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
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[Moore, James]

MEMORANDUM

To: Tim West

Fm: Joe Sinsheimer 

Re: Interviews with James Moore/Reverend Aaron Johnson

Dt: November 29, 1998

Enclosed are two items:

An interview I conducted with the Reverend Aaron Johnson, former pastor of the First Christian Church in Greenwood, Mississippi. Reverend Johnson was one of the first church leaders in Greenwood to open up his/her church to the civil rights movement.

Also enclosed is an interview with James Moore, a prominent civil rights activist in Greenwood, Mississippi. Both interviews focus on the development of the Greenwood campaign in 1962-63.

Interview with James Moore
Greenwood, Mississippi
June 19, 1985

Sinsheimer: If you could start with some background-- your name and where you were born and things like that ...

Moore: I was born here but I left her at an early age. My name is James Moore I was born here in Greenwood, Mississippi July 22, 1930. I left here at an early age and went to Chicago to live there, where I went to high school. And from there into the service and then back to Chicago where I attended _____ Business College.

But how I become interested in the Movement, it was during the time they were integrating school, Central High School in Pine Bluff, Arkansas. The Sunday Times carried an article each day on that. And I was really keeping up on it and I saw how they were beating the young children with bats and things, so that created an interest in me to come back to Mississippi and work in civil rights to help get this thing over with. So I choose to come back to Greenwood where I was born and my home, and I did get back here in '62.

And during that time they had the office here on MacLaurin St.. I went down to see Sam Block who was the head of the project and Willie Peacock was the second in charge. And I talked to them about getting involved and doing something. So we started canvassing, talking to people, and actually having meetings trying to talk people into becoming a registered voter. And we would have meetings at, which was at that time First Christian Church, Rev. Aaron Johnson was pastor, on the corner of Ave. G and Percy.

Sinsheimer: Aaron Johnson was the ...?

Moore: (Right). We would give people clothes and food and things like that. People really became interested in the Movement, tried to draw crowds in giving away clothes and food at the church and they would attend meetings, we would have a packed house every meeting night. And we started marching to the courthouse, around the courthouse to protest about not letting anyone register to vote, about the segregated policy they had, not letting black people register to vote. And demonstrating with marches downtown except most times we wouldn't get there before they stopped us.

Back in those days the white people were hostile. As a matter of fact one night I was walking down to Sam Block's and Peacock-- Sam Block was driving the car, Peacock was in the back, Sam Block and a young lady were

in the front and just as he stopped in front of the office here on MacLaurin St., they were getting ready to get out, a station wagon came by and shot through the window. Didn't hit him or the lady but it shot all the way through, knocked the front windows, both windows out.

Sinsheimer: Did you see that?

Moore: Yes, I saw it. After they shot they speeded up and turned, come down MacLaurin St. and turned right to Ave. G and went straight up Ave. G. That was the last time I saw them when they went off MacLaurin St. because I was back about a block back so I didn't see anymore after that, which way they went after that point.

Well, the Movement began to pick up momentum and we started getting a lot of publicity. When a meeting was being held we passed out leaflets and literature on where the meeting was being held. So there was a white church downtown named First Christian Church and they turned around and filed suit against Rev. Johnson to change the name (of his church) because they were, they said they had the name first, they were First Christain Church before he came here. And they were using his name, their name, which he had to change at that point to Percy St. Christian Church which is still the name of the church as of now.

Sinsheimer: Percy St.?

Moore: Percy St. Christain Church.

Sinsheimer: What do you remember about Dick Gregory's role here?

Moore: Dick Gregory came here, I don't know years and dates I can't remember.

Sinsheimer: Right.

Moore: But he came down to help us out, he even marched with us, called demonstrations. We had moved the office at that time from MacLaurin St. down on Ave. N. We got a big building down there, which was nothing but a barn. We went in there, we got volunteers in there to fix it up. We put paneling on the walls, we even bricked the ceiling up all the way around, we got a few bricklayers to donate their time. When we fixed up it really was a nice building after too. That is where we had our office, we put in a library there where the community people to go come to. As a matter of fact we are proud, we are very proud of our library. We had books, we had more books than the public library here in Greenwood

had.

I am trying to remember our librarian at that time, she wrote a book Freedom Summer which I understand became a bestseller.

Sinsheimer: Sally Belfrage?

Moore: Yes, Sally Belfrage, that's right. She would, every morning we would come in and make a report and how we were going out to canvass and talking to people, and different problems we were faced with. And Sally would be there taking notes there on what it was all about. Whatever problem I met with I would bring it to you so then the next time it wouldn't be a surprise to you, you would know how to handle it. And indeed if we handled it right at the time we were faced with the problem-- she would be writing all these things, notes, down-- you know she ended up writing a book which became, I understand it was a bestseller. Wasn't it?

Sinsheimer: It sold quite well I think.

Moore: Well, anyway she , her book was pretty accurate it had a good account of it--I never did read it but I am sure it was because of the fact that she was writing down things that we were talking about. So we also went out, not only did we go to houses here in the city, worked the city in trying to get people registered to vote, but we were also working in the county, go out on the farm, talk to people, ran off, shot at, and what have you.

Sinsheimer: Was it harder in the rural areas?

Moore: Much harder.

Sinsheimer: Why do you think that was?

Moore: Well, because you had to go on the white man's property. it was his farm and he could easily stop you from coming on the property, trespassing or what have you. They all claimed there was no trespassing on them even though you didn't see any signs, but they claimed there was. I can recall one time we went out to Pugh's plantation ...

Sinsheimer: Which plantation? P-e-w or P-u-g-h?

Moore: Pugh, out here a little town Pugh city, got a little store there, the name of a little store. The highway goes right through his property, and on each side of highway he has got a couple of stores there and they call that Pugh city. And the reason for that ... he put a store in there, a little cafe and stuff up there to

keep the people on the plantations from coming to town or going to other places and spending money (instead) of spending money right there. There is a little cafe there run by a black family on the plantation through him, he is just running for him.

Sinsheimer: Right.

Moore: Well anyway, we went down there, three of us, a chinese, myself and a jewish guy and he came out with a shotgun and put it in our face and threatened to blow our head off if we didn't get off his place and told us that there was no trespassing. So we didn't see a sign and we argued back and forth with him, telling him that we wasn't afraid of him and that we were within our rights and if people wanted to register to vote we were going to take them down to register to vote. So he told us that if the people wanted to register to vote he would take them down there. He would throw them in the truck and take them over to the courthouse and get them registered to vote himself, he didn't need us to come out there to do that.

Well, we didn't like that. We told him that they wasn't potatoes, he referred to them as their sack of potatoes, you don't throw them in the truck and take them on down. He ended up telling us that if we didn't off the place he was going to kill us. So he led us back to the highway and when he got down there right there at the fence where it comes on his property he went over and pulled some vines and bushes back and weeds and showed us a sign that said "No Trespassing" (laughter). So the next time we would come on there he would kill us. Well while we was there we was able to get people make up a motorpool right there to haul each other back and forth to register to vote. So they would do that before we would come up and ... interrupted our attempt to get people to register to vote.

... Some place, we had some guys, Hancock who is still around now he used to go out on plantations at night. He was from a plantation so he knew a lot of people back out there on the other side of Itta Bena.

Sinsheimer: What is his name?

Moore: Hancock, Milton Hancock I think his name was. He used to go and hide the car inside the man's barn and walk all over the plantation at night to get people to register to vote. And the next day they walked to the highway or come out to the road so he would haul them on in or we would be around helping him out. Or sometimes he could get people, somebody that had a car to bring them out to the highway, or they would take people to the courthouse

to register to vote in the car. And we would give them gas or help them out for hauling people to the courthouse.

And they also had at that time, why we never could get away with doing this, because the workers, somebody always found out that they did register to vote because the Greenwood Commonwealth in those days had a policy that they would, everybody that tried to register to vote they would publish their names in the paper. And people would get fired or get run off the plantation or what have you.

And you probably read about Tent city back around here near Leland, that is how that come into the making.

Sinsheimer: That is when people got run off the plantations?

Moore: Run off the plantations. I have forgotten exactly who came up with the idea and where they got the tents from but they got tents and set them up out there on a, I think a black man owned the land out there. And they set tents up back there and people that got put off the plantations could come there and live. And we would help to get food and clothes and stuff out to them so that they wouldn't go hungry or go without clothes or anything.

Sinsheimer: Do you have any recollection of when that might have started?

Moore: I guess, I imagine it was around '64 or '65, something like that during the time of ... I don't know it might have been '63 or '64.

Sinsheimer: When the most people were going to the courthouse was March and April of 1963.

Moore: Well, that is probably about the time that this was happening. They had a lot-- Sam (Block) was always working back out in the plantations back around Greenville and he went back up in there. Leland and some of the people from that area back up in there. Some of them just wanted to leave the plantation or just come on out there rather than stay on the place because well see we had so much foing on at that time. We were trying to get the minimum wage for people who worked on plantations. Some of them that were boycotting would refuse to go out on a place, and then we would picket plantations at that gates to stop trucks from going out there and what have you. So they run them off that way, run some of the people off that way. But this was about '64 when that happened.

We were trying to get minimum wage as a part of --

on the farms-- as a part of the minimum wage law. And if they refused to work it was obvious that the plantation owner would make them leave, set them off, and they would go out to Tent city.

When the Voting Rights Act passed-- we had people leave here and go to Washington to help get that passed. Well, we would demonstrate here, we would go to the courthouse and march around there with picket signs that we want to register to vote or what have you. I recall one time we-- the Klansmen had burned a cross down there near the office at the highway of Ave. N and 82 highway down there. And some of the people saw them when they set the cross on fire so we hollered to let the rest of them know, so they took and started running and left. And we put the cross out and brought it the next day-- Dr. Henry, Aaron Henry, had the cross on the picket line marching around the courthouse with a sign saying, "Some dirty Klansman burned this cross last night at the office," or something to that effect, I don't know exactly what.

The police came out and told him that they need the cross for evidence, I get that is a disgrace for them and they didn't like that. They told him that they had to have the cross for evidence ... they did take the cross and put in their car and left. Well, that probably was disgraceful to Klansman and the idea that we saw them burn a cross and we ran to them rather than run away from them. And ended up running to try to keep us from knowing who they were but they probably thought we were trying to catch them which we probably would have if we had got them, if we could have caught them.

So we were demonstrating and would march downtown. I can recall one time, I am trying to think of his name--he was over at the Justice Department.

Sinsheimer: John Doar?

Moore: John who?

Sinsheimer: John Doar.

Moore: I don't know I believe it was Clark, I don't know John Doar, John Doar that is it. Anyway he was here, we had marched from down to Avenue N down here to, we got down here to right here, (Ave.) G and MacLaurin St. and the police had blocked off, had blocked us off there. And (they) wouldn't let us pass, so he came out and told them that we were within our rights to march. And after he told them who he was and it was within our rights to march if we wanted to march, to protest, so they let us through. We waited to get down-- we all went to the courthouse that day and marched around the courthouse

several times and came on up back to the community.

So, well we had, I guess you heard about Silas McGhee during the time after the Civil Rights Bill passed, Silas and Jake, two brothers, Jake McGhee went to the Leflore Theater and they beat them up in there. So a few days later after they had been there a bunch of us started going there. Some of us would even pay the young people's way to go to the theater. The one night he was out here on Ave. H and he was driving the car and the rest of them stopped to go into the cafe there and he stayed outside. They came out and shot him in the head, in the temple up here through the window of the car. And after that, they never did find who did that thing.

One day he was coming from Browning and two white guys, there were about three of them I think, stopped them and taking him to one of these houses out in the field, what they call a cotton house. They said that they were going to hang him. Well, they had, one guy was holding a gun on him while the other was looking for a rope. And he took his eyes off him for a minute and he hit the guy and knocked him down and took off running. He ran all the way to Greenwood to the FBI office. Well, they did-- he knew each one of them by name, where they lived and everything. So they was arrested and taken to court and they did get time. One of them was named Biff I forget what the other one's name is. I believe they were two brothers, Biff

Sinsheimer: What about the economy of Greenwood? Outside of agriculture was there....

Moore: Well, really agriculture was the main source of income, the economy here, well through ... working on picking cotton or chopping cotton or working at the gin there was very little going on here. And then I imagine you have seen the signs all around, "Greenwood, Cotton Capitol of the World." Well, Greenwood being here years ago I think is what had something to do with it. See they had right here on the river here, especially in this area around here in the Delta here, before roads and railroads and things they were shipping cotton out by boat. I can remember when I was a kid a boat would come up here right at the bridge, they had a little dock there, they would load cotton and stuff on there.

Sinsheimer: What river is that?

Moore: The Yazoo river.

Sinsheimer: Oh, that is right.

Moore: I can remember the bridge would turn, this bridge here would turn straight up and down sideways, it would come right here. A boat would stay here for two or three days. And a lady who lives down the street there tells me when she was young that the first time-- she lived out there around Money somewhere-- and she came to Greenwood and bought some furniture and they delivered her furniture by boat out there to Money. So I guess that is one reason that Greenwood became such a center for these gins and shipping cotton out and compresses. A lot of them are torn down now, but I imagine back in those days they had somewhere close to ten gins right here in Greenwood.

Sinsheimer: Right. And were blacks working in gins as well?

Moore: Block working where?

Sinsheimer: In the gins?

Moore: No, Block came here from Cleveland somewhere.

Sinsheimer: No, I meant blacks.

Moore: Blacks, yes, yes, yes, yes. I thought you said Block.

Sinsheimer: Right.

Moore: Well, blacks that is about all that was working, doing labor, they had whites over blacks seeing if they ... the bosses what have you. So that is all practically that was there and your compress too. See what happen they would process the cotton in the gin, take out, take the seeds out, clean it, and then they would bale it up, put it in a big bale, then they would take it to the process and hold it there, store it there until they could sell it. Now after they sell it they ship it out. And they had, oh I can remember at least about four compresses, big large buildings for storage. Some of them have been torn down now, some of them are still here. You got, about three of them are still here I think.

Sinsheimer: The compresses?

Moore: Greenwood Compress ...

Sinsheimer: Yeah, when I drove in I saw a couple of them.

Moore: Yeah, there is several companies. Greenwood has their's right here off of (Ave.) F down here and the _____ Compress over there in Baptist town, and then you got

Staple Cotton out here on the highway, you probably saw that coming in, that is a federal, that is a federal over there.

Sinsheimer: When did the machines start coming?

Moore: The cotton picker?

Sinsheimer: To Greenwood and this area?

Moore: Oh I guess it started around, when I first came back here in '62 I think they had a cotton picker then. I don't know it was in the '60's, maybe '60, '61 something like that. But when I first came back here, as matter of fact I went out to watch them work, how they did it, picked by machine, pick the cotton. They had those when I got back here but very few, only the big farmers had them. Very few farmers did, only the big ones had the cotton picker here.

Sinsheimer: What do you remember about Bob Moses?

Moore: Bob Moses? Well, Bob Moses came here, Sam was, Bob Moses came here and he became project director over Sam Block. Sam Block was project director for Greenwood but (when) Moses came here he became project director for this area, this whole district. Well, Bob, he always impressed me as a very smart energetic young man. Very, he was a really smart person. I think Bob was over for this congressional district, the project director until ... we had some more people come in like ... I can't call his name. He married ... he lives in Africa, he is now in Africa>

Sinsheimer: Stokley Carmichael?

Moore: Stokley Carmichael. Until Stokley came and then Stokley became project director for this district and Bob became project director for the state of Mississippi. Well, the office that, we got a WATS line here where we could call most any project here in Mississippi. They started branching out, they went out ... from Greenwood. And after that they moved their state office down to Jackson. But Stokley Carmichael remained here until even after Bob left and went to Jackson to be state director for the project and the voter registration drive. But we had moved into just about every county just about at that time. They had a good project going down there in Hinds county and in Jackson down there. So they moved on Lynch (St.) and they got a building on Lynch St. where

they moved in down there the state office. Well, I suppose you know it was Bob Moses that engineered the Congressional Challenge attempt, the Mississippi delegates. And where he led, he led the delegates down to challenge them. We had a saying at that time, "Moses led the people to freedom out of Egypt and Bob Moses led the people to freedom out of Mississippi."

Sinsheimer: What about some of the other churches? Were the ministers supporting you early on?

Moore: Well no, back in those days no we couldn't get into a church, they were afraid to even let us come to the church at first, afraid they would burn it down. Back in those days churches where we had meetings, they did burn them down. ... But we had two or three churches burned down outside of Sidon down there. We were going to a meeting down there to the churches. And one church there, I believe it was Grove Bell or something like that, they burned it down and just as they built it back, just as they had got it completed they come back and burn it down again. I believe that was Grove Bell, the name of that church.

Sinsheimer: Do you remember, I think that some of the food distribution was going on at Wesley Methodist Church?

Moore: Yes, yes.

Sinsheimer: How did you, do you know how that got started there? Was it Rev. Rucker?

Moore: Rev. Rucker was pastor, but what happened was we had food coming in down here at the office down here at the office down here on, we had the office on MacLaurin. And it was stored down there. Got to point where we didn't have no storage place there, so we went to Wesley and they talked to Rev. Rucker and he agreed to let us come over and store some and pass it out too. So that is how it got started over there because we really didn't have enough storage space, we got to where we didn't have no storgae place there on Ave. N. And he, Rev. Rucker-- we did pass out food and clothing over there.

Sinsheimer: I mean Block and Peacock were here for a long time before anything-- well a long time, five or six months before ...

Moore: Before anything happened because they were just going around talking to people and trying to get local people interested. There was a young lady that I think really was dynamic at that tim e helping Peacock and Sam Block

to get started, Ida Holland was her name. And she lives over there on Gill St. She had an article-- I didn't see it-- but I heard that she had an article in the paper about a month ago that she got a doctor somewhere up there in Connecticut I believe.

Sinsheimer: She is still here in Greenwood.

Moore: She lives in....

Sinsheimer: Ida Holland?

Moore: She would go around with Sam and Peacock talking to people. She was dynamic in helping to get demonstrations going, people to march and go to the courthouse and what have you.

Sinsheimer: How did people know her, through church activity or ...?

Moore: Well, Ida was just a well known person, I don't know she was, well I guess maybe through church activity and she was born and reared here. Just was a popular person, I don't know. I don't know what was her background that she was so well known.

Sinsheimer: Is she still in Mississippi though?

Moore: No, no, I just said ... I don't know I didn't see the article but I heard somebody talking about it. There was an article in the paper how she had just finished school, she even had her Ph d. now. And the different projects she was working on where she was, Connecticut I believe it was.

Well, after, during the time after the Civil Rights Bill passed we had tested-- that was during the time when Rev. Tucker who had the NAACP, Rev. Tucker was the first chairman of that. You know once he went down to city hall and they put the dogs on him to run us away. Now I guess as you said this is progress. They once tried to run us away from the city hall, put the dogs on us to run us away, now I am a councilman to the city hall (Mr. Moore had recently won a seat on the Greenwood City Council within two weeks of this interview). That is progress. Well, Rev. Tucker was bit by the dog once. Well Rev. Tucker was a Methodist preacher and after he left here-- they transfered him somewhere else-- then we got I believe it was Mr. Everette _____ who became president, but he is still here too.

I became secretary, that was during the time that the Civil Rights Bill was passed so I organized a testing team to go downtown. And made Silas McGhee chairman of this testing team to go down there and test the public

accommodations, go into cafes and what have you. They became very hostile at that time, they threw hot coffee in people's face and all when they walked in and sat down at the counter. Wouldn't serve us, so we would go back to the FBI and file suit against them.

(Inaudible portion) He (a farmer) told them that the fine was only \$500 if they refused to serve us and if they refused to serve us he would pay the fine. So we would split up, at that time we split up into two groups, one side go down one side of the street and the other side, the other people go down the other side of the street. And we come back and filed suit with the FBI. So we said at that time that we were going to break him if it was possible. So he did go bankrupt, I don't know what part we played in it but he went bankrupt.

Well, something else about the theater might be interesting to you. When we went to court on the Leflore theater, the manager of the theater we subpoenaed him to go down to testify and he did, and he said that he had went to some city council meeting and they said, they told the Chamber of Commerce that if we came to the place and protested it, tried to eat or sit down or come in there, they would be in such a hurry to call the police.

They would take their call and they wouldn't come right away, they wanted the people to beat the hell out of us before they got there. When we went to integrate the Leflore theater, it would take them so long, they did do that to Jake (McGhee), they beat him up before the police got there, When the police got there they asked the manager of the place did he want to file charges against Jake, not Jake wanting to file against him, but if he wanted to file charges against Jake. So he told them no he didn't because there was no way he could file charges because his boss had told him to integrate and they had to do it. And this is the law.

He was dynamic in helping us to get an injunction against the police, to force them to give us protection, to respond to when we called. But they told the manager of the theater that he best catch the fastest thing out of Mississippi. I think he went to Florida, went to another theater down there. See the Paramount, the Leflore theater and the Paramount theater belonged to the same corporation that they belonged to. His testimony was really dynamic in helping us to get the Paramount theater integrated too. At that time blacks would go to the balcony at that top, the buzzard roost as we called, the whites would be downstairs.

Sinsheimer: Buzzard roost?

Moore: And we did integrate it and we started, well we started going down, everybody started-- they closed the top, the

balcony part of it, all the blacks used to go to the Buzzard roost-- and we all started going downstairs. Well, something else I should tell you. Byron de la Beckwith, the guy that is supposed have killed Medgar Evers-- his son put a picket line around the Leflore theater while we were there to ask the whites not to go, not to go there because it was integrated. Well, the whites boycotted the theater and the same thing about the Paramount after we got it integrated they would boycott that too. But they changed it, it became a, they closed the theater up, it became a little club there, a night club.

Sinsheimer: Which one closed up?

Moore: The Paramount. Well, they tore Leflore's down and then they finally closed the theater down it became a ... what is a place that they dance at?

Sinsheimer: Disco?

Moore: Disco. It became a disco.

Sinsheimer: Right.

Moore: Well, that lasted for awhile, that last maybe a couple of years. So then black and white started going to that and dancing in there. So I am told they set it a fire, because it did catch fire. Then they tore it down then. So both theaters (after) we integrated them they tore them down now and they both become parking lots.

We had a Holiday Inn was out there, that was about the only nice motel they had, the Holiday Inn. So we would go it back in '64, go to it every day. Around lunch time they had a lot of whites that used to come there for lunch. And we would go there, a bunch of us would go there and take up all the tables and seats and stop them from, they wouldn't be able to carry on business as usual. The white people wouldn't come in when they saw having a sit-in there. So that went on for quite a while, but about a year later-- and we kept filing suit against the-- one day, I forgot his name-- ... the white guy that was here from Canada, I forgot who other one was A local cab man, the white man from Canada said that he wanted him to file ... he wanted to know where it would work best so we said let's go out to the Holiday Inn and see if we can get it out there, knowing that they wouldn't serve us. But we were going to try anyway.

But when we got there the hostess met us at the door and asked a party of how many? We said three and they took us over to a table (laughter). We all were surprised that happened. And the waitress came over, oh

she didn't want to stand near us, she didn't even want to take my order. So we did order, they ordered pie and ice cream and we ate and when we got ready to go they decided let's see how bad does she hate blacks. I will put the tip under your plate and let's see if she will accept it and what she will do (laughter). So we got to the door and stopped and looked back. When she raised the plate up and saw the tip she grabbed it right quick and put it in her pocket (laughter).

Well, about a month later after that I had taken a, my friends back, my lady friends back there and this same waitress waited on it. She sat down at the table this time and started talking with us. The very same waitress, we went back to the same table, I guess that was one of the tables that she worked at, she did wait on other things. She sat down at that table and started talking to my friends about pecans or something ... they were talking about time when it is time to pick up pecans, harvest time for pecans. And she had some knowledge of pecans too so she sat down and started talking to her about it.

Well, that was the first time that we were served at the Holiday Inn, we were really surprised that that happened.

Sinsheimer: So it just sort of happened one day, there was no big ... ?

Moore: There wasn't a plan at all, it was just something As a matter of fact he had one of those little old TR-6, and one of us had to sit on the back back there. The three of us went out there just that way. Little two-seater thing.

End of Interview.