

Comments of Robert Moses and C.C. Bryant
Mississippi Voices of the Civil Rights
Movement Conference
McComb, Mississippi
July 9, 1983

Robert Moses: ... And there is something that I think we can learn from this McComb movement about all of those points and I would like to just see if we can get into that, see if we can figure out the lesson that it teaches us about tomorrow morning, what we should or should not do.

And I asked Mr. Bryant, I saw that C.C. Bryant wasn't last night and I asked him-- I went out to Beartown, that is why I was late, to bring him here, to make sure that he was here this morning. Because last night there was a statement made that I initiated or started the movement, but anyone who thinks must know that I couldn't have done that because I wasn't from McComb. And as far as I know things don't get started by somebody who is not from someplace just going in cold turkey and figure that they are going to start something.

And C.C. Bryant was the person who actually started this thing. And I thought maybe-- Mr. Bryant-- maybe you might just go over with us within your mind what you did. And then I would like to keep along that theme of how it got started, because I think there are some lessons in there about how we might have to move to start anything, about what you are talking about.

C.C. Bryant: Thank you. I regret not having been here last night. I saw an article in the Ebony magazine, I mean the Jet magazine back in '61. Can you hear me? Where the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) were coming towards the South. I had a friend by the name of Amzie Moore who was one of the state vice-presidents (of the NAACP), Cleveland, Mississippi. I wrote our friend Amzie. I was a state vice-president (of the NAACP) at that time of the NAACP. As a matter of fact I am vice-president emeritus of the Mississippi state conference of NAACP branches. I am presently president of the McComb branch, state chairman of the Labor and Industrial Committee of the Mississippi state conference of the NAACP.

We were interested in voter registration. We had the, we provided the resources but we didn't have the manpower. We wrote as I indicated a friend Amzie Moore who at that time was one of the state vice-presidents. And through that we got him (Robert Moses) here. He was scheduled to come here for a period of about three weeks, summer vacation, and wound up (after) the hot summer. He went back to Cleveland ...

Moses: I want to cut in. I want to Mr. Bryant wrote to Amzie, Amzie was up in Cleveland. And I had come down to work with SNCC on voter registration at that time. And Amzie sent me down here to Mr. Bryant.

Bryant: That is correct.

Moses: And I stayed at his house. And you remember Mr. Webb, Webb Owens.

Bryant: Webb Owens was our membership chairman. Ed Hill was our treasurer, Mr. Gibson was the chairman of our executive committee. All of these people worked here, worked with getting the movement started.

Moses: Now I believe Mr. Bryant you contacted Webb Owens and asked him to take me around to meet people in McComb.

Bryant: Yes, Webb Owens and Jerry Gibson, Jerry Gibson had a car. Webb Owens did not have a car. So these were the people, these were our key men-- Webb Owens, Jerry Gibson and Ed Hill. Those persons had access to the community and were also instrumental in getting the meeting hall at the Masonic Hall, where I was at that time a member of the trustee board of the Masonic Hall. And all of these things came about through our contacts. Our churches made, raised money, Society Hill Church ...

Moses: Now let me get back to that money. Do you remember Webb Owens use to come and pick me up with Jerry Gibson every morning? Do you remember that?

Bryant: Yes, yes.

Moses: And you would arrange with him for people for us to contact.

Bryant: To contact.

Moses: Do you remember those people, what kind of people were they?

Bryant: Well, they were church people. We made arrangements for you to meet with Steptoe (president of Amite County branch of NAACP). We went out there with you.

Moses: Not that far, I mean here in McComb. Because if you remember-- let me refresh your memory a little. When we came in what we said was that we would, SNCC would be willing to try and get two people to come down and live in McComb for a month.

Bryant: Yeah, the original plans.

Moses: Right. And the condition was that the people in McComb had to raise the money to support three people, myself and two others, for a month and provide food and _____ and so forth, we

Moses (cont.) weren't asking for any salary then, but basic expenses, basic needs.

Bryant: I think about twenty-five dollars I think was subsistence pay. You wouldn't be able to get anybody-- he didn't tell you that. But this was about what he was getting, what they were getting.

Moses: Do you remember how we raised that money? We ran around ...

Bryant: Yes, the churches, we went around in the community, we went around in different I know Society Hill provided funds. The Methodist Church, I think the Masons, the Masonic Hall provided some funds. All of the churches in this area. Rather than to isolate anybody, you know, when you start calling names you leave off somebody. The first thing they say is that you discriminated. We don't want to be guilty of discrimination, because that is one of our goals and objectives to eliminate (laughter). And I want to make it very clear that we contacted, and we had a zeal then. Since you are talking about the-- I would like to put a peg there. We had something then that you don't have now.

We had ministers in the pulpit who would get up on Sunday morning and talk about voter registration, who demonstrated. We sent-- to prove that-- we sent Reverend A. Taylor to a civil rights in sixty something, fifty something and the Reverend Hubble from the _____ Baptist Church on the fiftieth anniversary of NAACP back in 1959. So these were the kinds of commitments of people that we had. We had over there in-- I would like to call some of the most affluent ministers that we had at that time. The Reverend Taylor, the Reverend Tobias, the Reverend Hubble, the Reverend Allen from down in Magnolia, the Reverend Scott, Reverend _____, the Methodist Church over here. All these churches gave us the thrust, the key ministers who carried the ball and I think that we ought to give recognition at some point to those persons. The men who stood out. The Reverend Taylor, pastor of our church. We opened up our church, we provided voter registration, voter education. The Methodist Church they also had-- these our the kinds of things that we had. We don't have some of these things now. We have gotten sophisticated now. I would like to point this out that the church is the bulwark, the church is the cohesive force that can bring people together, that can motivate. When we fail, when we isolate the church, when we separate them, there is no civil rights, human rights are no difference. I am a church deacon, I believe just as well on Sunday morning that you

Bryant (cont.): ought to, you ought to have civil rights in the church as well as you ought to have it out here. And when we start separating-- the young man mentioned about the past-- those who forget the past are doomed to repeat.

This man here (Moses) and I would like to-- he is a very modest man. I saw him, I hadn't seen him in twenty years and I was going out to see my sister yesterday whose is very ill and this is some of the reason I wasn't here. She hadn't been in the hospital ... and they make a big thing, you know. And they take things-- so I spent the biggest of day with her. And I saw him (Moses) on Broadway I believe it was, on Deleware, he and this gentleman over there.

I said that looks like Bob, he had, he always had, he is a very mild man. He had his arms folded, this was one of his trademarks. Now these were the people, we had dedicated people at that time. The church, the Masonic Hall when they put the children out of school opened the Hall up against the opposition of the city government.

Moses: I don't want to cut you off C.C. but I want to keep on track now. These churches, do you remember now about how long it took to raise the money that we needed to start our project?

Bryant: Well, within two weeks. I think you went to Cleveland after you came here-- that is what I started-- you came here, you went back to Cleveland to try to get a program going there, he had a building there that he wanted to rennovate. The building didn't get started so he came back here. And we got started I think shortly after you got back here.

Moses: Right. Do you remember where that money went, who held that money? After people collected that money, what did we do with it?

Bryant: Just a minute, we are trying to record this. These are things that you have not heard before. I think Webb Owens was our treasurer. Webb was a man that had money, he didn't-- when you are talking about holding money you don't need a man who needs (laughter) Webb had money and idn't have to worry about the money. Otherwise he put his money into, he was one of the biggest contributors. So I think we need to put a peg there. When you start dealing with money, you need compotent people. This is one of the things that we have always advocated. The money is what gets you in trouble, the way you handle people. I don't know who it is, I don't care who you are, you start dealing with people's money and you don't deal on the up and up This is what he did. Webb

Bryant (cont.): Owens had money, he was a retired railroad man. And all of these people that I told you about were able to go your bonds-- you know we didn't have bondsmen then. These were the same men that were able to go down there and go (pay) your bond when you got jail. Webb Owens, Ed Hill, Jerry Gibson-- Jerry Gibson was a retired fireman and he had about the biggest paying job, you know. This is who we had. Until recently after some twenty or thirty years they didn't hire any black fireman, that is an old beef. You understand?

So they were the last leg of the firemen who stood on those old water things, and sometimes they engineered. Get out there and draw the water rather than this when they shoot firemen off. This is the kind of (railroad) fireman that Jerry Gibson was. So we are going back to getting the program under way. We conducted-- I had a barbershop at that time. Our church provided a mimeograph machine. We drew up-- I think they had about twenty-six questions-- I have got some of them somewhere, maybe you need to see some of them (questions on the voter registration application). We drew up along with that questionnaire of twenty-six questions. We had parts of the constitution that they used in conducting voter registration classes.

And we bogged down now in six questions, now you are talking about we can't register. Then you had twenty-six. You had to interpret the constitution to suit the registrar. All he did was say, "Well, Jack you didn't quite make it. You had a _____, but you didn't quite make it. This is the way it was then.

We started registration, along with the registration they started other things, but the original plan was to get registration-- this is what he was committed to. Now
....

Moses:

Right. Okay, I want to bring to bear now what we just talked about on the questions that were raised earlier. And it seems to me that in what we just talked about, and McComb certainly, for whatever reasons, was the kick-off point in the whole state of Mississippi for what became known as the Mississippi civil rights, or the movement in Mississippi. There were other places where the movement tried to get started-- in Jackson after the Freedom Rides and so forth-- but for whatever reasons it didn't get started. And I think we need to look at the reasons why it did get started here in McComb.

And there at least four ingredients there that Mr. Bryant talked about. One he said that they had some resources and this was an organization, NAACP, and a program, voter registration. And I want to add to that that it was a program on which there was almost universal agreement. Almost everybody that you went to, whether they

Moses (cont.): willing to go to register or not, believed that registration would help. So you had some basis in terms of just solidity, agreement about a program. He said he lacked manpower and that is why something clicked in his mind when he saw this article in Jet and he wrote to Amzie and he asked Amzie to send him some of these SNCC workers who were supposed to be coming into the state to do work on voter registration. Because while they had this program here, they lacked manpower. People and their families and so forth, and it is difficult to do that kind of program when you are tied down in family and work. So the second ingredient was manpower.

So when I came down Mr. Bryant put me in touch with the other officers in the NAACP here. And the important thing was that there was a local group of dedicated people that the manpower that you are talking about could relate to and were willing to work with this manpower on this particular program. Mr. Owens and Mr. Gibson took me around-- what I remember very clearly was the churches, going to speak and we raised money there. And also particular individuals. Now maybe you can help me? Ben Hill?

Bryant: Ben Hill yes, out in Fernwood. (Editor's note: Note change from Ed Hill to Ben Hill)

Moses: We went to him to ask for money, about ten dollars or whatever. And there were a number of people, individual people, business people.

Bryant: Mrs. Quin I think.

Moses: Mrs. Quin, Mr. Peter Lewis. Anyone else remember any names? Nathaniel Lewis? Percy Larry, the Nobles, Ernest Nobles, right. People were giving five and ten dollars, fifteen dollars, whatever they could put together. And who did they give it too, they didn't give it to me because they didn't know me from Adam. They gave it to Webb Owens. And they gave it to Webb Owens for the reasons that Mr. Bryant said. They gave it to Webb Owens because he was up and up with money. He had established something that is difficult to establish in any community. He had established the trust of the whole black community about his ability to handle public money. And nobody had any question in their mind about one penny of that money as long as Webb Owens was handling that money. They knew that if he said the money was going for this, the money was going for this. It wasn't going someplace else. So that is another ingredient.

I mean you have the program, you have the manpower, you have a group of dedicated people within some local community, and within that group you have at least one

Moses (cont.): person who is up and up about money. And then you pool your money together. Now you were talking sir about redistribution of money in the country as a whole in terms of federal money or foundation money or any other kind of money. We didn't deal with that to get this program started. We dealt with the redistribution of the little money that we had in our own community. And that was sufficient to launch this program and out of that the whole program in the state mushroomed.

But the program in the state didn't start of federal money or outside money or anything like that. But my own money I had saved up from work. I came down here on money that I had saved up from work. I was teaching school. And when I got down ther I didn't have enough money to sustain me for a number of months, I had enough money to get down here and keep on until I met someone who would take me in. The Bryant's and Amzie Moore did that. So the money angle of it, what got it started, was not federal money or looking for federal money, but was just a simple redistribution of these five and ten dollar bills that float around in the community.

And it seems to me that those ingredients are still with us. I mean we still have these five and ten dollar bills floating around. We still have if people think about it at least one person in every community who is up and up with public money. That people will trust to hold their money. We have more manpower than we had twenty years ago. There is more manpower sitting in this room than we had twenty years ago. People who are still dedicated to work. Now the requirements might be a little different. They may have a family, they may require that they be supported at the level so that they can at least take care of expenses not of themselves personally but of themselves and their children. But you can't say that you don't have manpower, that you don't have as a resevoir of this movement people who are dedicated and ready and willing to work.

Do we have a program? Do we have one program around which there is if not unanimous at least ninety percent or eighty percent agreement that this is what we ought to concentrate our energies on now as a people. Because if we do then we have all the ingredients that we had, that started the movement in McComb. Now I know that some of those people who are the manpower have individual programs that they would like to see going. The movement put this conference together as a program. They are a group of dedicated people, they are manpower. They are begging money outside. Foundation here-- (the) Mississippi endowment for the Humanities refused to give them any money at this

Moses (cont.): conference. They are begging money from around. That is one program.

I know that among those dedicated people there are people who have individual programs that they would like to get forward for the benefit of the community. Hollis Watkins was talking to me about a newspaper, he wants to get a newspaper going statewide. All of the ingredients are here in this state to get that newspaper going. There is no reason why that newspaper couldn't get going, the ingredients are here in this conference, here in this room.

What I am saying is that the questions that you are raising about education and about parents, questions about what the problems are of our people now, there are I think some answers to those questions to be found in the history of this particular local movement that got started in McComb. And as far as I can see all of the basic ingredients that we outlined what they were, are there. You may have to search to find that person that is up and up about money. And that can't be emphasized too much. I mean we all know that. So I don't know what the plan is of the conference had in mind-- one thing they had in mind I think was to try to get into the early history and I just wanted to make sure that this point was brought out, about how this movement got started in McComb and what the roles of the local people were in getting this movement started. And what the basic ingredients were and what the people who came from outside supplied, because we supplied manpower. And we supplied some dedication too.

And just to make the point that that is not irrelevant to what has to happen now, whatever the stage is, however you want to characterize it, that we are in now. And I am not saying sir that we should not go to the federal government, I am not taking that position that was taken over here that the federal government is irrelevant and the money that is out there in the larger society is irrelevant to our problems. What I am saying is that particularly to get something started anything, the avenues are there within our own community. And the redistribution of money that is necessary of those five and ten dollar bills is in our own community. And we have those and we can't _____. And we should, and we should make it our business to identify that program now which might garner the greatest amount of support among our people in Mississippi and try to push the group on them. Because we don't lack dedicated people, we don't lack manpower now, people who would be willing to work on such a program.

And I don't think we lack the ability to get the funds together to put them on the goal for a few months, six months. Thank you.