

Interview with Mrs. Hazel Palmer
Jackson, Mississippi
June 19, 1985

Joe Sinsheimer: If you could back up for a minute from what you were just talking about for me. You said your children were in Itta Bena in school.

Hazel Palmer: Itta Bena in school? My oldest son was.

Sinsheimer: Where was he in school?

Palmer: Itta Bena. I can't call the name right now ... Mississippi Valley State. And he joined the Freedom Rides up there.

Sinsheimer: And he was arrested? Or he came back down into Jackson?

Palmer: Yeah, he was arrested and then sent to Parchman. And then that made us here get interested. They had a lot of meetings and socials, and all kinds of meetings. And we started out trying to hold the (civil rights) groups together. NAACP was working here, SNCC was working here, SCLC was working here, CORE was working here. And we were working all over the state as far as we could go. There were a million people at that time and they wouldn't let us get into some of those towns. There is 82 counties in Mississippi and we worked in what counties we could.

And I have to talk about myself because we had peoples from each district ... and we had people from each district represent their district. So I was representing the Third District, that is what it was at least at that time. Now I don't remember too much about no laws, no rules and regulations at that time. But I did know that Mississippi didn't have no legal party because they had their white party (the lily white Mississippi Democratic Party), all white, and you might say we were just trying to get in.

Sinsheimer: How early after the Freedom Rides did you get involved?

Palmer: I got involved immediately, immediately. That was in 1961, I began immediately because I wanted to know what the children were doing, see. And so that meant I got involved real early in Jackson. I started off with the NAACP, but I saw that I couldn't work with them so I changed and starting working with SNCC through COFO.

Sinsheimer: Why did you change?

Palmer: Why did I change? Because they wouldn't let you do, you

can't do this they want to put a guideline on what you could do or what you can't do, and you can't do this and you can't do that. Now I had son that was with me in the NAACP too. And I had a daughter working with CORE.

Sinsheimer: What were their names?

Palmer: Will Palmer.

Sinsheimer: Will Palmer? Was he the son at Valley?

Palmer: No he is The oldest son who went to Valley State was named Now he was a Freedom Rider. And this Will son he always worked for SNCC. Well, I but I said he always, I didn't mean always worked for SNCC, but we were in NAACP at that time when we first started. But we got into a little thing, so trying to keep people (from) not getting mixed up we had a meeting, and it caused the NAACP, Urban League, SCLC, SNCC, and all the groups that we could get come together and merge there, office down on Lynch Street called COFO.

So anybody could work from, who felt like working. And what I was doing, mostly I was trying to stay out on the street, knock on doors, ask people to come out to vote, and would they come vote, and all this type activity. Am I talking loud enough?

Sinsheimer: I hope so. It helps if you could talk a little louder.

Palmer: A little louder. And it wasn't many people working in the Movement in Jackson. (Moving the recorder closer) Would that help any?

Sinsheimer: Yeah, that would help.

Palmer: So what we was trying to do, we were trying to do, what personnel we could get a hold of, you know, personnel who would come with us so that you know that the meeting was coming up too in Atlantic City (the Democratic National Convention). We wanted to go to Atlantic City and ask them, tell them about that Mississippi didn't have no blacks on their party (delegation). We told them that we were the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. And that was why we were going to Atlantic City. But all of this happened so fast. See we didn't have time to, you know, didn't have much time to move, we had to really get to work.

So at that point when we had the COFO building out on Lynch St, when— I know you have heard of three boys getting killed over in Neshoba county. Well we were out there having a meeting and they had some of

the same materials that we had the office passing out. And you know all that material was saying was saying how to hold a precinct meeting, how to hold a county meeting, how to hold a state meeting. There is another one in there— county meeting?

Sinsheimer: District?

Palmer: District meeting, and then the state meeting. So we got what people we could, we had our precinct meeting, we had our county meeting and we had our district meeting, and we had our state meeting out at the Masonic Temple. We elected delegates to go to Atlantic City and I happened to be one of them that is how I got a chance to go. And when we got there they still didn't want to let us in.

Sinsheimer: Did you take a bus up to Atlantic City?

Palmer: Yeah, we all had the same bus.

Sinsheimer: Everybody together? You drove straight through?

Palmer: Oh, we stopped whenever we wanted to stop.

Sinsheimer: But I mean you didn't stay overnight somewhere.

Palmer: Oh, no, no, no. Just stopped, the bus kept straight on through. And is this kind of what you wanted?

Sinsheimer: Yeah.

Palmer: Okay. And when we got there on the boardwalk they act like they didn't even see us out there. But do you know that we sang and yelled and hollered so that on the tail end they had to let a few of us in there. And who the Ed King who you were with last night and Aaron Henry, well somehow another they agreed to let Aaron Henry and Ed King come in, but they didn't agree for all of us to come in. And we didn't like that. We said if we let, take that for granted, those two votes, when all of us poor people is up there, who is going to speak for us? Who is going to speak for the poor people? And then we wouldn't have had nothing to come back home to work up to.

So that is what we were so angry, come back home and I worked in our precinct. Had meetings there and then had out little group. Now there wasn't too many Jackson people working in the Movement at that time. So to get a meeting we usually have to hold a meeting where the most Negroes could be there, poor folks now. And that was up by Greenville, up by Sunflower county.

And Mrs. Hamer represented her county up there. You have heard them talk about Mrs. Hamer?

Sinsheimer: Sure.

Palmer: Victoria Gray, Adams county. She worked Hattiesburg. That was the Fifth District at that time. Ed King and I were from always the Third District. And Annie Devine, she worked in the Fourth District. So we had all of this and we had a lot of people that didn't know, didn't understand like we did what we were doing but I felt like you could learn by doing, you know. I didn't get a whole bunch of school, and learn all these things. Well, I had to learn them on my own. And my having six or seven or eight children at that time, I think I did a pretty good job. It took a lot doing, it took a lot of effort, and sure enough it took a lot of prayer because poor old me, how am I going to be getting around But you see other people was helping us, fundraising stuff.

Another thing I want to stress-- to you it might seem funny but we had to learn it, you see. And different organizations they wanted to kind of pull out some, and we were trying to keep everybody combined so we could have the numbers that we needed to vote. So that made us keep going out of the state, Jackson, trying to find those kind of people. And we found most of them around the Delta area so that is why we, the Delta. Those people were sick and tired of you know the cotton season and coming out in debt. And no houses, no houses, you are talking ... and stuff like that. And they were more I think, I can't call Smith's name ... well he got over there, he had a little project going.

Sinsheimer: Frank Smith?

Palmer: Frank Smith. Do you know him?

Sinsheimer: He is a city councilman now in Washington.

Palmer: Oh, he is? Frank Smith ... they had a little city up there.

Sinsheimer: What do you mean by little city?

Palmer: Built a little city.

Sinsheimer: Do you know where?

Palmer: I can't call the name right now, been so long, been so long and I have forgot so much. But that is how we kind

of got started, that is how we got to go ... yes, when we came back they were saying we had some certain organizations--and you know SNCC didn't care who they worked (with), if they worked they worked. And SNCC had more workers down here than any of the rest of them. And I was trying to work in the community I went in, trying to get more adults interested in what we was talking about. And you know, help pull them in I thought.

But honey, they were so scarce around here, and so scared around here until you just didn't move too fast. And cities is hard work anyway. You can go out, edge out into the country like-- you used to could-- and you could get those old folks out there to move caused they knew what it meant to be poor, they knew what it meant to be poor everyday, everyday. So that made us, made most of our work up around the Delta area.

And that is where I began to learn everything. And then I got on, they put me on SNCC's executive board, I was on SCLC's executive board and I was MFDP, Freedom Democratic Party. Let me tell you this how we got, why, why, we called ourselves Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. So peoples out of the state couldn't, everytime we go "morally we are right, politically we were wrong." Morally you are right, but politically you are wrong. And then we wanted to try to find that political part, you know. But then when I found out, it come to me, I don't see nothing politically but just a lot dirt piled up on top.

Sinsheimer: Lot of ... ?

Palmer: Lot of dirt piled up on top. (Inaudible portion) ... Whenever and ever grants-- that is what we were working for-- grants and stuff come into a state they are supposed to use that stuff as for poor people. Do you know what they did? The grant that we went to Washington to work on and tell them about what we need, we need money, when Washington released the grant, they give them grants to the welfare office, and see the welfare office is the office that was keeping us poor folks. It didn't make sense. So that is the way it goes.

Sinsheimer: So they were giving the money to the same people that were ... ?

Palmer: Right to the welfare office. And they had a sheet printed up, material printed up. I had to take it, i had to bring it home to my husband, he had to take it where he worked and for his bossman to say that we get

some of that food. And you know that that man wasn't fixing to do that. So a lot of folks, you know, didn't get any. So that means poor people is still poor. And they always keep the poor because when they send money and they pay up here, they want teachers to work on the program and people, and by the time they pay all those people all the money they are going to make down here, poor folks is still ain't got nothing. So we is still poor. Right now there is some poor people right here in Jackson, right now. So what do you do? I am asking you what do you do (laughter)?

There is an old song that says, Freedom song says (singing), "Freedom is a constant struggle. They say that freedom is a constant struggle. They say that freedom is a constant struggle. Oh Lord, we have struggled so long. We must be free, we must be free." I don't think there is too many free people in this world.

Sinsheimer: You don't think there is too many ...?

Palmer: Free people in this world. You know it means something to be free, it means something. Now I don't mean like some people take it for granted and they say that, they take it for granted that we was just trying to get where, integrated where white men and women, black men and women— but that ain't no freedom, that ain't the freedom that we was working for. We was working for a different freedom than that. Now, if two peoples in love it doesn't matter the fact to me what they are. If they are that much in love and want to be married I ain't got no, you know, misgivings. But I do think we should be careful, you know.

Because now you take, they had all that problem trying to save segregated schools and they went through all that trouble and all that problem; and now you take the Negro schools in Jackson, right now, ain't too many white children there, they got other schools. They built those schools for the white children to go to. Well now, I heard somebody saying that they got a few Negroes out there, but they got to be, you know, middle class. I mean that is still not poor people, still ain't mixing with poor people. So it looks like they are going off and leaving us again.

Sinsheimer: Let me ask you some questions about Atlantic City, I know it was a long time ago but maybe you can help me remember some things. Do you remember the meeting in the church where you had all thre various speakers? Martin Luther King spoke to you all?

Palmer: Yes.

Sinsheimer: And Jim Forman would have spoke.

Palmer: Right.

Sinsheimer: And then I guess at some point after that you all voted, do you remember the actual vote?

Palmer: Yeah. Was that when we was voting for Ed King and Aaron Henry. That is when I will say the NAACP really turned our back because we didn't accept that two person, vote and a half— I don't know how you say it now they carry a vote and a half, a vote or a vote and a half. And then they choose them, they chose them up there. Wasn't our choosing, they didn't know who we was going to choose or what we wanted to choose, but they ... to choose Aaron Henry and Ed King. And Ed King (Aaron Henry) wouldn't meet with us too much more since, and Ed, Aaron Henry wouldn't meet with us too anymore. But Ed King he was there, most anytime we call he be there. Now what else did you want to ask me about?

Sinsheimer: One of the things that I am personally interested in is Bob Moses. I got, I have gotten a chance to talk with Bob three or four different times, but I was wondering what you might be able to tell me about what you remember about Bob?

Palmer: I remember, the only thing he was a hard working young man. I mean he is this easy, quiet type man. And he would make it so plain to you until it look like you clould just see it. You know, when he is talking to you look like he just make it so plain, and it is hard to find people like that. You don't find people everywhere, everyday (who) take time with poor peoples and help them understand what we are trying to do. And after you talk with him, and he tell you what he is he talked, you can just add your thoughts right along, right along. It easy to see what he was talking about. You just don't find that kind of people everyday. I think he is into the school system now, he may have been your teacher?

Sinsheimer: No, no.

Palmer: I bet you he turn out some genuis teaching because I just say he is quiet and he makes himself clear in a way where you can understand what he is talking about. He ain't like these other college people who come slapping those big words on you and keep on over your head and keep going just like they didn't and then nobody know nothing about what he is talking about with

all those big words they use. That is what they got to smother the uneducated out. I am going to tell you that I am just an eighth grade student but when I was young and putting myself out there I always said my word or two. My father and I just got out there and I just opened my mouth and something just come in it. Now I don't know-- I don't know what, I know he made me that way. And you needn't be afraid of talking because you know you have to talk to people, you have to talk to people. Do you have some more questions that you want to ask me?

Sinsheimer: Sure.

Palmer: Just go on and ask me.

Sinsheimer: Right. Do you remember if Bob spoke to you all at Atlantic City. Do you remember what Bob's attitude was like at Atlantic City.

Palmer: Just hold up. (Break) You asked me about Bob Moses speaking. I don't know, it has been so long I have forgotten, partially what he was saying. But this is what I understood (Inaudible portion)... But you know when Bob spoke, if we had accepted those two votes, why would we have to continue to try to build the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. You see we didn't have no party built, you and everybody else know that as quick and fast as we were going we was just trying to get enough poor people to understand, that is what ... me. And what are we going to tell our other poor people when we get back to Mississippi. We come up here and fa la la la and hooped and hollered and sang, and then come back home with nothing but vote, nobody but Ed King and Aaron Henry. You know Aaron Henry can't teach you nothing about being poor.

Sinsheimer: About what?

Palmer: Being poor. He has never had no poor, he has never been poor. I am talking about poor poor, I don't mean to a certain extent, but I am saying as all over. Now this freedom that I was working for, it ain't no little bit of freedom, this is-- my going to and fro out of the state taught me that this ain't state problem. Then when I got to Washington, I said hello, these folks talk the same as folks in Jackson. They ain't talking about no poor people, getting nobody free.

So all the singing and clapping hands was about keeping our morale up until we could do better. And we do better for some poor people, but then there you go. ... People lost their jobs, folks was working and

because you are out in the movement they lost their jobs. Come to be a living thing because that ain't been no hundred years ago that they put them out after being active in the movement, and laid them off, but since Mr. Reagan been in big jobs went down, little jobs went down, ... you can't hardly find a job. So that is the same thing they are doing to us. ... Political is money, political is money.

Sinsheimer: Let me go back to something that you said earlier. You were talking about you thought it was easier up in the Delta to get people interested. Were you saying that because you thought they were poorer there they understood ...?

Palmer: Yeah, oh they are. No where to live; worked all those years; no money; that is where, well I say, strongest people are, right around them Delta areas. Because they could tell you so much more about being poor, because I had just about run my food down and when I got back here.... And I do want to say this, you know when Martin Luther king was killed in Memphis, you know what I was doing— on the phone, had a list of churches in Jackson trying to go down the line to ask them would you let Dr. King and hold a meeting And guess how many I got. Make a guess. Didn't get any, didn't even get my own. But yet he was still

See we had gotten, been able, to you know get ... that would have meant that he would have been showing more and more to the eyesight of the black community in Jackson. The most I have heard about Mrs. Hamer in Jackson is since she has been dead.

Sinsheimer: You have heard more about her since she has been dead?

Palmer: Since she has been dead. And the people that know so much about her now, don't know nothing about helping Mrs. Hamer. But they have gotten it from books and books, and what they have read and what they have heard on tapes. It is beautiful but she don't know nothing about it. She ain't got none of them flowers because they gave them after she was dead. She isn't smelling not one of those sweet flowers. Am I making myself plain to you? Do you understand what I am trying to do?

Sinsheimer: Leslie McLemore, over at Jackson State.

Palmer: Important.

Sinsheimer: He pretty much told me the same thing.

Palmer: Oh really?

Sinsheimer: He is now in a position that, he is part of that now but he feels the same thing that this state, Mississippi missed an opportunity to really help Mrs. Hamer.

Palmer: Yes. Well honey, when we went to, Poor People's Campaign March on Washington all those people were there, all those people were there. That was when Martin Luther King made that statement.

Sinsheimer: In 1963?

Palmer: I don't know the year. But you remember hearing, talking to poor peoples in Washington. When Martin Luther King made that statement, "I Have A Dream."

Sinsheimer: You went up to that march?

Palmer: Yes, I went up for the march. Sure, poor me was there.

Sinsheimer: How did you get up there?

Palmer: Bus.

Sinsheimer: Was that organized here?

Palmer: Oh yes. No, it wasn't financed with money here.

Sinsheimer: (Break) You started to tell me a little about what you did after Atlantic City. You worked in the office here in Jackson?

Palmer: Yes.

Sinsheimer: What were you doing at that point?

Palmer: Well, we was ... and I always did feel like if the capitol is here in Jackson and we could keep our office in Jackson somebody might-- I might have had a chance or somebody might have got a chance to walk over to the house (Governor's mansion). And maybe we could get in and talk for a minute, how do we know. I am just saying this.

Sinsheimer: Talk to the ...?

Palmer: People in the ...

Sinsheimer: Legislature?

Palmer: Legislature (Inaudible portion). All these people around here, I want to tell you another thing, see it is different when you are poor, when you are poor, poor. You see when peoples is poor and they have a girl ... these girls have a babies earlier and earlier. Now what could they do, what can they do? Their Momma has done all that she can for them Do I make any sense? But that is the way it happens. (Inaudible portion) Where do you live?

Sinsheimer: North Carolina.

Palmer: North Carolina. Did they close down any big buildings over there, big businesses.

Sinsheimer: Textiles and things like that you mean.

Palmer: Big buildings, I mean plants and factories. (Break)

Sinsheimer: I wanted to know how you felt about outside help? Whether or not you thought that that was important? Sped things up, slowed them down?

Palmer: Now I don't know about other places , but definitely they helped push for things ... because peoples in Jackson, peoples in Jackson don't even know nothing about the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. You just ask them anywhere They just really don't know. And I want to tell you the reason we said we was the Mississippi Democratic Party because when you are out there (as) civil rights workers, civil rights work But you see if you get out there with them, you work with them. And when they come down they say they come to help me. Well, if you come to help me, I know what I want you to do for me and you do that. Since I didn't get, I finally got all heated up when they (the white volunteers) wanted to do what they wanted to do, and we wanted to do something different. You see I wanted them to knock on doors and try to help get as many adults involved as possible. Maybe they didn't want to do that. They may want to just be on the corner or something like that. But it worked beautifully, beautiful at first.

Sinsheimer: At first it was good?

Palmer: It was beautiful at first. But you know how it is when, it takes so much patience, get so lonely, it is so hot.

You couldn't bring them all together and tell them to get out in that hot sun. You might say, you might say well you know (we) are down here for you, but they didn't realize they weren't free themselves. They didn't realize, they thought for sure that they were down here for us. And I know they were down here helping us to get free, but I knew that they needed to be freed too.

Now I don't know nothing about law and political-wise, lawyers and stuff, I didn't even bother with that. I left (Lawrence) Guyot with that. I would go to Mrs. Hamer ... but just working trying to get people out, that was my job. And talking on the telephone, trying to get people to come out for different meetings When it come to reading, writing and spelling, see I didn't get any of that. But what I want you to help me to do, you come in here to help me, say you come to help me, well if you help me, you come to do things that I see need to be done, other than that you are not helping me. You are doing what you want to do. You aren't do nothing I want you to do. So those first kids were good kids, they was good kids, all of them

But it was a whole, it was a whole day's work that you had to put in. And then sometimes you wouldn't be doing nothing but walking and talking, but it was hard. And at that time you are talking about a police state, this was a police state. When I got to Washington and all those policemen, I said my goodness ... we is supposed to be nonviolent and all these policemen ... are down here.

Sinsheimer: Which time was this when you were in Washington?

Palmer: The whole front of the Capitol, the House of Representatives (was cover with policemen), you couldn't get through them if you wanted to. What was poor innocent, poor people doing, we wasn't do anything that wasn't suppose to be done. We were trying to stop some of this fighting, stop some of this killing, telling people that we have got to love each other to get along. You can't build nothing with hatred in your mind, you know. You can't get nothing Everything you try to do, you think you are doing right, they are trying to do something different. You see that is (Inaudible portion)....

I don't know recall, I know one thing the churches did involve themselves. ... But the memebership is supporting them, the preacher, and I don't see no reason why he can't speak out because they can't cut his money off. ... So long as they sit back and they ain't speaking out we still have a long way to go. Sometime it will scare you sometimes. But the freedom I was working for is for everybody, everybody because I will tell you gave me a freedom, I ain't free. Next fellow same thing. Now if

you have some questions that you want to ask me, did I answer your questions?

Sinsheimer: You have answered most of them. I was thinking about that just as you were saying that. Let's talk for a minute about Mrs. Hamer. Everybody likes to talk about Mrs. Hamer, why do you think, what was it about Mrs. Hamer that allowed her to speak so clearly to people?

Palmer: Mrs. Hamer was just a born free talking woman and Mrs. Hamer loved people. Sometime people love. they say they love people when they don't. But you see Mrs. Hamer was on of our (MFDP's) Congressmen, Mrs. Hamer, Mrs. Devine, Vicky (Victoria Gray), Guyot, Ed King, Rev. _____, and a few names I can't even think of. And you wanted to know about ...?

Sinsheimer: About Mrs. Hamer.

Palmer: Well, you see Mrs. Hamer was up there in that Delta area, and Mrs. Hamer got beat when she wasn't even trying to get registered. See they beat (her) and anytime you get a whooping about something you get Now I was lucky enough ... to avoid that licking. But I saw it done, I just happened not to be right at that spot.... But these people— Mrs. Hamer was beat just by trying to get registered to vote. And then from the last end Mrs. Hamer helped her neighbors when I was up there, I was up there. They were telling me about how Mrs. Hamer helped them, put a down payment on their house and got all that they needed, got them a much nicer house. I don't guess too many people are in their old houses, I don't guess, maybe me (laughter).

But I will tell you, I think that everybody if you try to live in your means Mrs. Hamer could sing, Mrs. Hamer could talk, she could do all that, that is who we had as our spokesman when we were going out of the state. Everybody didn't try to talk.

Sinsheimer: Right.

Palmer: A poor woman. She lived in a little old raggity house too. And she had several things going for when she passed. They had a little, something about they had a Hamer group or something where she just went from state to state where she would be invited, she would sing and tell her story.... They had Sunflower county.

Sinsheimer: I have only been as far north as Greenwood but next week I am going to get north of there, I really haven't seen it yet so

Palmer: You keep saying Greenville.

Sinsheimer: Greenwood. I am sorry.

Palmer: Now there is a Greenwood, there is a Greenville.

Sinsheimer: I know, I know.

Palmer: Okay. Well, I didn't know too much work around Greenville because Greenville is kind of like a, some of these people are able to do for themselves. They didn't have too much to worry about. Well, I am sure somebody else can give you some names. Names are hard to catch.

Sinsheimer: Do you remember a Mrs. Pinkie Pilcher?

Palmer: Yes.

Sinsheimer: Well, I got a chance to talk to her.

Palmer: How is she doing?

Sinsheimer: She is doing pretty good, she couldn't remember a whole lot, but she was able to remember some things.

Palmer: Right.

Sinsheimer: Pretty good. I am trying to think of anyone else who was a delegate.

Palmer: What?

Sinsheimer: I was tring to think of anyone else who was a delegate (to Atlantic City).

End of Interview.

Note: (At times Mrs. Palmer would speak so softly that the tape recorder would not record her voice. Every effort was made to keep the continuity of the interview)