exactly right. The whole thing was we knew they would die, some. But didn't think -- I wasn't looking for a Schwerner and Chaney. You might call it payback I don't know. That might be cruel way to say it, in other words to think about it. But if you did not think bring those students-- to give you an example of how the country dealt with it-- I have said this before and I will say it again because we forget. Is that during the time that Schwerner and Goodman and Chaney were missing, I mean they were finding bodies. Not only in Mississippi. And the media and everyone else would say but it was not the. They just found two more bodies and now the examination of the corner and the autopsosy. Everybody would say, "Wow, it wasn't them, whew thank God." Fuck, they are still dying.

... I was sitting in the office, I was part of it I think to a large extent, one day it just hit me I was sitting in the COFO office in Jackson on Lynch Street. We was just sitting down there and all of a sudden it just hit me we were listening to it and everybody was saying, "Wow, it wasn't them, okay, let's keep the search going." I said, "Look what you are saying. They found the bodies of folk in Mississippi in a river there. What they hell are we saying. So it was not, but it was somebody, and they were black. It was existing all over the place. And people just stopped and started looking at each other. Began to talk that night about the hell was going on with us.

Dittmer: You began I guess organizing the students at Southern, at least I read something, before you came to Mississippi?

Dennis: Yes.

Dittmer: And one of the things that you were interested in doing in '63-'64 was going back to the college campuses and organizing there. One of the things that surprised me when I came to Tougaloo, and that wasn't until '67, but just how little student involvement there was. A handful of kids who were doing voter registration or becoming active black nationalists. But most of them pretty much going through as students had before in order

to get out of the state and get a decent job which I can understand.

And then to hear from people who had been there through the early '60's that Tougaloo's reputation for being a campus that was very actively involved in the Movement largely rested in the hands of a few very active students with many of them being able to be turned out for rallies when something exciting was happening, but very little of the kind of commitment that I had for one had felt existed. What became of your efforts in that area? I know SNCC came back in '66-'67 to go back into the campuses. And how do you account for success or failure in that area?

Dennis: On my own personal point?

Dittmer: No, on the factors-- you had written about middle-class black students, the oppressive environment of the administration.

Dennis: My involvement, I went to Dillard after working for CORE for about a year.... And when I went to Dillard we started, a group of us started organizing students, most of us in terms of the whole cultural aspect. Those at Dillard and from talking to people from other predominant black institutions, everyone said yes it is true. Students come in as freshmen they are very energetic, they are very active, they are inquisitive about what is going on, they hit the library and stuff like that. Very soon the whole interest and anything of that nature just sort of declines to making it through, to getting a degree, getting a job. The question was what caused it. And I think to a large extent there was nothing people could relate to their identity in terms of what is success, how to be successful.

And so we began to organize on campus with the Afro-American groups and the cultural aspect of it, doing Afro-American festivals and things like that and became part of the National Association of Afro-American Teachers.... Did a lot of work, formed the group for the first time we did get the university to change the freshmen curriculum. There was more emphasis on black history, on black culture, on black participation and development in the country. African history and all that stuff. So we built a whole new curriculum. {Inaudible portion}

Dittmer: You sort of lost faith at that time in electoral politics?

Dennis: Definitely. I mean the whole system. There is no way. It is controlled by powers that you can't even come close to identifying with. The question is the identity of the groups and who they are. At one time we used to talk about President Kennedy and Johnson and whomever, great man, he is going to really do it. Well, hell they didn't have any more power than we did. They were just individuals sitting there as a mouthpiece for someone else who is holding the {power}. So the question then became how do you get to those people whereby they recognize the needs of black people. I damn sure can't communicate with them by speaking a totally different language. So the system was geared toward-- I would assume for a lack of a better term at this time that we were sort of into a system whereby we talked a language that wasn't very well understood. ... The fact is that anybody that stands up and lets someone stomp you-- you are dumb, you are coward, it is un-American.

Dittmer: Has anything happened in the intervening two decades to make you change your mind at all?

Dennis: No, I just have not answered the question. Well, I guess I might say the answer to the question might be there but the question of how has not been answered.

Dittmer: What about community organization? Did you see that as an alternative at that time?

Dennis: Sure. Community organization fine. People need to organize. But I know from my own experience I had in that area after the Movement, you got to a certain point whereby organizing groups still operating in the typical kinds of politics an organization. We organized grass roots groups called SOUL, Southern Organization Unified Leadership. And that was just another political group. But as you organize groups of that nature, you get to a certain point and then people say where do we go from here? I just didn't have answers. So when you say organize a community, the question is for what.

Dittmer: Does it get down to-- I know SNCC went through this in '64-'65-- where you start asking real

ideological questions about the kind of society you want to live in? Was that ever a factor? Were questions raised in terms of redistribution of wealth or a socialistic system.

Dennis: Oh yeah. For days. For months. The discussions, the conferences, you know. You are right back where you started from.

Dittmer: But there was no way of getting from here to there?

Dennis: Right back talking about ...? I am still, you can tell, I am still very frustrated. For years and stuff I have done a lot of traveling in Africa, China, Brazil, underdeveloped countries to a large extent. And it is amazing how similar the problems, how similar the questions, directions in terms of what is happening, has happened with the blacks in this country.

Dittmer: Well, I have kept you over an hour and I don't want to take up all of your time but I just want to say that it has been tremendously helpful for me. Thank you again.

Dennis: Good.