




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MEMORANDUM

To: Tim West

Fm: Joe Sinsheimer 

Re: Interview With Willie Peacock

Dt: December 20, 1998

Enclosed is an interview I conducted with Willie Peacock, SNCC field secretary in Mississippi from 1962-65. Peacock was particularly active in the Greenwood, Mississippi area during the 1963 voter registration campaign.

In the interview, Peacock discussed: 1) the development of a NAACP chapter at Rust College in 1961 in the wake of the Greensboro, NC sit-in demonstrations 2) meeting Bob Moses in the fall of 1961 3) the renewal of the Marshall County Voter's League in 1962 3) Amzie Moore's relationship to Bob Moses and the other young SNCC organizers 4) the formation of a singing SNCC quartet featuring Peacock and Hollis Watkins 5) working on voter registration activity in Sunflower County with Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer 6) the assassination attempt on Jimmy Travis and Bob Moses outside Greenwood in 1963 7) and problems in the 1964 Freedom Summer campaign.

Interview with Willie Peacock
Jackson, Mississippi
February 8, 1985

Sinsheimer: If you want to just go ahead and start, I will turn the tape on.

Peacock: Okay. Let me give you a little background information about myself. I was looking for a way, I was conscious of what was happening with my people in Mississippi and throughout the South. I hadn't been much in the North. I was young and about fifteen years old I left home and just went around the state for about a year. My parents didn't know where I went, it was just-- I went from one-- in those days it was not dangerous, it wasn't safe. Like many kids would be wandering around, tied down to some kind of job, or something. Because Jim Crow was very much alive.

But I went from my home town in Charleston which is in Tallahatchie county to _____ the various cities that they said, little towns and counties that they said were very bad for black people such as Carroll County, Carrollton, Leflore County, all points through the Delta; hitched around, hitch hiking, working a little bit. Such as a teenager at that time could get.

And then I came back home with the determination that, to finish high school and go to college, and try to get some skills, credentials so that I could be some kind of force in helping, joining forces with whoever came up to help bring about the kind of liberation in Mississippi that would save the lives of my people, because they were being lynched left and right. It wasn't even news anymore. The only time it became news again was when Mack Charles Parker and Emmett Till were lynched. And that kind of got attention focused on Mississippi. There were people even that I had heard about-- Medgar Evers, Amzie Moore, and Dr. T.R.M. Howarth, and many other black people that were trying to be progressive, who were going to Mount Bayou which was in Bolivar county, meeting every Sunday, not every Sunday but I think something like once a month. They had a campaign going on, don't buy gas where you can't use the restroom which was the first statewide direct action type movement, thing that I remember happening, that happened in my time.

So I followed my plan. I went off to Rust college in 1958. In 1960 the sit-in movement in Greensboro happened, people at sit-ins. Students on campus, those who had the same kind of ideas that I had came to the front and we began to know each other; talking, meeting, and trying to think about what would be our part to play where we were since we were students and we knew the kind of decadence that was around us, and the things that we were submitted to in Holly Springs, Mississippi as students.

So we started right then and there. We were the main support for the local theater, yet we had to sit up in the

Peacock (cont.): "crow's nest," up in the balcony, separate you know. So we started there, boycotting, and we got M.I. College students' body, student government to meet with us and to do something jointly. But then Mr. Roundtree got to, something got to the President and it was almost like they were forced to go to the movie. And then we kind of intensified, from that point '60-'61 we intensified our efforts. And we started-- we felt we needed a structure to work from, so the first chapter, college chapter of NAACP was organized. That is when I met Medgar Evers. That was the second time actually that I had met Medgar, because I had already attempted to vote around my home town and so he came and I told him of the results. I was refused and I sent an affidavit to him to get to the right places. And in '61 I helped organize this chapter on the campus.

And I came to find out that it was the more conservative students who were dealing with the NAACP, so some of us, a few of us just split off from that and we started trying to knock on people's doors and trying to get people to attempt to register to vote. By this time, the fall of '61, Bob Moses came to campus, because -- that was when I met him and Amzie Moore. They were trying to get busloads of students to come down to Oxford to the federal court where the case dealing with voting practices in Charleston, Tallahatchie county was on trial there. And the plaintiffs would always fill the court with these local white people.

Sinsheimer: Right.

Peacock: So that they would not be intimidated. Bob and Amzie strategically came to the campus and the president of the school was very receptive, Dr. _____ Smith and them were able to get maybe a busload and a few cars of people to come down. And being from Charleston that was a big step for me because naturally I saw all of these white people who knew me, who knew my parents, who knew all of my relatives, and whatever reprimands they could have taken because I was there.

And it seemed like to me from that point on there was no turning back. We started, we intensified-- well I was graduating that spring of '62. From that point on, through the winter, on through that summer we intensified our efforts. By that time I met Frank Smith who is now in Washington, D.C. He was with SNCC. Bob never got back to the campus, he was busy down in McComb, and going around the state trying to coordinate things.

(Peacock)

Sinsheimer: Did you know at the time what was happening in McComb?

Peacock: Yes, I knew what was happening.

Sinsheimer: Was that through word of mouth or ?

Peacock: It was on the news. And then there had been some SNCC people that had come through, Chuck McDew and Dion Diamond. Actually they were the first people who came through for SNCC. But they went back to Louisiana, they were serving ... they had got arrested and they were serving time. They had a charge of insurrection I believe, which was a serious charge. So they never got back and _____.

And as I was saying, Frank Smith came from Georgia, from _____ county and we started organizing, doing some serious organizing. We went throughout Marshall county, De Soto county and Benton county, all of these are rural counties right there together, making contact with people who we had heard about by word of mouth that had been trying to do things all the years. These were our initial contacts. There were always people in the communities who had stood out in trying to do things. So it seems you never really have to go empty handed so to speak, to anyplace that you are trying to do something with. There is always somebody there. And if you ask the right question people will tell you who to go to right away.

So we started coordinating, in coordinating with what we were doing we told them what efforts were being made in Marshall county. These kind of people kind of knew each other, you know, had been together some kind of way. And then they would tell us about other people in that same area we were working in. And then we started coordinating, gathering information and kind of consolidating our efforts. We were kind of at the same time-- it was the consensus that voter registration should be the thing to move on first.

Sinsheimer: The people in the communities felt that?

Peacock: Yeah, these contacts.

Sinsheimer: That voter registration was the first thing that needed to be done?

Peacock: Right, because ...

Sinsheimer: Now were a lot of these people old NAACP people, or younger people that you were seeing?

Peacock: Initially most of these people I would say were from middle age to elderly people working, doing things, standing up, standing out for a long time. So we started there, we were

Peacock (cont.): able to organize the Marshall County Voter's League, or activate it, I think it already existed because there were, in all of these particular counties except a few they always had a handful of people, black people that they would let vote.

Sinsheimer: Right.

Peacock: And usually these people were Masons. And since they weren't allowed to participate in the white Masonry, this was something that the white Masons had to do to control everything, not illegitimize the Masonic order, to keep it looking legitimate to these people, that it was something worth having.

But in the main there was no registered voters, they had no power. So when we really started pushing that is when we got resistance, and the more resistance the better organized we got. And I left Marshall county in '62 and our office. I went home to Charleston to decide which way I was going in my life, because I was a pre-med student and had been accepted to _____ school in Nashville, Tennessee. And I needed money, my parents wanted me to teach school for awhile. I applied for a teaching job-- they wanted me to come home. I applied for a teaching job there, I was refused a job because _____ Lindsey who was on the faculty at Rust College had become the first black man since Reconstruction to run for political office, he ran for Congress. And we had gotten a petition together to get his name on the ballot. So this is what was held up in my face by the superintendent of education when I got to him. "You went to the school where _____ Lindsey is from." I said yes.

The grapevine is strong because I didn't see a janitor or anybody, but the word got back to Mrs. Birdie Keglar, who was our contact there in my home town of Charleston. She got the word that I had been refused this job and why and everything almost before I could get home. Bob Moses and Amzie Moore, they were making their rounds, making contact with these people. And they heard about it and they came straight to my house and told me that they needed me, you know. And they heard that I was getting ready to leave, go to Detroit or something to work. So I had not even unpacked my clothes. And I told my parents what I was going to do and naturally they were wanting me to do something else.

Finally we left, we left that evening and stopped at a couple of places where there were meetings going on at churches, it was like a revival but they were actually political meetings. This is the kind of secretive work that Amzie was doing, all throughout the state. Amzie was the man, he was doing things all the time. And very

Peacock (cont.): quietly, but very, very effectively. And so he was, naturally he was Bob's contact, he was like a father to Bob in every way.

Sinsheimer: Right.

Peacock: So we left that evening, went to Cleveland to Amzie's house. (break) I was supposed to go to, it had been decided that I would go to Sunflower county, to Ruleville, they didn't have anybody working there on an ongoing basis. But they had many interested people, you know, had interested people, when I said many I was talking about four or five. That's enough.

And I was looking forward to doing it, and I was mapping out in my mind the strategy I would use because that was really like sitting right on the edge of Eastland's plantation, which was a very ruthless type of situation. And thinking about how to do that. Amzie had a plan. I could sing so, and Hollis could sing, talked about putting together a quartet, a gospel quartet. Because Amzie had done this before. Sing gospel at these churches, and then spring this on people, and get out of there. Come back go another place and do the same thing. So I was looking forward to this.

Sinsheimer: When did you first meet Hollis? (Watkins)?

Peacock: I met Hollis in '61. After he got out of jail, him and Curtis Hayes. But then when we got to Cleveland that night, we got sidetracked. This was about one o'clock in the morning we got a call from Greenwood, Mississippi. And it was Sam Block calling. And the building where they had the office upstairs was surrounded by, I guess we would call them White Citizen Council people, people, white people who had been put up to do this by the White Citizen's Council. And they had clubs and chains and different kind of paraphernalia, and they were getting ready to come up the stairs where the office was. In the office was Sam Block, Lawrence T. Guyot and Laverne Brown were sleeping.

So they called and asked, called Bob and asked him that they needed to get the federal government in there because their lives were at stake. So Bob told them to try and get out of the building and we were on our way. I don't know what we were going to do when we got there. I guess nonviolence the Hell out of them or something (laughter). But that was really strong on our minds, what are we going to do when we get there. But we got in the car and left left for Cleveland, left for Greenwood. When we got there it was about two o'clock in the morning. We went upstairs, it was over Burn's studio, on Avenue I,

Peacock (cont.): 614 Avenue I. We went up there. Papers and stuff had been scattered, the doors were wide open, and saw a window open. Learned later that Sam and Guyot, who was a real big guy, about 6'4" and about that wide, they had to pull him through this little window (laughter). He burned his hands on a TV wire, you know, coming down, they had to come down the side of the building like that. And they got out.

So Bob and I looked around. We wanted to sleep, we went to bed there where this had happened. And Bob turns on this noisy fan, just like it wasn't nothing, you know. And I just said a little prayer, "This man turn on this loud fan, if I be here in the morning Lord, I will thank you." (laughter)

So when we woke up-- well I guess-- we woke up, I guess it was early morning, late morning. And Sam returned first. And they sat down and told us the story of what had happened, just as I was telling you. The proprietor of the building who lived downstairs, he wanted us out of there, you know. So for about two weeks it was just getting into it, to that kind of action.

So it was about two weeks we didn't have any place to stay, we were just staying in different places every night. (Inaudible portion) Well, we were doing a lot of organizing I should say but we didn't have a base where people could contact us. Sometimes we would go back to Cleveland at night and we were piled up on Amzie's floors, you know, every night.

And we were staying out in Ruleville, Indianola, this is in Sunflower county and worked there. We knew we could work only for about an hour before the police would come and try to round us up, they would round us up and take us downtown. Distributing literature without a permit. So we never could at that time get anything, get any local people to participate too much in Indianola, but Ruleville-- this is where Ms. Hamer, Ms. Sessions, and a few other people I can't think of right now. Really they were very courageous people in this small town.

And we started taking busloads of people over to Indianola (the county seat) to register to vote. I was there-- Ms. Hamer was among some of those people when they attempted to register. And when I saw her, she was at the meeting, at the mass meeting after she had attempted to register to vote-- and I heard that voice, it stood out above everybody's, you could know that there was something different about her. She never, she got put off (her plantation) that night, she couldn't go back to the plantation worked for many years, and had been the timekeeper, responsible for keeping the books for this plantation master. But just because she attempted

Peacock (cont.): to register to vote, she fell out of graces with him just that quick, you know. He wanted her to take her name off the books but she didn't naturally. (Inaudible portion)

She was harassed, everywhere she went, everywhere she stayed, somebody seemed to inform the authorities where she was ... and they would shoot up the place. So this was in '62, we were really moving now. More people-- Charlie Cobb, _____, Charles McLaurin, they came up from Jackson where they had been dealing with the sit-ins here (in Jackson) and also other things. Jesse Harris, yeah. So they came on up to the Delta, and we got, we were working, we were working four or five towns a day, kind of softening up things. And then finally we began to settle in different places, we got a little established where we set up a little office and somebody had taken us in and we could stay there.

And in '62 that is when organizing at that level began, we started coordinating, giving the people whatever we thought they needed, whether it came from the SCLC, NAACP, CORE-- CORE was always with us, David Dennis and George Raymond Canton. We just started fanning out in the whole state and dug in and started organizing and listening to the people about what they felt needed to be done. And coming up with a means by which, we were coming up with a vehicle by which this could be implemented, that is what really happened I think. And really just being with the people and trying to give them courage and inspiration to go on, singing at mass meetings and going on like that.

And emphasizing to them the need to have what we call a grass roots organization, whereby they would have the structure and discipline to move on their plans according to priority. Voter registration and then other things, jobs and whatever, elected officials, and maybe sometime get to where they would be conscious enough to talk about changing the whole system. That is really where we felt the need was, and people would have to walk through what they had to understand what it was all about and participate in it so they could see the need for a total change.

And we wanted to do it in two years, so we were moving fast. Ate very little, we didn't think about it. Because we didn't intend to be doing this all our life, you know. But as we went on we found that freedom was a constant struggle, you never could say that you had it made, it was something that you have to do all the time, trying to be self-determined.

But we had gotten some real basic grass roots organizations, the buds of them started by '63. And in '63 we were moving, Greenwood had burst open, it was just a popular thing to go in and register to vote although

Peacock (cont.): they were refused. And then we had the structure, the local structure and the enthusiasm of the people. Then in February of '63 I believe it was, March, I don't remember exactly when Jimmy-- it was February, some time in February we got a break through and we got about 128 people to go down to attempt to register to vote at one time in Greenwood. And Bob (Moses), Randolph Blackwell, and Jimmy Travis drove over from Cleveland to see if this was true. They didn't much believe it (laughter).

So they wanted to see names and all that. They just couldn't believe it. But that night we tried-- they got ready to go back to Cleveland-- we tried to get them to stay because we had seen some people circling the office and we figured that-- with dark glasses on and no tags on the car, about four cars-- we figured that somebody was going to get hurt if they ever left town. But they left.

Sinsheimer: Right.

Peacock: Jimmy (Travis) was driving the car and he got shot, he was the one that got shot. A slug hit directly in the back of the seat where Bob was sitting, it, somehow it didn't hit him. It went through the seat. Mystical.

And then that caused another thing to happen. Wiley Branton made a public statement to the press that we were going to make Greenwood a testing ground for civil rights. And then that brought in-- it kind of snuffed, it kind of-- we went into mobilization instead of organization. Everything was mobilized. People were coming from everywhere and doing it for the people-- and the people, lot of stuff, action wasn't coming from the people because organizers from everywhere stopped what they were doing. Because one of our-- we had already committed ourselves that if anyone got killed anywhere we would go, we would bombard that place. So everybody came from everywhere there.

The federal government that didn't want to protect us in the first place-- the Kennedy's--that really were, they didn't know what to do. John Doar and a group of his lawyers from the Civil Rights Division of the Justice Department. It was surprising to them. They spent a lot of time investigating us, they really did. We were very pissed off when we found out what they were doing. We were in jail when they questioned us, that is when we found out what they were doing. Wow, wait a minute so you all are investigating us and he laughed and said, "Yeah." "That is what you all are doing investigating us." And that time, John Doar had a good working relationship with us, but it kind of made him feel bad, but he knew that they had been doing it all the time and he

Peacock (cont.): didn't know how to look at us when he saw us again. Because we developed kind of a comraderie, we were, because we weren't doing anything unconstitutional, everything we were doing was constitutional.

But we kind of came, sort of spring on this government and they were trying to understand how it is that the black people were moving like this at this time, you know. I guess this is what it was all about. What force was behind the movement? What was happening?

So we went through that and by the spring-summer of '63 we were still, we were back organizing and doing things. Somebody came out of nowhere with this idea of having this kind of project for 1964. And naturally most of us, all of us who worked in Mississippi didn't want it, because we had spent too much time trying to get these little budding organizations off the ground so the people would have the skills of how to do things for themselves, regardless of where to move. And wouldn't be dependent on nobody from outside of their communities to do things. Only, and if they got somebody, we were acting as consultants really. So that this is what you do, you know. You call in expertise and get people to do things, that is what we were really saying. And get that and go on and do things for yourself.

But when the summer project of 1964 came into focus, we knew by the experience that we had had with the students coming for a short time. They didn't know how to organize, they didn't know, they came with guilty consciences, they didn't come with the idea, they came with the idea of giving people a fish, instead of teaching them how to fish.

Sinsheimer: Right.

Peacock: You give a person a fish, they will be hungry tomorrow. You teach them how to fish they will never go hungry. So they came with the guilty thing of giving a fish. And they couldn't understand why we weren't grateful for them coming, you know. They were angry with us and they started dividing us from the people, because they were angry with us, because we were not grateful, you know, that you were interfering with a process here, where people, where we had people doing things, not allowing them to express themselves and show their own ability, and get results, so that they could have more confidence in the next step, which was very, very potent stuff in the early stages, because nobody was doing that in the USA for poor people, white or black, white or black.

So naturally I understand later, as I got older, why the government was interested. Because that was a dangerous idea. Because that kind of idea is what caused the USA to break away from England, that kind of thing.

Peacock (cont.) That is revolutionary. But we weren't thinking in those terms, but that is what it was. That was just the thing to do. In our revolutions it just happened to be the thing to do, you know. But the establishment does not want to be moved naturally. It is nothing to be angry about, naturally they are benefiting from being where they are and if you are where you are you are not benefiting, you know. These two forces have to meet at some time.

 It can be delayed by federal poverty programs, it can be delayed by grants, it can be delayed by giving grants to the police forces around the country-- that is thing in vogue now to beef up security to keep the people in their places-- but eventually these things have to happen when the government gets to a point where it does not meet the needs of the people. (Knock on the door-- break)

End of Interview