

Interview with Greene Family  
Clayborne Carson  
Greenwood, Mississippi  
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Mr. Dewey Greene Sr: There were two parties that went together. The old Democratic Party and the NAACP, I mean the National Democratic Party. They finally joined hands and you got some of both.

Interviewer: Did you think that was a good idea to join hands or did you think the MFDP should have been independent?

George Greene: Well, I think it was good idea because see the only place we actually had any power was during the election, any power. But it didn't strenghten you in the state. When it came to Mississippi we didn't have no strength.

George Greene: When you stop and think about it, the only place where the power really existed was in the Delta, where this a large percentage of black people. In other parts of the state, it just did not exist. The majority, the concentration of black were in the Delta.

Interviewer: That would have given you at least some strength in the state in terms of the Delta and on a local level.

George Greene: In one congressional district. Mississippi I think would have had five congressional districts. It gives you voting strength in one congressional district which is not going to change this state. It is not going to change the state. You can threaten people with it. If you use it, you can threaten people.

Carson: Can I ask you a question. How old were you when the movement started her?

Female Voice #1: About fourteen or fifteen. Between fourteen or fifteen.

Carson: What was your judgement about why your family got so deeply involved and maybe other families didn't?

F. Voice #1: It was mostly because of my brother Dewey applying to go to Ole Miss. As far as I know that was the main reason.

Carson: So you think it was just rallying support for him?

F. Voice #1: It started in support for him and then as things started and grew on my father got interested in it after we began getting threatening phone calls and they shot in the house. My sister and brother were really wrapped up in it.

Carson: One thing that I have heard in going around the South is that one of the hardest groups to get registered to vote are the young people. That very few young people are bothering to vote. Have you found that? And if so why is that?

F. Voice #1: I find that to be true because for the last two or three years I have worked at the poll and there are few young people. And their main reason is what good is it going to do them. You know you ask them why they are not voting it is because they can't change anything.

Carson: Do you think that is because they don't know very much about the history of the movement?

F. Voice #1: Well, I believe they just don't care.

Carson: What about you Mr. Greene? What do you think the reason is the young people don't seem to be that interested?

Dewey Greene Sr.: Well, actually I don't know. I am not meeting with any of you people. A lot of them, a lot of people think that the first time you make an attempt to do something if you fail quit. My opinion is if you fail put more {effort in} to it. So we dealt with that.

But most of the young people, and the old ones too, think if we didn't

get an election, if we didn't get somebody, that we had failed. You haven't failed, you fail when you quit. I think that is the trouble, they haven't been schooled well enough to put up enough fight. That is what you have got to do. Is there anyone that thinks that you go in and get wealthy overnight. It isn't like that. But it is a thing that over a period of years will develop well. And it will do it more for the coming generation than it do for us.

Oh, I guess they will get to it.... You know there are some people that can start a thing and keep it going, others can't. Now that was the big power of King. Because the excitement.... And doing that he kept the movement alive. Not that King was any braver than a whole lot of other people in the movement, I don't think that, I doubt that very seriously. But that he could influence more people. He was a fluent speaker and by being so he could get a bigger crowd, he could get a bigger gathering and get people to do more. I think we need more men that can do this, that is one of the main things to get more people involved.

These young people, one of the things about young people is they have to be school {and heard} you can't do such and such a thing. And they believe it. A whole lot of things you can do that people don't believe you can do, but you have to put a fight to do it.

Carson:

Do you think another organization like SNCC is needed?

Dewey Greene Sr.:

Well, it wouldn't hurt anything. It wouldn't hurt a thing. If we could get the organization built up with a lot of people willing to fight. That's the trouble. Most of them are not willing to fight, willing to do a whole lot for nothing. I figure when you have to do an organization you have to do a whole lot for nothing. I think we expect to get too much too soon. That is the reason I think that young people don't do anything, because he doesn't see anything within hand's reach. And you

don't know whether it is in hand's reach until you apply it.

Interviewer: I just have one person to ask you Mr. Greene speaking of young people. I would think you are very disappointed in the young people. Are you?

Dewey Greene Sr.: No, I am not. I am not because you people is a chip of the old block, and the old ones is scared {laughter}.

Carson: What is your name? What grade are you in?

Male voice #1: Seventh.

Carson: Seventh. In school do they teach you anything about the history of the struggle?

Male Voice #1: No.

Carson: So you have learned nothing about what happened here in Greenwood from your school? Do you think that is something that they should teach?

Male Voice #1: Yes.

George Greene: I think the question you ask him was I think kind of an unfair question. Directing the question directly back to you-- you should ask him what about black history. There is black history am I right or wrong?

Carson: Well, the point is they don't teach any black history, right.

George Greene: I don't know, I don't know, I don't go to school anymore.

George Greene: No, they don't teach black history. They have Mississippi history here but it is strictly what happened back then, they discovered America, they discovered the Mississippi river. The same thing that, mostly what I had when I was going to school.

Interviewer: Are there any black people on the school board?

Male Voice #1: One.

Interviewer: Out of how many?

Male Voice #1: Six.

Interviewer: Does Greenwood still have a majority of black people here?

Male Voice #1: Yes, it does.

Interviewer: So that means a whole lot of people aren't voting if they can only get one person on the school board.

Dewey Greene Sr.: Yes it does.

Female Voice #2: He was appointed.

Interviewer: And who appoints him.

Female Voice #2: The superintendent of education.

Interviewer: Is he elected.

Female Voice #2: No, the city superintendent is not elected but the county superintendent is elected. See the city and county are separated as you know. Well, when they had the election for the superintendent of county schools he is elected but the Greenwood city superintendent is hired.

Interviewer: By whom?

Female Voice #2: By the personnel manager at the central office.

Interviewer: Are there any blacks on the Greenwood city council?

Female Voice #2: No.

Interviewer: No, that is incredible with a majority. Is that because black people aren't running? Are they running and therefore people don't vote for them or are they are not running and people figure they don't want to vote if no black person is running.

Female Voice #2: No, not really. Because about two years ago we had two or three to run but what

happened was if I ran another black ran against me which splits the black votes so the white man automatically wins. When we split the blacks, the white win.

Interviewer: And that happens consistently in the elections?

Female Voice #2: Yes.

Interviewer: Which probably means the whites are putting up somebody else to challenge right?

Female Voice #2: Yes.

Interviewer: Do you know that that is a fact?

Female Voice #2: I don't know it for a fact but I know if I was going to run they would get another black to run against me. He would go in at the last minute and at the time of the election the votes would be split.

Carson: I am wondering what your feelings are about the recent direction of people who were leaders in SNCC like Stokley Carmichael?

George Greene: What do you mean recent directions?

Carson: The political views he has now about the role of Africa.

George Greene: I have no objections to his political views. I talked to Stokley this year. As a matter of fact he was down here, I talked to him this year. I have no objections to his political views at all.

Carson: You agree with him?

George Greene: My political views are some of the same. As for individuals, I just don't think I have the time to go out there and support what he is talking about. I am not saying he is wrong or it is a no good cause, I am not saying that at all. If it was in fact in the USA I would be willing to back it 100 percent. But since he is talking about

going to Africa I have my skepticisms. I spent too much time in war, I am tired of wars.

Interviewer: Did Stokley speak down here? What kind of crowd did he draw?

George Greene: It was packed.

Interviewer: By young people or by older people?

George Greene: It was over at Valley State.

Interviewer: But did the Greenwood community go to hear him?

Female Voice #1: It wasn't known in Greenwood. The only way we knew was he called up and told us, asked if he could spend the night here. And we knew that he was going to be there then.

George Greene: I went over with Stokley the next day. That is how I know.

Female Voice #1: Other than that we knew he had been at Tougaloo because I have a niece at Tougaloo that called us and said Stokley spoke down there. But when I was at Valley he wasn't allowed to speak over there and that was in '74.

George Greene: No, he had a packed house, it was packed, it was jammed packed. Everybody was cheering him on, cheering him on.... What can I say you asked me I told you.

Carson: Could you say a little about what you are doing now, what your plans are?

George Greene: Well, I am not doing really doing a whole lot of anything. My plans are to go back to school.

Interviewer: Why did you leave SNCC George?

George Greene: I left because I didn't particularly care for Rap (Brown) and what he was doing. He was creating I thought more problems than we could handle.

Interviewer: Like what? Why did you think that? What was he doing that made you think that?

George Greene: What he was doing, he was preaching violence. He was preaching violence. I just couldn't see it. You are out here teaching violence and we don't have but two guns. You are out here telling people about getting their guns. Between the six of us we ain't got but two. Come on let's be real. I can't handle it. I have been out there with you. Look I know that you don't know how to shoot. No, no sir....

Know how to handle guns. If you are going to mess with them, no how to handle them.

Interviewer: Did you think that when you left that SNCC was going to disintegrate very rapidly after you left? You saw that coming?

George Greene: Yes.

Interviewer: What gave you that feeling? Was it just Rap's election or were there other things?

George Greene: There were other things, other people in SNCC that I could see. Everybody was preaching violence. Nobody knew anything about guns. If I gave Stokley one hundred bullets he couldn't hit a can. Now that is unreal. If you are going to be talking about violence around me doing them kind of thing, you mess around getting me killed. When time {comes} to start shooting, you know, I have to shoot for myself. Give me all of the ammunition because you niggers don't know how to handle them guns. Ain't none of you niggers going to get me killed, no sir. Can't handle it.

Interviewer: Was that the main thing about it that people were talking about guns and violence that made you leave? That is interesting since you were one of the main persons to talk about self-defense.

George Greene: See I know how to use one. I know how to use it.



Interviewer: I understand that.

Goerge: To me there is clearly a difference. There is an ability to use things. Don't start messing around with anything that you don't know how to use. Don't touch dynamite if you don't know anything about it. You know I could say something that I don't want to say. You know about it too. How did your car torn up when Ralph Featherstone got killed? Don't handle things you don't know anything about. Am I right or wrong.

Interviewer: I think your statement is right. I am not sure he was handling anything.

George Greene: Don't handle nothing you don't know about. Don't touch nothing you don't know anything about. Leave it alone. I have learned how to handle ammunition, weapons, the whole nine yards, beautiful. I am good with them. I don't play with guns. I don't allow people to come around me playing with no guns. If you don't know what you are doing, get out of my face. Because I don't want to be no accident. What did Richard Pryor say, i don't want to be no accident. I found out a long time ago that most people just don't know how to handle guns. Don't play with them because they are not toys. They will kill you.

Carson: During that period in '63 when the house was bombed were people armed then?

George: If they were, not to my knowledge. Not to my knowledge. I don't think people started arming themselves until 1964. And I think I was probably the first person who started doing it. Allen and myself because I was very skeptical and very leery about other people handling guns around me. I thought and I still feel that if they don't know anything about they were doing, I don't need anybody around me who will handle something that they don't know anything about. You know you could accidently shoot me.

Interviewer: I want to ask one more question of Mr. Greene if that is all right. {Did you feel SNCC should remain a black southern student movement?}

Dewey Greene, Sr.: Actually I thought that it was right that you brought them because when bringing white students and they staying with Negroes, it convinced the southern white man that whites and blacks could get along together. And that was the first time that they have been forced to see that the two could live in the same house and get along. And it proved that he was wrong when he said the white man and the Negro couldn't get along that way because a lot of the white students that came down here were real good people. And they came down here and took the tough fare that Negroes have been taking all the time. And to a certain extent they didn't complain. So I think it was one of the most weaking things that he had that the two got along too well together.

George Greene: I did some things that I didn't particularly want to do. I took some white people down to southwest Mississippi. But I was very selective, I thought I was very selective in choosing the people that I would take with me with the realization.... I knew that if anything happened to me we were going to get a whole lot out of it, we were going to get some mileage. Like a country is going to make a move. I am hoping that it doesn't happen, I hope that it does not happen.

When I introduce, I take them down here, I introduce them, I tell them this is Congressman So and So's son from the state of California. Like don't shoot me right now {laughter}. Let me finish saying what I have to say. I had this Congressman's son with me. Congressman obviously must think that I am right, his son come down here, had his son right here.

Interviewer: So you agreed that white people should

come into the state?

George Greene: No, I always thought that you would have to do it. See if you want to shoot me you were going to have to shoot a white boy too. And I don't think you can get away with shooting that white boy cause his daddy is a Congressman in the Unites States Congress.... Shoot me. I just don't believe that it is going to rest that way. Now you honkies went out there and you killed James Chaney and those other two white boys.

But see I don't believe that you are going to do that with me. No sir, James Chaney, and middle class white family. Middle class, white people. They don't have as much power as that Congressman does. I know that it is not going to rest that way. You shoot me, if you shoot me, if you do anything to me, the world will know about it because I know that that boy is going to call his Daddy each and every night and tell him what happened. I am going to say my blessings with him because he is keeping me alive. He is keeping me alive.

Interviewer: Why did people begin to arm themselves in '64? Was it because of the escalating violence during that summer?

Goerge Greene: You had better believe it. This white people quit playing, I ain't playing with them either. They are going to shoot me I am going to shoot them too. What goes around, come around.

Interviewer: So it was during the summer of '64, the Freedom Summer, that people began... which meant if towuld have been immediately after the three workers in {Philadelphia were murdered}.

George Greene: No, it was before that. Before we went up to Ohio, we were sitting around in Atlanta talking about it. No sir, I am not going back to Mississippi until I get me a gun. And when I go back I am going to have me a gun. I don't want to hear it, I am not going back without a gun. Can I get some money. They gave me the money, bought a couple of guns down in Louisiana.

Carson: Was that just you or other people?

Greene: They gave me the money to buy the guns, I don't know what they gave other people. With the realization that I was probably in the worst part. You know working down there {Southwest Mississippi}, the man blowing up houses all of the time.

Carson: This in McComb?

Greene: I was down in Southwest Mississippi. I was director of the whole project down in Southwest Mississippi. I was in the house. My sister was in the house too, not her {but Freddie Greene}. But they blew up the house down in Southwest Mississippi. Threw dynamite. Bam!

Interviewer: Were you in the house?

Carson: Where was this?

George Greene: In McComb. It must have been July 9 or something, 1964. My sister was down there too. That is my youngest sister, she wasn't down there.

Interviewer: You are talking about Freddie right? Yeah, we talked to Freddie about that. Was the organizing in Alabama any different from organizing in Mississippi?

George Greene: Same old thing.

Interviewer: Now you were in Wilcox and Greene as well as Lowndes. Weren't you among the first to go into Wilcox and Greene?

George Greene: No, I was one of the last. They called me out of Mississippi to come over and help. What had happened then was they kind of personality thing. People had gotten very scared and very reluctant to go anymore. And Stokley decided that, "Well I know George ... he will go anywhere," to call him over here, bring him over here. The first day I got there the man stopped in and asked me who told you to come over here. I will tell you who didn't tell me, you didn't tell me to come over. Since you didn't tell me to come over here, you don't tell me to leave. Why don't you

just get out of my face. I will shoot you.

Interviewer: Which county are we talking about now?

Greene: Lowndes. Talking about you are going to shoot me. You must think I am a fool or something.... You see my shirt out of my pants. I got my pistol too.... You think I am going to let you draw your pistol. I will blow your head off. You had better leave me alone. You don't know about me boy. Nigger standing about laughing. They got one of those old mean niggers over here now. They recruited one of those mean. That man is not going to do nothing to me.... Just as quick as he can reach I can too. And I will bet you that .444 will blow him away {laughter}.

Interviewer: Did you have any problems with leaving Mississippi and going to Alabama? Why not?

George Greene: Why should I have any problems.

Interviewer: Well, who did you leave in your place when you left Mississippi?

George Greene: Janet Jemat. She is mean, she is mean enough.

Interviewer: That is true, I recall.

George Greene: She is mean enough to take care of them honkies. She knows how to talk to those honkies, they weren't going to do nothing to her. I ain't worried about it. I know that she talked to them.

Interviewer: Yeah, but now shortly after you arrive in Alabama Janet too comes to Alabama. So who left. As you look at it, as I look at it....

George Greene: Well, you are right. She did ....

Interviewer: She comes shortly after you do. So what I am wondering now as I go back in time is, people keep moving from Mississippi into Alabama and that helps Alabama. But what is happening in Mississippi at the point in which those people are leaving?

George Greene: See, my thing was that niggers down in Natchez had got to the point where they would defend themselves, they would defend themselves. So they didn't lose anything really. They didn't lose anything period.

Interviewing: They lost the FDP, they lost a real strong organization.

George Greene: But they had the fight and the determination not to let people turn them around. Those people down there were very well armed. They would fight in a minute.

Interviewer: So when you left you thought that they could take care of their own?

George Greene: Right. When Janet left, the only reason I didn't go back is I thought they were self-sustaining to the degree that they wouldn't let anybody walk over them. We have not come here and started anything and walked away and left people. They have got more guns than we do. And they don't mind using them either. So we have not done anything to them. I still believe it. What did I give you two guns?

Interviewer: I am not talking about people arming themselves. You have been here since you got out of the service. I am just getting back to the South so I didn't know before I got here that the MFDP is pretty much non-existent.

George Greene: Washed out.

Interviewer: Except in one county. And that there isn't a lot of political activity or economic activity either in the state. And so I am wondering what happened to the leaders that SNCC thought it, the local leaders that SNCC had thought it had developed when it left the state and moved into Alabama?

George: You know I understand the question that you are asking but you are asking me a question now that I can't answer. I wasn't here. I am not going to attempt to answer your question.

Interviewer: {Addresses next question to Dewey Greene

Sr. about the status of the movement  
fifteen years later}

Dewey Greene Sr.: Well, I didn't expect it to stay like it was, as tight it was. I thought in a period of time, and I still think .... I guess it takes time and I am sure it is taking time here that Negroes haven't gone into politics right. They don't realize that is the power of the country. The political field. He just thinks fight, fight, fight. Well, you have got to have something to fight with, fight for. We haven't fought that direction enough....

I remember the time when a Negro and white man get to fussing there would be a gang of white folks around there. No more.... You can't send a white man down here to beat that nigger. That Negro won't take no beating. I guess it comes little by little. I know it has come that far. Most of the Negroes do not take anything off of the white man. And that is one of the steps that you have to take.

Now of course the fact with the ballot he hasn't come out to do it right, he hasn't come out to support his people right with the ballot. I don't know how long it will be.

George Greene: If I can interrupt you I think part of the problem really is that nobody in Greenwood really that was good or qualified to do anything ever ran for anything which is probably the reason why black folks never really have supported each other. You have got all of these jive time turkeys who never did anything in their life. Who now that they realize that black folks are voting want to run. They have no good for themselves intentions, less good for other people. When you come to the question of the lesser of two evils. I guess in the lesser of two evils I may as well elect this honkey. I don't want this nigger in office. He never did nothing for himself, he don't do nothing for himself, he don't do nothing for nobody. That is kind of the bottom line. Becomes the bottom line for the whole thing, right, wrong, or indifferent. The people are looking at it

that way. Since I have been back they have told me to {talk to} people who run for office. I have known them. They have never been any good for themselves. If you ain't going to do no good for you, how often are you going to do something for me. I say that is the bottom line. Why do I want to vote for you? I will take my chance on this honkie. I know all the time he ain't going to nothing for me. But see with you, since you done messed yourself and everything you ever did, I figure you are going to mess me too. I don't need that. That is the bottom line. There is a bottom line to everything.

End of interview.

Interviewer-- Jean Wiley?