



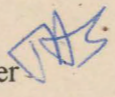
Digital Education Systems  
730 17<sup>th</sup> St. Suite 360  
Denver, CO 80202

303-573-1284  
fax: 303-573-1285

www.digitaled.com

**MEMORANDUM**

To: Tim West

Fm: Joe Sinsheimer 

Re: Interviews with Silas McGhee

Dt: December 1, 1998

Enclosed is an interview I conducted with Silas McGhee, a local civil rights activist in Greenwood, Mississippi.

In the interview, McGhee discusses 1) his reaction to the Freedom Rides and the North Carolina sit-ins in 1960-61 2) his attempt to intergate the Leflore Theater in Greenwood in 1963 3) speaking at a mass meeting in Clarksdale, Mississippi 4) working to organize the Freedom Democratic Party in the state 5) the organization of a SNCC "folk festival" on his family's property in 1963 that featured a performance by singer Bob Dylan and 6) reaction to Medgar Evers' shooting in Greenwood.



Interview with Silas McGhee  
Greenwood, Mississippi  
February 25, 1987

J. Sinsheimer: Maybe you could just start and give me a little bit of background so I can get a better picture of where you were and what you were doing. Did you grow up in Itta Bena or Greenwood?

Silas McGhee: Greenwood.

Sinsheimer: You went to high school here?

McGhee: Yes.

Sinsheimer: Did you in '62-'63, had you graduated high school?

McGhee: No, I graduated high school in '63. But in '62 I was still in high school. Until May of '63.

Sinsheimer: Do you remember when Sam Block first came to town?

McGhee: If I am not mistaken he first came to town in '60, I think it was '62. I can't be sure.

Sinsheimer: People were in and out but Sam Block first came to live here in the summer of '62.

McGhee: He came to live in the summer of '62 but I think he had been here before. I think he came here in '60. The movement first started somewhere on a small scale in '60 {'61}.

Sinsheimer: Right. Down in McComb.

McGhee: Right.

Sinsheimer: Do you remember watching the Freedom Riders when they came into the state? Did that have an impact on you?

McGhee: Yeah, of course. At that particular time it was something that fascinated me. You read about the sit-ins in North Carolina and South Carolina and all the places like that. And then the Freedom Riders started throughout the South riding buses and getting off in small towns and being



harassed by policemen and law officials. And they finally made it to Greenwood. I remember there were several buses coming in different intervals, not at the same time, but I can remember this one particular bus coming to Greenwood and we had this policeman by the name of Big Smitty. That is what they called him. He met this bus. He was harassing people getting off the bus. And this particular guy that got off happened to be an FBI agent that he was harassing and arrested. And charged him with vagrancy and something else. After he carried him down and got him booked and everything he found out he had made a great mistake because he had just arrested an FBI agent. And that sort of broke up the harassment of the Freedom Riders here in Greenwood with the police meeting their buses and harassing people cause they were coming through. Some of them weren't even Freedom Riders they were just coming through one part of the country, probably going home. But after that incident happened that sort of broke that.

Sinsheimer: When you saw the TV, the sit-ins in North Carolina, did you ever think that would happen here?

McGhee: Yeah, it crossed my mind. Something crossed your mind, but you put it out of your mind, you know. I would always think about what it would be like if that did happen here in Greenwood. One of the things that fascinated me about this was when all these sit-ins and demonstrations were going on I was still in high school, government class talking about the Bill Of Rights and the Constitution and stuff like this. And I always figured that if they would live by the first 14 admendments nobody would be having this problem.... If everybody was treated equally and had an equal opportunity.

And then later on-- it was also during that time time, not exactly during that time but a little later on, the Congress was also debating the Civil Rights Bill. And that was another discussion I used to have with my government teacher all the time was why pass another bill called the civil rights bill to give people civil rights when you had the Constitution, and the first ten admendments



was called the Bill of Rights. If you just followed the Bill Of Rights everything would be okay. It was just an ongoing thing.

Sinsheimer: Did you all talk about the sit-ins in government class?

McGhee: Oh yeah, we talked about the sit-ins in government class and we talked about voter registration. I mean we just run the whole gamut for political activity and a person's right to participate.

Sinsheimer: Was that teacher taking a risk by doing that?

McGhee: Not at that time because it was an all-black school. It was nothing known by anybody else outside of the classroom at the school. It wasn't something that someone carried to the principal's office or nothing. This just took place in our government class.... I have had a lot of good teachers but that was one that I could remember. He was really up on that stuff.

Sinsheimer: What was his name?

McGhee: Cooper.

Sinsheimer: When you grew up here who were your role models and your heroes?

McGhee: When I grew up here people ask me who was a role model or hero. At that particular time the only role model I had was my mother and my family. I grew up as a rural, black boy. No father, he died while I was five. He died when I was five years old. The only role model that I had was my mother and the rest of my family. And out of all the things that I have done, participated in, I couldn't have done any of that without her support.

Sinsheimer: She supported you all the way through?

McGhee: Even before. Actually my mother was the type of person that even before the movement came to Greenwood she believed in one thing: regardless of whther you were black, blue, or green that you should treat everybody the way you want to be treated. It didn't make any difference-- if you were wrong she would



tell you were wrong, if you were right she would agree with you. And if she could help you she would help you. That is the way she brought us up.

Sinsheimer: How did she earn a living?

McGhee: She was a housewife, farmer.

Sinsheimer: How many brothers and sisters do you have?

McGhee: Four brothers and one sister.

Sinsheimer: How many people in your family got involved in the movement?

McGhee: All of them.

Sinsheimer: All of them did. Did your mother do anything overtly? What did she do?

McGhee: Well, she used to participate in demonstrations, she used to march. She used to teach voter registration classes in her home.

Sinsheimer: Did you all go to church? Where did you go?

McGhee: {Inaudible}{Baptist}

Sinsheimer: Do you remember when Sam {Block} first came to town? Do you remember first meeting him?

McGhee: I can remember him being in town-- like I say I can remember him coming to town in '60. When I first met Sam was 1963 that was when I first met him.

Sinsheimer: How did you meet him or why did you meet him?

McGhee: Well, he sort of met me really. It all happened because at the time see up until, even 1962, early part of '63, the movement was going on in Greenwood. The Freedom Rides had taken place, we had voter registration, we had marches. And my mother was participating in all of this stuff. I was still in school. They used to go down to the courthouse and try to register people. They were sicking dogs and stuff on them. And I used to leave government class, during the hour I was in government class. My teacher



let me have his car. I used to go down and down across the street across the courthouse and watch the activities going on. That was my duty for class. If I did it on Monday, I had to make a report to the class the next Tuesday, the next day.

Sinsheimer: About what you saw?

McGhee: About what I saw. So I used to do that. I never participated in any demonstration or march or anything during that time because I was still in high school.

Sinsheimer: So you were afraid you might be thrown out of school?

McGhee: No, no I wasn't afraid. It was just that I didn't do it. I wasn't afraid. I could have easily have walked over there and joined in my mother and did it. I was an observer so to speak.

Sinsheimer: Did your brothers and sisters participate at this point?

McGhee: They was in high school.

Sinsheimer: Okay. So are you the oldest?

McGhee: No. But anyway in 1963 just before, just after I graduated-- I got out of high school. Before I had graduated I had made up my mind that if they ever did anything to pass the Civil Rights Bill I was going to test it to see whether it was any good. Were they going to enforce it like they said they was. And in 1964 after the Civil Rights Bill was passed I decided that I was going to go down and go to a certain restaurant.

Sinsheimer: Which restaurant?

McGhee: A restaurant downtown called Crystal Grill. It is still there, it is Crystal Club now, downtown. And I had made up my mind that the minute they signed this bill I was going to go down and test it and see what it was all about.

Sinsheimer: Why did you pick that particular restaurant?

McGhee: I really don't know why today I picked that



particular restaurant. It just came off the top of my head, I really don't. I guess it was just because I knew that particular restaurant was strictly all-white, no question about that. I went there, I chose that particular place and I walked down there to do it. And after I got there by some strange coincidence it happened to be closed. I had walked from, about three miles to get there, maybe four. And after getting there and finding out it was closed I was disappointed and rather than walk back home I said I want to go a movie. And why I decided that I wanted to go to a movie I don't know that but I didn't walk back home.

At that particular time we had black movies over on Walthall, the Walthall Theater, and we had a movie down on Johnson called the Dixie Theater, both of them black. And we had two white movies in Greenwood. One was called the Leflore Theater and the other one was the Paramount. And both of them were located on Washington Street. Both the Paramount was located in the middle of a block on Washington Street and the Leflore was located on the corner of Washington. Leflore was, I thought it was the best theater in Greenwood so I chose to go to the Leflore. And after going there that is when I met Sam Block in person.

Sinsheimer: So that was really the first movement thing you had done?

McGhee: Right.

Sinsheimer: And what happened that night? What time a day was this?

McGhee: Well, I got there is was about five o'clock or five o'clock. I walked up to the window and ask for a ticket and the lady looked at me and she told me that she had to see the manager. And she left and she came back and he came back with her. She pointed at me and he looked at her and told her to sell me a ticket. So she sold me a ticket.

Sinsheimer: Did you know the manager?

McGhee: No, never laid eyes on him before. I went on in.....



Sinsheimer: You don't happen to know if he was a Greenwood native do you?

McGhee: I don't think he was. I think he was originally from Louisiana. But I don't think he was born and raised here.

Sinsheimer: Did you know the clerk?

McGhee: No. I went in the movie and I was there about thirty-five or forty minutes....

Sinsheimer: You don't remember the movie do you?  
{laughter}

McGhee: The only thing I can remember about that movie was that it was a Jerry Lewis movie. Sorriest movie I have ever seen in my life {laughter}. That I do know. I don't know the title or anything. I know it was a Jerry Lewis movie. The movie was terrible.

Sinsheimer: Did you sit in the front of the theater? Where did you sit?

McGhee: No, I sat about five rows down after you entered the door from the back, about five rows down. And I had been sitting there for about thirty-five, forty minutes. I was just about ready to leave on my own when four white guys came in and they sat right behind me. And they started talking about, making remarks, "What is this nigger doing up in here?" And so and so on and they were talking among themselves. They had popcorn and pop and then one of them poured his pop and poured down the back of my neck. And then they got up and walked out. Two of the them came back, standing in the aisle, and one of them asked me what was I doing there.

Sinsheimer: Let me back you up. So they came in the middle of the movie? So you think somebody called them? How do you think they knew you were in there?

McGhee: Oh, I don't know. They probably was already in the movie.

Sinsheimer: Okay, they just saw you.

McGhee: After seeing me, they just moved on their



own. Anyway, one of them had come and asked me what would it take for me to leave. And I told them when the movie was over I would leave. And then they turned around and walked back out. And they stood out there in the lobby for about two or three minutes talking among themselves. And then they came back and he asked me to get up and leave or he was going to drag me out. And I told him that I didn't, that I paid \$2.25 to get in that movie and I wasn't going to leave until I saw that whole movie. And he told me that I was going to leave right then. And by that time the other two had come back, there was four of them then, and one of them was standing in the aisle in front of me, and the other three were standing in the aisle. And the guy who was in front of me grabbed me by my collar and jerked me out of my seat. And when he did that I hit him in the face. I ran out in the aisle and kicked the other two. I was mad I ran into the lobby.

Sinsheimer: How old were these guys?

McGhee: I guess they were about my age, 17, 18 , 19 years old. And I ran to the lobby and they came around to the lobby. So when they came around to the lobby I went on in the manager's office and they tried to come up in there. And he wouldn't let them. So anyway they was standing out in the lobby calling me names and stuff. And the manager tried to put me out of his office, you know. I told him that I wasn't going out there and if he wanted to put me out he had better call the police you know because I had paid to come in there. Anyway, he picked up the phone and he called the police and they came over there. They came in and they sat down and they talked, they talked him, they asked him if he had any charges that he wanted to file.

Sinsheimer: Do you know who it was? Was it Millar Wyatt?

McGhee: Yeah, Millar Wyatt was one of them. I can't think of the other, but Millar Wyatt was one of them. And he asked him if he had any charges that he wanted to file against me and he told him that as far as he was concerned he didn't have any charges to file against me. From what he had observed I



didn't do anything. I bought a ticket and came in and went down and sat down. Only thing he wanted was for me to leave because it had caused a stir. And he would give me my money back. Got me out and they took me out and carried me on to the police station. And they questioned me again and they wanted to know who had put me up to do it, who sent me down there. All of this good stuff. I told them that nobody put me up to do it, nobody sent me, nobody told me to do it, I just did it on my own.

After about an hour or so it was getting really dark, and they asked me if did I have a way home, no he asked me how did I get up there and I told him that I had walked. And he asked me how did I plan on getting back. I said I am going to walk. He asked me did I know anybody that I could call that could come pick me up and I told him no. Then they asked me would I mind if they carried me home. I said no.

Sinsheimer: Was this Millar Wyatt? They were afraid for your safety?

McGhee: I presume so.

Sinsheimer: Were you?

McGhee: No, I wasn't. I don't know I guess I was crazy {laughter}. I am serious, it never crossed my mind that I would be in trouble. And as far as I was concerned after they let me go I would have come on out of the police station and walked home and thought never of it. That was just how I felt.

But anyway they brought me on home and let me out.

Sinsheimer: Did you tell your mother about it?

McGhee: Yeah, I had to tell her about it because I had a black eye. Also when I got there she wanted to know what had happened and I started to tell her what had happened and how I got my black eye and then my brother came in, the one next to me....

Sinsheimer: Is that William?

McGhee: No, Jake. And he wanted to know what had happened and I was telling him what had



happened and his concern was how come you didn't tell me you were going, I would have gone with you. You know that was just the way.... After that, after the incident happened it all got in the paper and everything then Peacock, Sam Block, Stokley Carmichael and Bob Moses. They were there running a SNCC office up her on Barrentine and they all wanted to see me. That is how I met them all.

Sinsheimer: What did you think of them?

McGhee: Well, at the time you know they were just somebody I had met, you know. I admired what they were doing and I had a lot of respect for them. And at that particular time they were just very intelligent people. They was doing things to register people, trying to register people. Stuff that hadn't been done here, here in Greenwood anyway. I had a lot of respect for them. And after getting to know them and working with them I had a great deal of respect for them. I definitely have a lot of respect for Stokley Carmichael.

Sinsheimer: Did Jake go back with you?

McGhee: Yeah, as a matter of fact we went back several times but we was supposed to go back-- that was on a, I am not mistaken that was on a Sunday. I believe it was on a Sunday when I went the first time. And we had made plans to go back that Tuesday night.

Sinsheimer: Just you and your brother?

McGhee: Just me and him.

Sinsheimer: How many people knew about this? Did the word get out that you had done this? Did any of your other friends say anything about it?

McGhee: No. So anyway we had made the arrangements to go back that Tuesday night. I didn't get a chance to go because Aaron Henry was running the NAACP over in Clarksdale had asked Stokley to bring me over there to speak at the NAACP meeting that Tuesday night. So I went to Clarksdale and Jake went back to the Leflore by himself. And he got



beat up. And from then on we just made it a regular ritual. We just went until-- well actually it finally just closed.

Sinsheimer: They finally just closed the theater?

McGhee: Yeah, we made several trips there. I remember one particular night we had holy Hell getting away from there. We went to the movie and got there, we had been on to the movie and was getting ready to leave. Whenever it was trouble we would get somebody to come pick us up. Call a cab and they would come pick us up. They would be up there calling us names and shouting and going on but nothing happened that was real bad.

But this particular night we were there and nobody bothered us. All of the other nights, you know, they would bother us in the movie but nobody bothered us that particular night. We just sat there and watched the movie. We got ready to leave and we came out just outside the door-- it was white people, white people, white people as far as you could look across the bridge, looking north, back west, down Market, back south down Market, back west down Washington. Nothing but car lights and cars. They were all lined up. People out there blowing their cars, hollering, shouting, and telling us to come on out.

We tried to call a cab to come pick us up. And we tried to call a cab to come pick us up. The man came up there {laughter}.... They ran him off. Then we called ....

Sinsheimer: It was real nice of you to call a cab {laughter}.

McGhee: Yeah. Then we called the SNCC office and told them what was happening and that we couldn't get nobody to come get us. There was a white guy who was from Mississippi who had went up North to go to school-- what was his name-- anyway he went to school up there and he was back down working with the civil rights movement.... And they told us he was going to come, he was going to pick us up along with Dr. Cornwall. Somewhere or another, I don't know how it happened, but we were supposed to get in the car with him. But when he got down there {laughter},



before he got to the theater, you know coming up, all of these white people wanted to know where he was going. I think somebody in the crowd thought they recognized him as one of those civil rights workers and they fixing to get him. And he said, "No, I came up here to get them damn niggers that are up here in the movie. That is what I come here for. And I am trying to get up there so I can get them when they get out because I am tired of going to the movie with these niggers."

That is the only thing that saved him. Dr. Cornwall walked behind him so when he stopped, when they stopped him, Dr. Cornwall came around, Dr. Cornwall came up there and stopped in front of the movie and we just ran out there and jumped in the first car that stopped. That is when they threw a bottle.... I had glass.... And went to the hospital and stayed out there a couple of hours.

We got to the hospital. They was all around the hospital, beating on the windows.....

Sinsheimer: That is where Dr. Cornwall took you?

McGhee: They was beating on the windows, they was beating on the door. They had to lock the hospital up because they was trying to get in. And they wouldn't let us out. And I had brother here from, he was here on leave from the Army and we called him and he came down to the hospital. And we tried to leave and they wouldn't let us leave because everytime we tried to leave all these white folks would start coming after us. So we called the local sheriff and they said they couldn't do anything. So SNCC called the Attorney General in Washington and my brother called his company commander and told him what was going on, what was happening, and he told him that he would call the Attorney General too and see what could be done. And between him and SNCC and the Attorney General, someway or another back about three hours they called us back-- phone call from the Attorney General and they told us that if the hospital and the roads weren't cleared in thirty minutes to call him back. But he reassured us that within thirty minutes everything would be



cleared and we could go home, but if not to call him back.

And sure enough I guess about five or six minutes after that, after he hung up, the sheriff and the highway patrol and the police and everything came down in there and cleared everybody out. The highway patrol and the sheriff came in and they escorted us out to the car and escorted us home.

Sinsheimer: Had you been going to the mass meeting before this?

McGhee: Oh yeah.

Sinsheimer: So you used to go to the mass meeting at night. Do you remember when Dick Gregory came to town? What was his impact?

McGhee: Oh, it was overwhelming, I can't describe it. When he came to town and the mass meetings-- so much went on I can't even tell you. I do know after that particular, the next day after that particular mass meeting my mother was marching down McLaurin....

Sinsheimer: What was your mother's first name?

McGhee: Laura. They was marching down McLaurin, her and Dick Gregory and a lot more people that were on the way to the courthouse and this particular officer came down the street. And for some reason they was telling them that they couldn't march two deep or something and he pushed her and she hit him back.

Sinsheimer: The policeman hit your mother.

McGhee: And she hit him back.

Sinsheimer: You said you went to Clarksdale for that mass meeting. Do you remember what that was like for you? Can you describe that for me?

McGhee: It was frightening.

Sinsheimer: Frightening.

McGhee: Not the mass meeting. The mass meeting itself didn't frighten me. But what frightened me was I was the speaker, I was one of the speakers. And I had never done anything like that before and it was just



frightening. But the mass meeting itself, you know, that wasn't the part, the part that frightened me was here I was doing something that I had never done before.

Sinsheimer: How did you do?

McGhee: I guess all right.

Sinsheimer: They- Sam and Willie told me that they had a hard time finding churches in the begining and that it seemed that the Methodist churches seemed to open first. Do you remember that? Why do you think the Baptist churches were so scared other than the obvious reason that they could burn their church?

McGhee: That is basically it. I would say that other than the obvious reason that they thought somebody was going to burn their church, Baptists was just basically not the one to make the first step, not the one to take the lead. Eventually all of that changed but at that particular time they weren't willing to do that.

Sinsheimer: In your mind who were the local leaders in Greenwood? People mention Mr. Jordan, Cleveland Jordan?

McGhee: Okay, yeah. I would say in my mind he was one of them. And a lady named Mrs. Johnson, I can't think of her first name.

Sinsheimer: June Johnson's mother {Lulabell}.

McGhee: Right.

Sinsheimer: Do you remember what her part was?

McGhee: She would participate in marches, meetings and demonstrations and all.

Sinsheimer: She was just somebody that people looked up to?

McGhee: Yeah. Willy Bishop.

Sinsheimer: Daddy Bishop?

McGhee: That was what people called him.



Sinsheimer: What did he do in town? He was a businessman?

McGhee: No, he was a property owner. At that particular time he was working for I would say one of the higher ups in the white community. {Turning to his friend in room} The Malouf's aren't white are they {Receives response- "They was Jews"} They were Jews. He was working for the Malouf Music Company. They had a lot of money and he was working for them. He owned property himself. He was financially independent.

Sinsheimer: That was the key then? Anybody else you can think of? Mr. Sanders?

McGhee: Yeah, Mr. Sanders, bless his poor soul. Probably somebody else, has to be somebody else but I just can't remember, I just can't call their names. They was leading the local people and they played a very important role in the movement.

Sinsheimer: Did your family suffer harassment because of ....

McGhee: Oh yeah, we took all kinds of harassment. People just to come by and shoot in the house. They firebombed it three times.

Sinsheimer: One thing-- I don't know if you know this or not. I talked to Sarah Criss, she used to cover Greenwood for the {Memphis} Commercial-Appeal. Nobody knows exactly what happened when you and your brother were sitting in the movie theater, during those times, they told me... that the mayor and Buff Hammond got in a fistfight in city hall. Did you know that?

McGhee: No.

Sinsheimer: Yeah, well they told me-- I don't know exactly what happened-- they actually came to blows one night arguing about what to do about the Leflore Theater. I thought that was real interesting.

McGhee: It is {laughter}. No, I never knew that. That is something interesting.

Sinsheimer: She remembered she was at a wedding, a



family wedding, and she called and they told her and she was mad as hell because she was a reporter and she wasn't here.... But they actually came to blows. So what happened after the movie theater? Did you get any chance to work with any of the white students who came down that summer?

McGhee: Yeah, I worked with a lot of them. After the theater incident, I kept working with the movement and we started to organize the Freedom Democratic Party, the first party to challenge the regular party at the National Convention, challenged the Mississippi regular party at the national convention. I put together and helped organize that. I was a delegate to that convention from the FDP and unfortunately I didn't get a chance to make that trip because I got shot. But I helped to organize.

Sinsheimer: You were supposed to be a delegate all of the way to Atlantic City?

McGhee: Right.

Sinsheimer: Did you go to the state convention?

McGhee: Nope, didn't make it. ... I worked with the movement until 1965 and then I went back to school.

Sinsheimer: Where did you go back to school?

McGhee: I went to Coahoma Jr. College and stayed at Coahoma until I was drafted in 1966.

Sinsheimer: How did you think the black Greenwood accepted those students that came down here?

McGhee: Black Greenwood? Black Greenwood was overwhelmed, they accepted them wholeheartedly. I don't think there was any-- and if there was I never heard it-- but I don't think there were many black that criticized the white students that came down here. I mean everyone in the black community that I dealt with who knows them or heard of them was very respectful. They were glad they were down here, appreciated them being here.

Sinsheimer: Do you remember in the summer of 1963 there



was a big folk festival here? Did you go to that?

McGhee: It was held on my mother's place. {Break}

Sinsheimer: {Do you remember how that was arranged/}

McGhee: I don't know. All I know was that SNCC approached them about, approached several people about having the festival. I don't know whether it was the location or somebody else turned them down or what. But anyway it ended up there.

Sinsheimer: Where is this, your property?

McGhee: It is in Greenwood, about three and half miles east of Greenwood.

Sinsheimer: Did you all help put it together? Do you have any recollections of that?

McGhee: Not really because I didn't-- I remember my other brothers did, they did most of the planning stuff. At the time that the festival took place in 1963, I had just started working. That was the first job that I ever had other than farming and stuff like that. I had got this job out at Medart Locker.

Sinsheimer: What were you doing out there?

McGhee: Cutting metal. I hadn't worked a week.

Sinsheimer: You don't remember how much you got paid do you?

McGhee: I think it was a \$1.85, yeah, \$1.85 an hour.

Sinsheimer: That was a pretty good job.

McGhee: Yeah, at least I thought so at the time {laughter}. Anyway I had been working there and my brothers and mother were more involved in putting the festival. All I know was that I knew it was going to be held and where it was going to be. And I went to work, same day the festival was taking place. I went to work that morning and the supervisor-- and I got there and my time card wasn't there at the clock. So I couldn't figure out where my time card was.



So anyway, I went to my supervisor and told him that my time card wasn't there so I couldn't punch in. And he said I know but you have to go to the office.

So I immediately figured out now what have I done that I have to go to the office. I go to the office and there is this man sitting behind the desk and he looks at me-- I walked in and I said-- can't think of the man's name-- "\_\_\_\_\_ sent me here to see about my time card." He said, "Yeah, I have it right here." And he said, "The reason I took your time card was we can't use people like you." And it hadn't dawned on me still what he was saying. And I looked at him and I was attempting to ask him what had I done and at that point he said, "This plant will never tolerate this kind of thing and I would like for you to get your stuff and leave. And we will mail you your check."

At that point I looked at him and told him "I don't understand what you are talking about. I don't understand what I have done. But I will tell you this. I wasn't hungry when I came here and I won't be hungry when I leave. But before I leave here you will give me my money because I have worked here." He sat there and reared back and he looked at me for a few minutes and said, "All right, I will give you your money and then get out of my sight." And he called his secretary in and she wrote me a check out and he signed it and that was that.

Sinsheimer: Did you go to the folk festival?

McGhee: Yeah, I came home and went to the folk festival.

Sinsheimer: Do you remember how many people were out there?

McGhee: I would say in the neighborhood of six or seven hundred.

Sinsheimer: Do you have any memories of it?

McGhee: Not really. The only memory that I have is other than the crowd and the speeches and the good time everyone was having-- for some strange reason this was on my mother's land and the police or somebody came out there



and put up speeding signs on my mother's land, speed signs and no parking signs {laughter}. Which was amazing here are all of these no parking signs and speeding signs that hadn't been there before. But they were there.

This one white guy that lived down below us named Dick Johnson, oh he was a racist, he would just drive up and down the road....

Sinsheimer: Was there a veteran's building or a VFW near your property.

McGhee: VFW was not too far.

Sinsheimer: Somebody said that a crowd {of whites} had gathered there.

McGhee: The VFW was right over here, right across the lake from..... And then there used to be a building located with a nightclub, it was located about a 1/4 mile down in front of her house on the north side of the highway. A lot of white people used to gather there.

Sinsheimer: Bob might have told me this or maybe it was Sam. Did you all have trouble with your land for a while? What was the story behind that?

McGhee: Well, the story behind that was ... there was this white guy that used to rent our land. He had some land {too}. His name was George Young, and he used to rent our land, and he used to bug my mother about selling it.

Sinsheimer: He used to grow on it? Cotton?

McGhee: Cotton. He used to always bug her about selling it. She never would sell it to him. In 1955, my mother borrowed some money from the Federal Land Bank. The land is broken up into two parcels, a 40 acre tract, and a 20 acre tract. And she borrowed money on the 20 acre tract. She would never sell to this guy we had trouble with the Federal Land Bank.

Sinsheimer: He tried to get them to call in the note to force her to sell?

McGhee: Right. Not only that they claimed that when she made the note that she included



everything, not just the twenty acres....Dr. Martin Luther King and Andrew Young and Bob Moses came down helped straightened it out.

Sinsheimer: So it got straightened out? So Martin Luther King had to come down>

McGhee: He was down several times. He came down for mass meetings, rallies.... I worked with Andy Young for almost two weeks....

Sinsheimer: Was one of your relatives active in the NAACP in the 1950's.

McGhee: My uncle.

Sinsheimer: That was your uncle that got shot shot, Gus Cots.

McGhee: Yeah, that was the one that got shot in Belzoni.

Sinsheimer: You have got some history there. Did that influence you at all do you think?

McGhee: I guess it had to because it was my mother's brother and like I said she was the type of person, she didn't take any junk. If you were straight you were straight, if you were wrong then she would tell you were wrong. Yeah, he was shot in Belzoni and after that he left Mississippi.

Sinsheimer: Did your mother do anything before '62-'63?

McGhee: No.

Sinsheimer: Somebody said Mr. Jordan had tried to start what he called a Voters' League in the late '50's. Do you remember that at all? Would your mother have been a member?

McGhee: No, I don't think so.

Sinsheimer: You didn't go to the March on Washington did you? You did go? What was your reaction to that? I keep asking all these questions {laughter}.

McGhee: Here again, you know the March on Washington, I enjoyed it. But it was frightening, not from the stand point that I thought something was going to happen to me.



It was from the standpoint that it was something that I wasn't used to, too many people. It was something that I couldn't believe that I was a part of.

Sinsheimer: Did you ride a bus down there?

McGhee: It was overwhelming. This was some fantastic experience to be there with the crowds. It was frightening, you know, but it wasn't from the standpoint that I thought something was going to happen to me or that somebody was going to do something to me. It was just from the standpoint here I was caught up in a crowd I couldn't even imagine being part of. If anybody had even two weeks before we got there, if anybody had carried me aside and said this is what it is going to be like, I probably would have looked at them and said they were crazy. After getting there and being part of it ....

Sinsheimer: Had you done much traveling before that?

McGhee: No.

Sinsheimer: Had you been outside the state.

McGhee: Before that I had been to Dallas. I hadn't done any traveling.

Saltzman: {When you saw the sit-ins on television could you imagine this happening in Greenwood?}

McGhee: When I was watching the sit-ins on TV, you ~~on~~ know, and I have seen how people were being, coffee was being thrown on them, and people were being beaten for nothing and thrown in jail, it flashes through your mind could it happen here? What if it did happen here? And at that particular time I didn't think that it would. I really didn't think that it would happen here in Greenwood. Where I was sitting at North Carolina and South Carolina was a world away. That is just where I was sitting at that particular time. It was a whole world away. And I did not see that happening here.

But after the Freedom Riders and the people from the North, students, coming down to Greenwood, start trying to register people and they start sicking dogs on



people, put firehouses on people then these things start catching aflame. Your whole perspective changes, it can happen here. It will happen here, the same things that I was watching in North Carolina and South Carolina.... And with that there is no way that this can happen and I can sit by and be a casual observer anymore. I have to be a part, I have to get active in this. That is how my perspective changed on it.

Saltzman: {What kind of concrete goals did you have}

McGhee: At the time I went to that movie I had no goals. The only goal that I had and like I say when it started out it had nothing to do with the movie. It was just one club, the Crystal Club, and the only-- my whole thinking was it .... My goal at that particular time was if I go to this particular club, will these people serve me and if not will the Civil Rights Act be enforced. That was my goal, to see if they would enforce the law if that is what it would take.

The law said that if I walk into a public place and am able to afford the bill and could pay for it they were supposed to serve me. That was my goal. That was the only goal at that particular time that I had. Just to see if they would uphold the law, abide by the law. Because I had said all along we didn't need a Civil Rights Act then. All you had to do was enforce the first 10 admendments to the Constitution and that would take care of it. And I always said I couldn't understand why Congress was spending so much money debating a Civil Rights Bill when they wouldn't enforce the first 10 admendments. If you put another law on the books and don't enforce it it is still no good. That was my goal.

But after the incident and got up there I see it closed-- here again I didn't even have a gal. I just went to the movie because I was disappointed because I couldn't go in the club because the club was closed. And I had walked three miles to do it. But after I went to the movie and was served-- okay, no problem, let me in there-- then the incident happened in the movie and my whole perspective changed and I had a goal that I am going to go to this movie until I wasn't



bothered.

Saltzman: { What effect did the Atlantic City Convention challenge have on the work you were doing in Greenwood? }

McGhee: They were related because after we lost the challenge we came back with the determination to keep on. We were determined to keep on. We were determined to organize and keep organizing and to keep fighting and to keep challenging the regular Mississippi Democratic Party, until we got representation in that party. And eventually we were successful in doing that.

Sinsheimer: Let me just ask you a couple of questions and then we will let you go. After you got fired from Medart Locker did you get another job?

McGhee: No. I didn't take another job because after that I went back to work with the movement and I worked with the movement and I went back to school. After school I went into the army and I came back out of the army and went back to school. And after coming back out of school I applied for a job as district organizer for  
.....

Sinsheimer: What was your memory of Greenwood's reaction to finding out that Beckwith was involved in Medgar Evers' assassination? Let me tell you why I asked you. First, how you felt Black Greenwood reacted. But I have gotten conflicting reports about whether or not white Greenwood rejected Beckwith or-- I know that a lot of people who helped him. But let's say aside from the people who were very active in the Citizens Council did Greenwood really accept him back.

McGhee: I would say that if you had to put a percentage on it, I would say 75 percent of them did, supported him.

Sinsheimer: Did you hear people say bad things about Beckwith though?

McGhee: Not really. But I do know they were very supportive of him. I would say 75 percent of them if you had to put a percentage on it.

Sinsheimer: What about your reaction to that, finding out



that someone from Greenwood might be involved in something that big.

McGhee: Not surprising. It didn't surprise me because I knew there were people like that in Greenwood, that were capable of doing things like that. The only thing that did surprise me, that would have surprised me, was the fact that he, you know, he happened to be from Greenwood and was down there in Jackson....  
{break}{Interviews starts to end but McGhee tells another story}

These three guys in a pickup truck drive me and the man points a gun at me and tells me to get in his truck. At that particular point....

Sinsheimer: Had you been involved with the movie theater {at this point?}

McGhee: Yes. So the man holding the gun on me tells me to get in the truck. So I gets in. So they come out here and goes over to this little white neighborhood right behind this washeteria and the Greenwood theater. Here I am sitting in this truck and this man has got this gun on me.

Sinsheimer: Are you in the back of the pickup?

McGhee: No, I am in the front. I mean they tell me to get in and they slide over. While we are going over there there are all these little things going through my mind about what is going to happen. They tell me to get out and they goes around through this yard. Park on the side of the street and go walk this yard to the back of this shop. We all walked into this little shop. There is one little old door and then it has got a little door that goes to another room.

They didn't close the door when we walked in. I am standing ....and then this guy looks at this other guy and say, "That is the nigger that has been going to the theater." And when he says that that is when it hits me that you is in trouble {laughter}. I just stood there calmly and cool as I could. I just stood there and looked at him. One of them took a piece of pipe about that long and another has a 2X4 board. And then the guy who was holding the pistol took the pistol and put it in his pocket....



He put this pistol in his picket. I saw this ... shovel and I took that shovel and I grabbed it and I hit him and he fell back. And he called out, "Catch that damn nigger and kill him. " And by that time I had ran through the other two. And all three of us fell. I got up and this other guy had got up and this one guy was holding my ankle. And I was trying to get loose to run and I dragged him. And this other guy was trying to hit me in the head with a 2 by 4, he did because he made four or five cuts in my head with that 2 by 4. And the other guy was still in there hollering {laughter} talking about "Get Him! Get Him!" And I couldn't get loose and this guy was still holding me by my ankle. And then I realized there was one way I could get loose and I stoped fighting the guy who was trying to hit me with the 2 by 4. And I took my other leg and i came down on this guy's arm. I stomped him and he turned me loose. And I was gone.

But that was the only time that I remember I really got scared. The rest of the time we were just happy go lucky. We would go demonstrate, we would sit in, go to the movie and have a good time.

Sinsheimer: Thanks again.