

MEMORANDUM

To: Tim West

Fm: Joe Sinsheimer

Re: Interview With Cleveland Sellers

Dt: February 8, 1999

(Tim—I still have some more materials to send you. To date, I think I have sent you 75% of my collection. I will see if I can send the remaining 25% over the next few weeks).

Please find enclosed an interview I conducted with former SNCC field secretary Cleveland Sellers. In the interview, Sellers discussed: 1) his tenure at Howard University as a student and a civil rights activist 2) class divisions among the student population at Howard 3) his first encounters with Malcolm X during the summer of 1963 4) the impact of Emmett Till's murder on his political development 5) tensions between the SNCC staff and the summer volunteers at the Ohio training sessions for the 1964 Freedom Summer Project 6) Robert Moses' leadership role at the Ohio training sessions 7) searching for the bodies of the three "missing" civil rights workers in Philadelphia, Mississippi 8) working in Holly Springs, Mississippi during 1964 Freedom Summer Project 9) John Doar's efforts to protect civil rights workers in Mississippi 10) sexual tensions between black SNCC staffers and white volunteers 11) his role in coordinating MFDP activities at the 1964 National Democratic Convention and 12) internal discussions among MFDP leaders in response to the Johnson's administration's proposed "compromise."

Interview with Cleveland Sellers
Greensboro, North Carolina
March 30, 1985

Editor's Note: (The interview began with a brief general discussion of the class question within the black community and Mr. Sellers' experiences at Howard University.)

Cleveland Sellers: Okay, I guess I will just, I will start out with my own involvement out of Howard University by saying that I had gone to Howard University after some involvement with the sit-ins in South Carolina. And I grew up in a probably upper lower class if you want to put it on a scale, a socio-economic scale. But because of rigid segregation in the area that I had come from I went to a school that was private, in other words public-private school that was one of the Booker T. Washington schools, Voorhees school and Junior College is what it was referred to then.

It was founded by a woman named Elizabeth Evelyn Wright. The arrangement was that the state would pay a tuition per student to the school to provide public education for students in that community. What that did was that generated probably a much better educational environment than it would have been if it were in a strictly public, state public high school. But it also created in many of the students there a sense of consciousness of purpose and direction. We were always made aware of history, black history; we were always made aware of commitment and dedication among Booker T. Washington and Douglas and Du Bois; and we were encouraged to strive beyond our own boundaries and limitations, so we had a kind of goal and mission that we had to achieve in the world. It wasn't tied to any kind of material attainment, it was tied to a commitment to your people, to developing, to developing and broadening that community that you came from, the black community.

And just as Booker T. Washington had developed Tuskegee and George Washington Carver, who was a scientist, had developed all kinds of methods for the potatoes and the peanuts and had explored all the possibilities for those vegetables, fruits, each one of us was encouraged to have a mission that would be kind of explored and change or bring about a better world.

So when the sit-ins came that school was an active participant in the sit-ins. Now at that particular time I had problems with my own participation. I went out

Sellers (cont.): and lined up on occasion and was able to get into one of the restaurants, but there was a tremendous amount of resistance on the part of my parents because of their status. So the resistance and the restraints created a probably heightened desire to get into an environment where that commitment, broader commitment to the movement, civil rights movement could be realized.

So in trying to determine where I was going to go to school one of the considerations was is that I wanted to go where I thought there was a "hotbed" of resistance. Where there were activists all over the place. My first choice was to go to the University of South Carolina because at that point it was all segregated. And I played basketball when I was in high school and my first notion was to go to the University of South Carolina as a basketball player but the schools were segregated so that was just completely out of it. And in applying to other institutions one of the options was to come to (North Carolina) A&T here in Greensboro and the other was Howard University and a couple of other options.

Joe Sinsheimer: How did you know of those options, I mean was someone at school helping you, saying here is a school in North Carolina?

Sellers: Yeah, we had, like I said the school was exceptional in the sense that it was a public/private high school and that many of the teachers were there because they wanted to be there. And the achievement levels of most of the students were much higher than in the other parts of the state. Also we had about a eighty percent rate of graduates going on to some college or technical institution. So that points up the uniqueness of that particular experience. So we were all encouraged to go somewhere. High school was not enough, high school was kind of a launching pad. Once you left high school then you go ahead and develop those skills necessary to do your research, to fly jets, to be an engineer, to be a scientist, to be a professor, to be a statesman, whatever you set as that particular goal. So we were all encouraged to go in the wild blue yonder and try to establish ourselves and try to make a contribution again to the world, positive contribution. And in particular to that community from which we came.

The school was founded by a woman, Elizabeth Evelyn Wright and she was patterning the school after Tuskegee and Hampton Institute. And because of her relationship to Booker T. Washinton she had managed to get a number of teachers from Hampton Institute which was a sister school to Tuskegee. So the quality of education was

Sellers (cont.): very, very high.

As a matter of fact for a long period of time the principal of the school was a woman. So it was not, I mean you had all the very positive qualities that were not found in other communities. You had a woman who had actually founded the school that adressed the question of women. You had a woman who was the principal, that adressed the question of women. And you had the president of the college during that time was a man, who was a scholar, an intellectual, and so we had most of the better, best of worlds.

And now when you look back on it you can see it, it is much more prevelent than you could when you were coming through during that period. But I organized a youth NAACP chapter. We had very intense discussions about the civil rights movement. We had ... what was it called, I am trying to think of the term but we had talked about academic freedom and defining the role of the college to the community. Oh I imagine back during the early 60's, late 50's. We probably, well we did before it became fashionable at Berkeley. We had already had demonstrations against the adminstration and negogiations and all those kinds of activities. Now we were in a very small, very rural, very agrarian community so if you were not there you might have missed it. But nevertheless those kinds of activities did take place and we had students there from Africa, and we had students from Trinidad, Jamaica, so we had, plus we had students from the school who were from, you know, New York and Washington and Savannah, Georgia and other parts of the country. So you had a real interesting mix. And it lended, it loaned itself to a really high level of sophistication on the part of many of the students at the institution. And all these factors I think helped shape and develop many of us coming out of that school.

As a matter of fact I have had the priviledge of having many of my friends and classmates active at some level or another in the Movement and I think there is a certain uniqueness to go along with that which you can actualy see people that you kind of grew up with, and buddy buddies, and they have actually have civil rights experiences, similar experiences, even though your experience with civil rights might be unique. They share those kinds of things and they understand those kinds of things. As a matter of act I have had about seven or eight of the persons in my, classmates and all, who have been active at some point or another in the civil rights movement. Many of the others

Sellers (cont.): went on to professional careers. My class was probably about sixty-three seniors, which was the largest class at that time at the school. Most of the classes, senior classes ran about thirty. And out of the three classes '60, '61, and '62, I think we ended up with approximately seven or eight medical doctors out of that class. And the other professionals out of that class is probably very, very high in terms of a lot of them went on to principals of high schools, and they became other professional kinds of people. (Inaudible portion)

Anyhow, I left and I decided to go to Washington, D.C. and Howard University. And I thought that was going to be the hotbed of civil rights activities. And I went up that summer because I wanted to work a summer before I went to school. Because I had gotten an athletic scholarship to Howard University. And I wanted to pay for it on my own, going to school. I had become very disenchanted over the fact that I had been restricted from being actively involved in civil rights activities.

As a matter of fact on one occasion I put together this major rally as president of the youth NAACP and had a speaker come in from Atlanta, Georgia. Had a church and a choir. Just when-- well the whole discussion about my participation had occurred over a long period of time-- and the confrontation came probably a couple of hours before the program was ready to go off. And I was restricted from going and that just did me a number. I mean I just-- took all the wind out of my sails. And at that point forward it was just a matter of trying to wait my time out, and trying to assume a certain independence so that I could in fact experience, or be a part of, actively involved in the civil rights movement.

So one of the major considerations-- well there were two major considerations for Howard University. One is that I was thinking that it was a hotbed for civil rights activity. And secondly I was interested in chemical engineering and flying. And I figured that I could accomplish all three of those objectives. At Howard University they have a good engineering department, they had an ROTC, and I figured that I would go into the ROTC program and come out with a commission and fly and be a chemical engineer and all those kinds of things. Not really dealing with the contradictions at that point, just this is how I came out of high school and you had to set some real goals. That is what I had intended to do.

When I got to Howard because I was attempting to be fairly independent my resources were fairly limited. And I worked and I attended classes and that consumed most of my time. Because the athletic scholarship was an athletic scholarship during basketball season and a work/aid scholarship at other times. So as soon as I went to school I started working on the athletic staff there as a trainer.

Sellers (cont.): And that required probably two to three hours per day after class. And I began to try to find my niche in terms of finding these radicals, these rebels, these people who were going to stride into the world and change, and confront segregation, and change oppression, and all those kinds of things. And I was rudely awakened to find that many of the students, even if they were not from middle class families gave you the impression that that is where they came from. The idea was that Howard University was like the stepping stone into black middle class America. And they carried themselves to that manner, they talked in that manner.

When I was coming along the young ladies use to wear heels and stockings to class. The young men would, they would probably change clothes twice a day. And they had a certain carriage, the hair had to be properly attired-- whatever proper means. But they were really not interested in the plight of black people, the plight of the Negro.

Sinsheimer: How many southern students were at Howard? Was it ... ?

Sellers: There was a fairly sizeable number of southern students at Howard University. But see what Howard would do, because Howard was what Howard was, you would have a case, I will give you a specific case. There was a young lady from Jackson, Mississippi that was at Howard. And I think her family, both her mother and her father might have been school teachers. Now school teachers in Jackson, Mississippi, good gracious they can't make but so much money. But she would tell you about the family home in Atlantic City, the summer home. And how during the summer she would go up spend the summer in the family home in Atlantic City. I assume it might have been a relative who had left Mississippi or was living in New Jersey. But that status is what she was trying to achieve, that is the way you read about it in the other books on middle class America and they generally had a winter residence and a summer residence. And they had mobility and fluidity all over the place. And people would actually concoct tales about what there parents did and how much wealth they came from.

And I think E. Franklin Frazier, I mean if you want to get a clearer perspective on it, in his book Black Bourgeoisie will tell you about the extreme steps the black community would go to and still goes to to project themselves with status, especially the black middle class. You know the other kinds of phenomenon that were going on at Howard University which was not as common in the institution that I came from, Voorhees. Plus there was a caste system and a color system. If you were light and bright and curly haired then you automatically walked on

Sellers (cont.): campus with a certain amount of status and social organizations would come and want you to be in their organization. If you were as dark as I am, and I am not that dark, or darker, then you would be cast aside in terms of social interaction and social integration. So I just completely wiped out.

You had I guess must have been about 10,000 students there. And the biggest activity, social activity of the day was changing clothes. Friday afternoon fraternities and sororities would have activities on the campus and that was the buzz. Everybody would show up Friday afternoon and watch the AKA's and the Kappa's and the Omega's and the Sigma's and the Delta's all go through their different routines. And they were very, very, very exclusive. And even in those organizations you could tell by the color who was in what. The Kappa's and the AKA's were generally more light complexion. The Omega's and the Delta's were more brown, and the Sigma's and Alpha's were probably darker complexion.

The other thing was that just the social atmosphere and the status, you had to have the newest, stylish clothes. Jeans were just a no-no. And I had taken a large number of jeans to college with me. I had used those in high school and probably because of the area that I come from where it was common casual kind of wear to have jeans. So what happened was eventually I came to realize that I was in a dormitory where there were not a lot of people who were of the same kind of persuasion that I was and I began to seek out and try to find those people who might have been a little bit orientated or had some kind of activist mentality. I had all kinds of problems with my roommates because during the same period you are talking about '62, you still are in the age of the sit-ins and there is a lot of activity going on. And you try to talk to people about that kind of activity and they were very derogatory. They had not a lot of concern or consideration or compassion for many of the people who were involved in civil rights activities. They thought it was unbecoming, and they thought it was negative behavior for blacks to participate.

One thing led to another and I mean it was just not for healthy and wholesome as I, a person who was encouraged by what was going on. So I began to seek others at. I ran across a number of people in my effort to seek people out. I ran across Courtland Cox and Charlie Cobb and Stokley Carmichael and Bill Mahoney and Joe Gross. And I ran across probably Joe Gross and a number of other people through an Episcopal student ... what do you call it, I can't think of the proper name. It was where they had meetings, they had a house, Episcopal.

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Sinsheimer: Fellowship or?

Sellers: Yeah. And then Joe and those tied me into NAG (Nonviolent Action Group) at that point. And NAG was a very small organization that was committed to providing support and assistance and giving focus to the struggles in the South.

Sinsheimer: National ... ?

Sellers: No, NAG is Nonviolent Action Group. And I went and hooked up with NAG and I found some additional people, Stanley Wise and Muriel Tillinghast and Muriel Lovelace and Mike Thelwell and Charlie Cobb was there. And then during that same period during that time SNCC set up an office in Washington, D.C. and NAG kind of operated out of that office. And I went into the office and met some additional people-- Ivanhoe Donaldson and Cynthia Washington ... who else was coming through there? John Lewis and another student at Howard was Ed Brown who was the brother of Rap Brown.

So there were a number of persons and personalities that were in and around the campus that I just plugged into. And I was so glad to meet these folk and we became so dependent on one another that we kind of like formed a very close-knit group, and we tried to spend as much time as we possibly could together. Because we were like I guess salmon amongst the mackerel, I mean we were trying to go upstream and everybody else was going apparently downstream.

So I became more involved with NAG, and the more involvement I had with NAG, the more the activities would change. We did a couple of things at Howard. We made an effort to elect people to certain positions on the campus like the newspaper Hilltop. We managed to get Mike Thelwell as the editor of the Hilltop. And we tried to take over some other student organizations to try to give some viability and visibility. The Lyceum program, we had an opportunity to move some people in there. We tried to bring people like Bayard Rustin.

Sinsheimer: Lyceum?

Sellers: Lyceum ... speakers.

Sinsheimer: Speakers.

Sellers: Like when you have your speakers coming to campus. Maybe I am not saying it right. I think that is ... Lyceum program, yeah. L-Y-C-E-U-M.

Sinsheimer: Right.

Sellers: Okay. And we tried to impact on the kinds of speakers that would come to the University. As a matter of fact we invited Bayard Rustin to the campus and we ran into a lot of

Sellers (cont.): opposition because Bayard was considered tainted and Bayard was considered this that and the other. So we had to fight issues like that on the campus.

Sinsheimer: Who was ... were you conscious of a couple of people being in the lead there or was it ... ?

Sellers: There were a couple of people in the lead primarily because of their status at the institution one, and secondly they had probably a little bit more exposure in terms of civil rights. Stokley (Carmichael) was a sophomore when I got to Howard, I think sophomore/junior. And he I think in '63 he was featured in ... what magazine was that... he was featured in some magazine as a student activist. I forget, I don't remember whether it was Glamour, it wasn't Glamour but it was some journal as an activist on the campus at Howard University. And he was a philosophy major. And he had gone to some conference I think with some of the people who were getting ready to put together SDS.

So he would have been one of the persons. And Mike Thelwell had, was editor of the Register and he had a certain amount of status on campus. Bill Mahoney was there, and he had a certain amount of status on the campus, plus was the antithesis, antithesis, whatever-- he was, Bill Mahoney was light complexion and straight hair but he was a Movement person. Which he looked the part for a real good Howard student you understand, but his heart was somewhere else. So he was constantly in conflict. During that time I used to wear my hair probably as long as it is now which was substantially long for Howard University. Everybody else had those little-- I mean they were skinned back, I mean hair was real short. So people would constantly have little comments to make about wearing hair long, why don't you get a haircut, don't you have any money? Did your Mama send you any money? You know, that kind of thing. That provoked me to continue to letting it stay like it was. Plus even coming out of my high school I think it generally stayed fairly long, not as long as it got during the period of the Afros, in the formal stages.

But we use to do other kinds of things like-- because we knew that we were not particularly, well we weren't unpopular, but we weren't popular-- that we use to do things like, things that were traditionally lower class, traditionally middle class, traditionally lower class kinds of things like we would sit out in the middle of the campus on a Friday afternoon while the frats and

Sellers (cont.): soriorities were all there and we would split open a watermelon and eat it in the middle of the campus. And people would not even come near you, they would pretend that you didn't even exist. Or you would sit out and eat some fried chicken, or you know, any of the traditional kinds of taboos, we would do those kinds of things. And people would, people would be real, if they looked at you then they had one of these expressions of just some little common Negroes, I mean just don't have any dignity and any status, anything.

So we continued to find a certain amount of strength in, from amongst one another; at the same time not opting into that facade, and into that kind of status situation. I mean I never ever even in my pursuit of the flying and my pursuit of the engineering, it was more, it was not in terms of status and position and money-- it was interms of as a chemical engineer I could do these kinds of things. And possibly pick up where George Washington Carver, for example, left off. I don't know. But that was something, I had done well in chemistry at high school and I liked it and I thought that maybe this would be the area. In terms of pilot flying, that would be something that I may enjoy doing and if it be something that I could stick with and you know you had Benjamin O. Davis and other pilots that I had seen through growing up in high school. That had established themselves in terms of flight and aviation. You had the flight school down in Tuskegee where all of the black pilots had kind of come out of that. So I was looking at it in that kind of sense, altruistic as opposed to money making kind of thing.

So me it was not, Howard was not the stepping off point. And after a while and not a long time after I had gotten there I had seen I had made a serious mistake. So I had to make the best of it. And what I began to do is I became more and more and more involved with the civil rights activities on campus. We had some bus demonstrations, bus strikes. We refused to ride the D.C. transit until they hired black drivers and let blacks ride wherever they wanted to on the bus. We spent the winter of '62-'63 down at the Justice Department if something happened in Mississippi, we would go down to the Justice Department. And then the Spring-- we would also raise and solicited food and clothing, which we gathered up to take down to Mississippi.

Sinsheimer:

Who was your link to information, was it through speakers, were you reading Movement magazines?

Sellers:

Well, we were reading Movement magazines, we had the SNCC office there which kind of shared with us information coming up and down the pike. And as hodge podge as the SNCC operation may have been at that point there was a tremendous amount of information passing back and forth. I think there was that one office in New York, or contacts in New York. And then D.C. and down to Atlanta, Atlanta was the central point. And the office in D.C. would be in contact with the office in Atlanta probably on a daily basis. So as things would develop in wherever, we would pick up on that. Plus our link was a link to the Congress and the Justice Department and all that other kind of activity. Plus they had a person in the SNCC office that was somewhat responsible to making those kinds of links. So we were like the foot soldiers in a lot of instances in that regard.

We had activities separate and apart from the SNCC activities that dealt primarily with the, dealt primarily with the campus. (Break) So there were any number of activities, as a matter of fact what began to happen and I could see it very clearly, was that we became so involved in activities, different activities, that it made it almost impossible to do a lot of studying. There was a conflict there, how do you get enough time to study and how do you convince your professor that what you were doing is as important as coming to class. And how you ... there wasn't a way to really get around that.

Now there is a contradiction inside of Howard itself. While the student body was geared in that general direction, the Howard administration did extend itself to students who had gotten kicked out of other institutions. So that kind of contradiction existed. So I don't want to paint the picture that Howard including its administration and its faculty and staff were monolith, that is not the case. There were professors who were involved in civil rights activities and egged us on. And they gave us the kind of support that was necessary. But the overwhelming majority of students were not of that persuasion. There was some that did support us, but there were more who, who standing out into that new found identification and they were going to succeed, they were going to make it. They were individuals, they did not see the relationships with them and even the community they had left behind. So that kind of-- I wanted to make sure that we point out that that kind of contradiction was in fact there. Because there were a number of professors including E. Franklin Frazier who wrote the Negro, the Black Bourgeoisie who were Howard professors.

In any event what began to happen was that the more we became involved, the more important it became to kind of bounce off each other again, and to kind of develop a spirit of support. And there was some other people, Jean

Sellers (cont.): Wheeler and I think I said Stanley Wise. I am trying to make sure I touch on all of the people there. There was another fellow, I can't think of his name ... Mickey, Mickey, Mickey ... Lassiter was another student. He just recently died in Atlanta. Probably a victim of the struggle. And then there were some other people at other institutions and community people, young folk who we became involved with, David Daugherty ... I am not going to remember all these names. A girl we called Squirrel, I can't remember her name. Karen Edmonds was there. Marion Dansby. A couple of others. I would have to go back and begin to put some names together to understand, to get that right.

But anyhow we went on and in fact the more the year went on, the more we were involved in different kinds of activities. And then Cambridge (Maryland) came along. And we ended up going over to Cambridge. And for the year '63-'64 I think it was, was the year that Cambridge was under marshal law. And we went over and spent a lot of time over there. So our experience level was becoming more and more. And we began to tie into other student groups, we began to tie into Maryland State at that point, which is University of Maryland Eastern Shore, Princess Ann, and we began to plug into some students over at the University of Maryland, some black students over there. And at some of the other institutions, D.C. Teachers College, we plugged into Ralph Featherstone and some folk there.

But after getting involved with Cambridge, then that summer I stayed in D.C. and worked and the later part of the summer ...

Sinsheimer: Were you just earning money?

Sellers: Yeah, I worked at a Hot Shoppe, and I worked washing dishes, working the line, whatever was needed. Making some money to help me go back to school, because while I was at Howard if not all most of the financing of my two years at Howard was I did it either through scholarship or trying to make some money here, there to cover the bills and expenses.

Then you go into the summer of '63 which is the summer preceeding the March on Washington. And because during that year we had forced the University to allow Bayard Rustin to speak there, he knew there was a contingency of young activists at Howard who would be involved. Plus Ivanhoe (Donaldson) was there in the Washington office, and Ivanhoe became the coordinator for fixing signs and coordinating a lot of the logistics of the March on Washington. So we all were assigned to that

Sellers (cont.): and spent a considerable amount of time working on the March on Washington, setting it up, just the foot soldiers. We stapled posters and moved posters and checked on loud speakers and the whole thing. As a matter of fact I often times when talking about it, I talk about the fact that we stayed up, that night before, we stayed up all night long straight through. And by the time Martin King was speaking I had fallen asleep. I heard part of it, I didn't hear that much of the speech because I was just fatigued. I was just burnt out.

And we manned the information booth and we tried to coordinate, to help coordinate the entertainers. We helped some of the marshals, most of the marshals were coordinated through different police departments and that kind of thing. Where there was a need, we were there.

There is one interesting part to this whole summer. And that is that Malcolm X had come to Washington prior to the March. And we had been in contact with Lonnie who was the Muslim minister in Washington, D.C. As a matter of fact we branched out, we were involved with a lot of different types of people, individuals, some kind of left orientated groups, and nationalist groups, the whole spectrum. Well, anyhow Malcolm was there and we had an opportunity, we would run into him in different places. And we use to sit down and Malcolm would tell us about the March and how it was a contradiction, and how the leadership in the civil rights movement ... and Malcolm would go on and on and on. It was just always kind of refreshing to debate Malcolm because Malcolm was always very friendly and very warm, and he was very sharp. So you didn't have to worry about whether or not you were going to win anything. That was out. But he was, he had a lot of respect, as a matter of fact he always to SNCC as the "student group," and I think that might have been his first encounter with SNCC that summer of '63 when he came down to Washington.

But we spent a lot of time talking with him and then it kind of, we had some mixed about what the March was all about. Because Malcolm knew the history of the March, and he knew that is started out, that they were talking about sit-ins on the runways and blocking the transportation and stalling the Congress and the whole And then all of a sudden it went from that to being very peaceful. Malcolm would talk about why those things would change and who was responsible for that. And then lo' and behold we had the problem with John Lewis' speech which did not help our own development and frame

Sellers (cont.): of reference, because here we are, we are involved with it, Malcolm is saying but look at the contradictions and he is raising some legitimate kinds of things to observe; and then all of a sudden we get smacked in the face because John has to change his speech. So that whole process was a learning process. And even though it was a NAG-SNNC affiliate, Friends of SNCC group which was what NAG was, it had an impact on SNCC in its own group. (Break)

Well, summer of '63 we spent most of the summer preparing for the March on Washington and we did a lot of coordination out of the SNCC office for getting people to Washington, SNCC people, and SNCC type people. There was definitely a type. We became more and more familiar with the class orientation of SNCC during that period. The bib overalls became the standard dress. The reason for that was the identification with Mississippi and what we now refer to as the peasant class, or peasants. And because of the humility that goes along with assuming that status and that posture, especially young blacks. It was like, almost like an initiation for you to feel comfortable and at ease wearing your bibs, probably your red plaid hankie and the blue workshirts. And all that was symbolic. And generally boots. And that was just a part of, it had a lot of conveniences. One is that if you are going to be on a picket line and get arrested you wouldn't have to worry about your stuff getting all torn up. If you had to be on the road or on the road or whatever it is you could very easily have that-- it was durable, if you were on the road it was not only durable but you could take it off, wash it and put it back on and go with it. So those are the reasons why, but it always set you apart if you wore it and you could very easily tell someone who was of the same at least political persuasion as you.

For the activists on the campuses in these other areas of the country they would recognize you coming. The regular people they would probably not want to make that identification with you. So the task obviously was to make information available to the vast number of black students, students period, about the plight and about class orientation. The group that we were trying to affect and how they related to that group. They were, they were in fact that group. Many of the students who were in college when I came along were first generation college, so they weren't that far removed from the land. They weren't that far removed from the jeans, the long hair. But they had developed an attitude where they were, they did not want to identify with it at all. And we had to transcend that, we had to break through that. And so

Sellers (cont.): we made that attempt.

After the March on Washington things in D.C. probably got back to normal. And the shortly after that you had the church bombing in Birmingham. And because we were in Washington, we were on the cutting edge. And you know all of the swirling around of different people and different opinions about what the next move is. At that point King was in Birmingham. And we had, we understood what had happened with Albany and had become fairly skeptical about King's intent and motivation in many of these cities. (Break)

About the same time we began to talk more seriously about the Summer Project (of) '64. And the necessity to recruit volunteers and to get people geared up for a major assault on Mississippi. Most of our activities in terms of support activities, our focus was Mississippi because it was easier to give it focus than maybe to an Albany, Georgia or to a Selma, Alabama. When you said Mississippi, the connotations of Mississippi immediately brought certain kinds of images to people's minds, both black and white. So it made it easy and rather than trying to hit everything we tried to hit the major target.

Sinsheimer: Now were you aware of that living in South Carolina, I mean was that a ... ?

Sellers: Well, the thing that kind of turned me around when I was a youngster was the Emmett Till case. And we use to use Jet magazines for example as the kind of black history tabloid. Either I collected it or one of the students in my class had a copy of the Jet magazine and they showed the pictures of Emmett Till after he had been pulled from the river. There was a whole bloated distorted facial and then they had an insert picture of what he looked like when he was alive. And we had discussions about that and the fact that he was about the same age as I was during that time. Mississippi and Emmett Till kind of stuck with me for a long period of time, and probably was one of those motivating factors because I became more conscious of what was going on at that point, and specifically conscious of Mississippi. Shortly after that there was the lynching of Macks Parker, he was pulled out of a Mississippi jail.

So we followed those things and those things, and we were encouraged to follow those things. We were encouraged to go to the library, we were encouraged to read. We were encouraged to read black journals and literature and newspapers. As a matter of fact in my home we had the Journal and Guide which was out of Richmond. And we had access to the Baltimore Afro newspaper, and we would go to the library and read the Pittsburg Courier. So we were keeping up. And then when

Sellers (cont.): the sit-ins started, generally the black press would be the one that would carry more intense and in depth articles on what was taking place and the personalities involved, so you would go to these as opposed to the state, you know, you might not get anything at all. But you go to the Afro, the Courier, the Journal and Guide and you have a good picture, you have something about some of the activities that were going on, names of the organizations that were

But specifically on Mississippi it was, it was I contend that the thing that kind of triggered me was Emmett Till. And that has stuck with me all the way through, it really has. At first I could not comprehend why a youngster would be mutilated and beaten to death, I just couldn't, wherever it is there are so many contradictions that you recognize. And the question of whistling at a white woman, I never could buy into the, I mean even if he was whistling, at the age he was, he was whistling. I mean it wasn't an act of defiance, it was just, he was being cute or smart or whatever it is, it did not justify. So that was a point where I really kind of got turned around there.

Sinsheimer: Now when you were in the Washington office (of SNCC), now some of the people had been to Mississippi, like Ivanhoe (Donaldson) had been there and he obviously would talk. Who else had been there and was helping in Washington.

Sellers: We use to bring people up, people who were there. We had a conference at Howard, I can't remember the year, I can't remember whether it was '63 or '64. But we had a conference, SNCC conference at Howard. And we brought up all the personalities, as a matter of fact I think Ms. Hamer came up and Jimmy Travis and Moses. We would have what we called eyewitness accounts. Moses spent some time in Washington with us as well. But we had people come in and talk about their attempt to register people to vote and the things that went on.

Our presentations, symposiums, forums were more hands on than anything else. It wasn't an academic, intellectual discussion about the pro's and con's of integration and that kind of thing. Even though we had people among our ranks that could do that. Most of what we would present would be an eyewitness account. Or we would have the SNCC office in Atlanta reported this to us. And then we would do a blow by blow. Church bombing, an assassination, beatings, brutalization, whatever it may have been. So that is the way we would deal with it. And we would try to deal with it in what we called common language, because not only were, did we put ourselves in a position of being able to understand that, but we also put ourselves in a position as the

Sellers (cont.): medium between articulating that and people hearing that on other sides. So you were a conduit, you just carried that information so that people would be familiar with it.

Sinsheimer: Do you remember was the University (Howard) game for the conference, I mean was there, for them to have SNCC at that point ... ?

Sellers: I can't remember the particulars on where the University was, I certainly wish I could give you that information. But we went through a lot of trouble setting it up. I don't know whether there was resistance or not.

By that time though we had fanned out pretty well and had taken over some very key and strategic areas of the campus. The other thing is that we had, when I was talking about getting outside of the, outside of SNCC, we had activities that were peculiar to us also, we were involved with a rent strike at that point in Washington. And actually organized the housing project unit by unit and actually had people refuse to pay the rent. And refusing the forced eviction.

So during this period of '62 to '64 our experiences were quite extensive in terms of organizing and in terms of mobilization, in terms of commitment. We would spend all night long trying to collect up the food and clothing and taking to the central warehouse and packing it up and getting it ready to go to Mississippi, sorting it out and all that kind of stuff. So it was almost like a full-time job, you are talking about sixteen, seventeen hours a day. So for me it wasn't, wasn't ... and I detected that hey grades were just, I was just about ready to give up on that. I was trying to maintain that but there was no real pulsation there. The other thing, Cambridge, was more important. And we had gone over to Cambridge and we had a demonstration to keep (George) Wallace from speaking at a public facility there as well as being a segregationist. The facility, we thought, was a National Guard Armory and we didn't understand the contradiction.

So we went over and participated in that and got gassed and arrested and taken off and locked up in Pikesville, Maryland for a period of probably about three or four or five days.

Sinsheimer: I grew up about ten miles from Pikesville. I was born in '62.

Sellers: Oh did you. Well they took us over to the National Guard Armory there in Pikesville.

Sinsheimer: I have been there.

Sellers: Well they just up on one of those floors up there, it wasn't anything that was guarding us, it was just rooms. They just locked us in there and they would bring us food every day, let us take showers, and we would just have to stay in the room. It was more like a classroom, we just sat around there all day. And then eventually they came around and released us. Because see during that period Cambridge was under marshal law which meant that any arrest was a federal arrest, you know, they could do whatever they wanted. But there ain't know trespassing charge that I know of when you are not on federal property and that is what they picked us up for. So there were a lot of contradictions there. Other than the fact that it was marshal law, so that means that the jurisdiction of the town belonged to the federal government. I mean who is going to go to court to prosecute that. So what they did was they penalized us by keeping us for a couple of days.

And we went on and got release and during that period Gloria was real active in Cambridge and we really spent a lot of time over there giving her support. At that point we met some additional SNCC activists, Bill Hansen and Reggie Robinson were over there. So we were completely surrounded now. There is no real distinction between us and our role and the other SNCC full-timers.

So then we began to tie into all these groups in and around the Washington, D.C. area and put together our contingency to go to Mississippi. And we were told that we would need some cars, so we recruited some automobiles, recruited a Ford station wagon and some other little old ratty car, and anyhow, we recruited three automobiles which took us from Washington to Ohio to Mississippi. And we recruited at the University of Maryland we got two people; we got one from D.C. Teachers. Johnny Wilson-- we recruited him out of Princess Anne at Maryland State. He didn't come to Mississippi on a long term basis but he did become involved in SNCC at other points.

Sinsheimer: This is the city councilman in ... ?

Sellers: Yeah, in D.C. And we didn't recruit Rap (Brown) initially. Rap ended up coming to D.C. after he got kicked out of Southern (University), because Ed (Brown) was there and he was going to enroll at Howard, and he was going to play football at Howard. And because I was close to the athletic staff I ran across Rap and because of Ed's relationship to us. And then Rap came down to Mississippi later on, he didn't come with us initially. But the next thing that I

Sellers (cont.): think happened that was of significance was that even though I had a room in a dormitory, Stokley had an apartment right off campus on Euclid Street and we spent the majority of our time that was not involved in other kinds of activity at Stokley's house. And it became like, almost like a communal kind of arrangement. Most people stayed there, cooked there, we ate there. If you were looking for anybody that would be the central place to find them. We recruited Lynn Wells, we recruited another fellow by the name of Fred Mangum. Who else did we recruit in there? Let's see Fred, Eric Jones ... he is special assistant to Johnny Wilson yeah, he is his administrative assistant, whatever that is.

Sinsheimer: Eric Jones?

Sellers: Yes. _____, he is a producer now. I think he did D.C. Cops, I think that is his, yeah, D.C. Cops. The Man with the Funny Hair. Let's see, who else? Bill Hall, Julius, not Julius Lester but Lester McKinney. I don't know how he got into Washington, I will have to figure that one out. But Lester ended up being near. What is her name, she is a seargent in the D.C. police department? Suggs, Diane Suggs. I don't know whether we put Muriel Tillinghast down or not, but Muriel was another person. I think that was it. We had about, no Ruth Howard. We had ... Charlie Cobb, I don't know whether we put him down. We had about as many young ladies as we had men. We also had monolith in terms of a group. Even the people at the University of Maryland and other places we had already brought them in on other kinds of activities. Now, everybody made the commitment to go. That was a joint commitment and we used each other to kind of balance that off, to make sure we were doing (something) we could live with.

One night, it was real hot. It gets hot in those apartments. I think we had eaten so we had come out and were sitting on the stoops and we were all sitting around chatting about, as much as we are chatting here. Every now and then somebody would joke and it was Stokley, Rap, Carolyn, Doris Wilson. Carolyn Matthews and I think Doris Wilson were the two students from the University of Maryland. We were all sitting out there, males, females, the whole works.

And down the street came these two women and this man. So I was sitting closest, the stoop that I was sitting on was closest to where the people were passing. So when the people got there the woman turned and asked me, "Are you Stokley Carmichael." I said no. She said, "Well I am looking for Stokley Carmichael. And I want to find him right now." Then she took one of those high heels out of her show, I mean out of her bag. She said, "I want to see him right now, would you tell me where he is?" The other woman and man kind of interceded and I said, "Well,

Sellers (cont.): he is somewhere around here." And then Doris, and then they asked for Doris and Carolyn I think. Doris was outside, Carolyn was inside. So I said I will get Carolyn for you. I went in and got Carolyn and she came out. And Doris said we will handle it. And it was I think Carolyn's mother had come because we were taking their daughters and we had brainwashed them or something, we had taken them away.

And they talked and they talked. And Carolyn and Doris said well we are going to go (to Mississippi). We have made our commitment, we have talked to the group. We are going to go. And then the parents were not satisfied at that point. They flagged down some policemen and asked them to arrest Doris and Carolyn. And the police officer said well how old are they? The mother said they are eighteen. The police said I can't do nothing if they are eighteen.

And eventually, you know, the mothers were crying and oh boy it was just dramatic. And Doris and Carolyn were crying, and we had about two days I guess before we were going to pull out. And we all had to sit here because it is not like it is Doris and Carol it is all of us, we are all in this bind, you know, what the hell is going to happen in Mississippi. We might be committing ourselves to our own fate, you know, to our own death possibly.

So we talked, they wanted to talk, and we talked back and forth. We try to establish for them, you know, a sense of trust and that we are doing the best we could for them. And the option was theirs, and they had to make a choice. And they committed themselves and they decided to go. They went.

We all packed up and got the cars all gassed up and then we drove them up to Ohio, left D.C. and went on to Ohio. When we got to Ohio the fact that we were monolithic in the sense that we were all, had the same orientations, same understandings and all that kind of stuff. We went in with an advantage that others did not have. And that sort of rubbed some of the key organizers in a real interesting direction, because what ended up happening was most of the people who had gone with our group ended up in the Second Congressional District which was the blackbelt area. The lines have since changed, but during that period we are talking about from Holly Springs down through Batesville, down through Greenwood all the way over to Greenville, all the way down to about Canton, is the area that we had our people in.

And then we had Ralph Featherstone who started out with us in Holly Springs and then was shifted over to Philadelphia, so some of them ended up getting out of the area. But the other thing was that the group was primarily black, and our argument was that it fits better in the blackbelt areas because you would have better organ-

Sellers (cont.): izers and more experience, plus they would be black which would probably help you out a little bit. Did not go over very well. Stokley ended up being the Congressional area coordinator so he knew on a very personal level... The project director where I was was Ivanhoe (Donaldson) initially, and then I took over that. In Greenville it was Muriel Tillinghast, in Cleveland and that area it was Cynthia Washington and it was Stokley in Greenwood and Fred Mangum was somewhere, I don't know where he was, I forget where he was. And all the rest of us, you know, was like out of Holly Springs because we covered an eight county area. So that was our territory.

But we went to the orientation and most of what people were coming aware in terms of realities in Mississippi, we had already been exposed to. So that automatically made us seasoned veterans to some extent. And when we got there when there was need to have people assist and direct and coordinate or whatever else, many of our people would be at the center of that kind of responsibility. And I guess there must have been about seven to eight hundred volunteers. I can't remember the exact numbers. Out of that there might have been, there might have been maybe eighty blacks, if that many.

Sinsheimer: Most ... it is somewhere it seems to me between eighty and ninety percent white.

Sellers: Is that right. And out of that group the Howard group was about twenty to twenty-five strong which gave it a little . . . The other thing we did was as we picked up our assignments we immediately recruited one fellow out of Colgate and another fellow out of California, Hardy Frey. So we ended up picking up some additional blacks and they were in that Second Congressional District which really irked some of the people in some of the other Congressional districts.

The Fourth Congressional District was a CORE district. Let me see now where is the Fourth. The Fourth is Canton and somewhere in that area, Canton and Jackson and in and around that area, somewhere in that area. All of the rest of the Congressional districts we (SNCC) had. The Fifth I think was down there where George, where McComb and Natchez. That was George Greene and he had his own crew.

But anyhow the conference went very well. A lot of the youngsters that came in had no idea what they were getting into. None, I mean they were cold. And I think the thing that probably helped them out was that they came from ivory Colgate and Harvard and ... they had at least had some intellectual intercourse, relationship with the Mississippis and the Alabamas, but in terms of

Sellers (cont.): what it was going to be like they had no idea. And it became real clear as you would go through the conference, 'cause they would-- I think what (Ralph) Featherstone used to do is that he had a little juke box with him and he used to turn on his juke box and he would dance. I mean wherever, you know, and people couldn't get ready for that. The blacks there figured that he was not serious because you know that would be his scene. He would just turn it on and start dancing, he would just go ahead on. He had the box-- like the boxes now that you see on kids-- that is where he was. And everybody else with no boxes, you know. And for whites it was like ... living outside of McComb there he was strangled.

But anyhow as the conference went along and as people began to settle in and began to talk about what to expect. The major thing that I remember was that, when they showed the film. And they showed Mrs. Hamer and some others talking about Mississippi. They were not using proper language and the kids laughed. And I think it was, it could have been Travis, I am not sure who it was, but somebody got real, real mad. And when the movie was over they got up and said something to them, got real pissed off and walked out. And subsequently the rest of the staff walked out because they were saying that these are the people that you are going to work with, you can not laugh at them because they do not speak like you speak. And there are a whole lot of reasons for that most of which are class and caste. And as a result of oppression. But you have to listen to what the message is, and we spent ime talking about the difference between saying, "I am going to register to vote, " and "I am going to register." And it was the same thing, but you can make it a lot different if you put a lot of emphasis on the proper sentance structure and that kind of thing. And we were saying who are we dealing with. We are dealing with people who in many instances didn't get any further than the third grade. Now if you want them to talk better than we have to spend another ten years training them how to do that. But that is a part of the problem that we face here, you know. They are doing the best they can with what they have, therefore, let's don't play them off cheap. I mean we understand what they are saying. You know a baby was hungry it is just screaming out and we understand. You know you don't have to go through any kind of dissertation to understand that there is a problem and that, you know, that it has something to do with the baby being hungry. And the same thing. If a person is oppressed, you can understand that without having them say it in Harvard language.

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Sellers (cont.):

So we had to press that issue, that issue kind of took us from the kind of moving around abstractly to actually dealing with the hard cold reality of what the hell that was going on. Because we were getting ready to jump off into something. And nobody, nobody knew what the heck was going to happen. I mean it was just that clear. And while there was a lot of concern about the fact that the people who reacted were black and the people who did the laughing were white and there is probably some racial prejudice there, it had more to do with, I think, a genuine concern about the safety and security of everybody who is concerned. If you go down and you are playing people off short and they don't provide the kind of resources and protection that you are going to need, you are out there on a limb, that was clear.

Sinsheimer:

Right.

Sellers:

You know you had to almost, you know, you had to expose yourself certainly, but I mean you would have to expose almost every part of you in order for people to know that you are sincere. And would be willing to provide the resources that would keep you living. And so I think shortly after that we came up with a series of rules and regulations, some of which had already been drawn up, but some kind of emanated from that kind of confrontation. And then we kept dealing with, we began to deal more realistically, and people began, you could see people beginning to kind of tense up and be concerned, because the days began to count down.

And then shortly after that you had the Schwerner, Goodman, and Chaney thing. They were at the conference and we all kind of wished them well, and they were the first ones to move out. And Schwerner had tremendous experience and was a basic, sound kind of person. He understood the basic rules and regulations that you had to follow in Mississippi. So when he didn't show up, when he didn't show up within twenty-four hours we knew something had happened to him. That was clear to the more seasoned veterans. You might play around and laugh and joke and be the baffoon, but there are certain basic kinds of rules and regulations that you follow, because you not only have your life but you are dealing with, you have somebody else's.

Sinsheimer:

Right.

Sellers (cont.): And we had already had the Jimmy Travis incident, and we had already had the incidents down in McComb and in Amite county and Pike (county) and all down in that area. So it was a deadly situation, if you could not play with. So at that point we knew, the more seasoned people. And the younger people ... for some it was an avoidance, just let's push this out of our minds that this is happening. For others they didn't understand all of the dynamics. How could somebody be at the conference one minute and just walk down the street and all of a sudden they are gone, I mean they have disappeared, they can't be dead, they have to be somewhere else.

Sinsheimer: Right.

Sellers: And that is the way, that was the way life was in Mississippi especially during the period of confrontation. One minute, you know, people would be there, the next minute bamn you know, they are gone.

Sinsheimer: Yeah, the randomness.

Sellers: Yeah. So you had to deal with that kind of reality. And people were there telling people that, but it still took a while for them to make it hit. And regardless of what you said I think everybody on crossing the line between Tennessee and Mississippi, you know, you kind of went into it, you know, well this is it. You know and you could almost feel the crossing of the line. Now the next group that went out

Sinsheimer: Let me back up, let me ask you some questions about Oxford (Ohio). You talk in your book about the special kind of role that certain people played there, and I guess most specifically Moses.

Sellers: Right.

Sinsheimer: Tell me some more about that, I am curious about that-- the whole reaction that people had to him specifically at Oxford.

Sellers: Well, Moses always had an interesting repoire with the students and young people because 1) Moses was a very philosophical kind of person. And his method of presentation was always distinctive and unusual. And he was all involved-- he would raise questions with you, and he would challenge you, the intellectual you. And kind of stimulate you to think about the world that you are in and your relationship to that world.

Sellers (cont.): And at the (Oxford) conference Moses was no different. He raised the question of, for example, the importance of registering to vote. I mean what is the significance of that? What does the vote mean? And then rhetorically he would go ahead on and answer that question. It means food, it means education, it means security, it means those kinds of things. And who denies people the right to vote? And what is the state's role in that denial? Those are the kinds of things

And then he could talk about his own experiences and be insightful about going into a community and having the weight and the responsibility for whatever reaction occurs in that community on your back. I mean if you went into a community, everybody in the world know that you are in that community. It has gone around the horn for all blacks and it has gone around the horn for all whites. The sheriff know that you are there, the Klan know you are there, everybody know that you are there.

Now where are you? Wherever it is that you are you automatically attract a certain amount of attention. There will be blacks that don't want to identify with that black because of fear that they will get that association. There will be whites who will then put a lot of pressure, or make attempt to put a lot of pressure on the blacks. What kinds of problems do you create for people? Is that worth the effort? What is your commitment? I mean why are you here? What are you going to do in Mississippi.

So the way that Moses would present, Moses would raise all those kinds of questions. And raise them-- and a part of that would be that there would be a certain pulsation that you would get. You would begin to raise those questions too and have to come up with some very clear answers on what it is that you are getting yourself in, what it is that you are getting involved in. So that is what I am talking about in terms of Moses. Now you had people like Jimmy Travis that talked about getting shot. And Jimmy got shot with an automatic gun and he kind of slumped over and they managed to keep the car on the road, I don't know how they did that. And Moses could talk about that kind of thing and Jimmy could talk about it, but it would be a different kind of conversation.

Moses would talk about it in terms of the higher concern and consideration and that is, you know, what is life worth, I mean the corollation between bringing about change and that kind of experience. Jimmy would talk about it in terms of driving down the highway and this car pulls up behind you, you try to keep it from passing you, eventually you get on a stretch of road, the car is running a little bit faster than you. People

Sellers (cont.): pull up, you are driving down, they are shooting the car, they hit you, you fall over, somebody grabs the steering wheel. You don't know at that point, you don't know whether you are going to live or die. You don't know whether they are going to stop, roll back up and finish you off or what the circumstances are. The car keeps going, somebody--Moses-- grabs the wheel I think and keeps it in the road until they can slow it down and pull it over to the side, and pull Jimmy out from under. Then they have to take him over to the hospital. This is the story of Mississippi. You are constantly confronted with that kind of problem. You have George Greene who is going in and out of McComb at night. He has become on a first name basis with the state trooper who runs him in every night and runs him out every night. And he has been shot at, you know, three or four times. He is making contact and communication at night, setting up voter registration activities, setting up a Freedom Day or whatever that might be. So that would be part of how a Jimmy, a Jesse Harris, a George Greene would relate it.

Moses would relate it in terms of the higher questions and the larger questions of what kind of impact does this have? And what is the role of the federal government? What is the role of society in this? How do you play a part in changing that? Do you play a part in changing that? Does the larger society have any responsibility for what goes on? It wasn't like a guilt trip, it was more like what I am going to do is raise so many questions and then you are going to start thinking about these things and you are going to raise so many questions that eventually you are going to have to deal with how you are going to answers some of those questions, because it impacts on your own life, your own growth, your own development. So I think in that sense that we talked about Moses. Moses was always extremely calm and he did not talk particularly fast, so he could draw you in very easily. And if he-- the method in which he would present usually attracted even more attention. Like he would probably not go up on the podium, he would probably ... if there was a podium he would probably go somewhere else. He would use the _____ on occasion, but generally Moses would speak from the side or he would speak from the back of the room or he would ... there was always a special delivery method that would attract attention. And so he would hook you pretty much right in. But he would raise very significant questions. That is about what I can remember right now, I might be able to come up with more specific ... as I go back over that period and come back with some of the other kinds of activities that went on. But we were so busy trying to get settled in to the idea well this it, that most of the time was just trying to level off and settle in.

- Sellers (cont.): And you know there were a lot of guitars around, people kind of singing here and there. And it was a whole kind of "glow" to the orientation. People really grasping and grappling with a lot of extremely difficult questions and issues and just being confronted with a situation that they hadn't been confronted with before. (Break)
- Once we made the decision and concluded that Schwerner, Goodman, and Chaney, something had happened to them, then the strategy was to keep the press in the state of Mississippi from giving the false impression that they had gone to another state, that they were irresponsible, they were not legitimate and concerned. Because it was important for us to establish integrity with the people who were coming to us. (Break)
- Now we are at a point now where we have actually explode the myth that they are in good shape. And the only way you can do that is go to Mississippi, go to Philadelphia and find what the hell is going on. And at that point they assembled a team. I, on occasion, I have had some difficulty getting all the people who were together. But I know it was _____, Donna Moses, myself, Ivanhoe (Donaldson) maybe, Charlie Cobb-- there were eight of us. I am not going to be able to give you the other ones at this time.
- They sent us off with the better vehicles. Our primary assignment was to Mississippi for a period probably up to two weeks. (Break) We went into Philadelphia, we got there-- I can't remember the relationship between the funeral and when we got there. I remember the funeral. I think we might have gotten there the day of or the day before or somewhere in that general area. Dave Dennis had come to do the eulogy.
- Sinsheimer: I mean the funeral was later (in the summer).
- Sellers: Wait a minute, wait a minute, no it wasn't the funeral.
- Sinsheimer: No.
- Sellers: What was it? I don't remember what it was.
- Sinsheimer: The church burning?
- Sellers: The church burning came first.
- Sinsheimer: Right.
- Sellers: Then they went, they went down after they had gotten-- to investigate the church burning. All right. So what we did was we went down to check the church too. All right. So we got there and we talked with Schwerner, Rita.

Sellers (cont.): And we talked with the rest of the CORE people. That is a CORE area too. Sure was. All right. So we talked to the rest of the CORE people there. And we got as much information as we could and we had some contacts in the county, I don't know know what county that is-- Neshoba.

And we stayed in Philadelphia for about a day and then one night I think it was, one night we eased out of Philadelphia into the county. Went to this man's house, parked the car, I think we parked it in the barn. And some of us stayed in the barn, and some of us stayed in the house. And we stayed out there three or four nights. And each day somebody had responsibility for going out like hunting and they would check out old buildings and wells and ditches and all that kind of stuff where bodies would be hidden. And they would come back and pass the information down the line. That night we would take off and we would walk out to these areas. You know we had a real serious discussion about whether or not we should take weapons and Donna and were opposed to taking weapons and we lost that battle.

There was a firetower in that area so we couldn't have anything that was metal. And generally we did not wear white. We wore dark, any kind of dark clothing that you had. It was like all day long you would kind of sit around because there was nothing to do. If you weren't asleep, you maybe wake up about 1:00pm or 2:00 in the afternoon and you would kind of sit around until it got dark. And then you take off and you go out and you search houses. Featherstone was with us, that is why he had the liking for Philadelphia, he was there.

And most houses we would break the door down, go in, very skeptical about flashlights. We had about two flashlights and we had people that was their responsibility, when to shine the flashlight and when not, because we figured that if the firetower spotted us, that is their job, that they would send law enforcement officers and the law enforcement officers would pick us up. And probably we would end up just like Schwerner, Goodman, and Chaney. So we wanted to prevent that from happening if at all possible. But we stayed out there, we searched that whole area, we came up with absolutely nothing, no clues, no nothing. So we knew that we were warm but we were, we couldn't sustain that for a long period of time. It was not good for us, it wasn't good for the community because they were under intense pressure too. And weren't sure how to go about expanding the search effort. If you were in another area where there are a lot of whites in the area then you had some real problems. But we were in that area where that church was, so we figured that maybe they were in that area somewhere.

Sellers (cont.): So we pulled back and went back to Philadelphia and then after we went back to Philadelphia then we were dispersed to our respective projects. I went back to Holly Springs and Featherstone went to Holly Springs. Charlie Cobb went over to Greenville and Donna (Moses) went to Jackson and _____ went to Greenwood. I don't know who the other people were, there were eight of us I am almost sure. But even after that search and after talking with people, after checking out the church and all, we knew that they were dead and if they were dead they wouldn't ship the bodies out, that they were somewhere in that general area. That is just what we knew.

And we knew a lot of things during that period of time that we tried to convince other people of and they never would quite buy into it. The surveillance _____ forward, the whole bailiwick, we got a-- it wasn't just a feeling, it was like you would do certain kinds of assessment, certain kinds of analysis and it would draw and lead you to certain kinds of conclusions.

We weren't sure of the role of the federal government and the FBI in that too, so if you were using that group as your backup in terms of security you are in a hell of dilemma especially when you don't trust that same group. So we had just a heck of a time trying to resolve a lot of that. But we ended up going back to our respective projects. I went into Holly Springs with Featherstone and at that point Ivanhoe was the project director. And I was responsible for Marshall county, the area where Holly Springs is.

And we fanned out and we put together the, we began with the organization of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. And began to set the strategy in place for the challenge.

Sinsheimer: Right.

Sellers: We registered somewhere in the area of 28,000 people out of that Holly Springs office. That Holly Springs office I think did encompass eight counties.

Sinsheimer: Got 28,00 to go attempt (to register)?

Sellers: No, no, it wasn't attempting to register now, this was registering for the MFDP.

Sinsheimer: Oh okay.

Sellers: Okay. And we ended up with a total I think 80,000 to 88,000 people in the state of Mississippi. The largest majority of those people were in the Second Congressional District, so we did a tremendous job in terms of, in

Sellers (cont.): terms of having names and addresses of people who were more than interested in being involved in the political process and 2) were interested in being supporters of the MFDP. Because we had to tell them what it was, they had to fill out the papers and the forms-- if they did not write they had to sign their x's and have a witness to their signature on the papers. But most importantly is that in Mississippi during that period of time if you signed any kind of statement that was related to civil rights it was tantamount to putting your stuff in the streets. I mean that is how restrictive and repressive Mississippi was.

And so people, it wasn't an easy thing for people to-- I mean it wasn't a question of you just walking down getting people to sign their names. I mean they had to sign, they had to fill out an application, and that application if not handled properly could be used against them. That is what some of the sheriffs and the deputies would do. They got hip to the fact that we would have applications in the car, and they would try to get your applications. So you would have to hide the applications in the car and generally the first couple of weeks they would chase you. They would get you for reckless driving and speeding and driving too slow, any number of harassments.

But the way we had to, the way the orientation set us up was that we confronted the sheriff before he confronted us. And generally you would go in and say to the sheriff, "Mr. Rainey, Sheriff Rainey,"-- like in Holly Springs-- "I am here to work on voter registration and we are going to be involved with trying to get blacks to register to vote. And we would like to have a fairly good working relationship, we don't want to create any problems." You would through experience have to know how to talk. See each sheriff differed because in Mississippi you could find a sheriff who couldn't read or write or you could find one that had maybe a bachelor's degree. But primarily they were the remnants of the old boy system, they were sheriff because their father was sheriff or they were sheriff because they took the position when they were young and they just kept it all through, whatever it was. It generally had nothing to do with being good police officers, very little to do with being smart. So you had to deal with it, and you would have to know how to deal with it going in.

And everybody was instructed to go in on the first, once you got there for any number of reasons. One is that you did not want the sheriff to pretend as if you didn't exist. "I didn't know they were there, they got blown up, they got killed, why didn't they come and tell me." We did that on the front end. The other thing was

Sellers (cont.): that you wanted to establish a presence for the FBI and you wanted to tell them where you are operating and let them know. Now during this whole time the FBI was telling us that the only thing that they could do was reports incidents of violence. They could not intercede, they could not stop it. The police could be beating you on the head, they would take a report. They would not come over there until the police stopped beating your head or anything. They wouldn't even threaten the police.

Sinsheimer: Right. Is there a difference in your mind between the FBI and the Justice Department people, people like John Doar.

Sellers: No. John Doar would probably be a unique personality in and of himself. But no there wasn't a significant difference between U.S. marshals and the FBI as far as we could tell.

Sinsheimer: But both basically ineffective in that sense?

Sellers: Yes. John Doar's involvement at different times probably puts him head and shoulders above the rest, but that was an individual action as opposed to the group action. Primarily the group was non-committal, wanted to maintain their relationships with the locals, key stone cops. And you were just in the middle of that. And you had to develop a method for survival-- and I mean developing a method for survival. If you didn't develop a method, you didn't survive. And that is why I was saying that when you go into town you would have to know how to talk to a sheriff.

Some of the sheriffs would want to confront you. So if that were the case what you had to do was in fact you had to take his heart away initially. And keep him from doing something ugly to you. The other thing is that they would, some would try to embarass you in front of the public. If that were the case then what you had to do was you had to be able to follow up on it. You would not try necessarily embarass him, but you would, as he would try to belittle you, you would challenge him just a little.

I think Sam Block episode on the movie where the sheriff said, "Nigger you need to be out of here by sundown." And Sam said to him, "Sheriff are you planning to move." And the sheriff said, "No, I ain't going nowhere." And he said, "I don't how this is going to happen because I ain't going nowhere either. And I am here to register people." And that kind of challenged the sheriff. And he kind of like said okay well this is a stand-off. Now what that does for us is sets it up so that the black folk-- you have challenged the sheriff

Sellers (cont.): and survived. I mean there must be some magic here, some good magic. I am not talking about magic in the sense of the mystical magic, but I am talking about magic in the sense that you can actually challenge the system and survive it. And that is a good sign, because everybody hears about that you see. Everybody hears about it.

Now they tell two different stories, in the white community there is one story, in the black community there is another story. But everybody knows what has gone on. You can go in the sheriff's office and ain't nobody in there but you and the sheriff and everybody knows you and the sheriff are in the office and what is happening in there. Maybe because he comes out and tells his deputy what happened or he comes out and tries to tell his deputy what happened. Or maybe somebody is listening in at the door-- I don't know what it is. But generally around the courthouse you would find older black men who would be sitting around obviously in the context of the spook that sat beside the door. And they would hear and see everything. So when you went in, you know, you had to go in as a proud, head-up strong individual. When you come out, you come out the same way.

Well, they move on down the road and they pass that information on and within an hour or two hours it will be all over the county what had happened. So then that is the way you begin to have that kind of impact on that community in which you work. The other thing is that the communities began to open up after you got in there, they saw you trying to get people to register to vote. They would make certain things, resources available to you. They would tell you where houses were that you could rent or they would tell you, you know if you need something out of the garden, go in the garden and get it. Or they would go out on occasions and hunt and bring you some venison or some rabbits or some squirrels or something-- or some chickens-- or whatever it was. Because you needed that, we were operating-- the SNCC thing I think was about \$9.37 a week-- when you got that. Normally you didn't get paid but every two weeks and you had about twenty dollars. And sometimes it would be in Atlanta so you wouldn't get it until the end of the month and even at the end of the month you had \$40 so you didn't have a hell of a lot of money to be doing anything with. So you had to organize for your survival in essence, that is what it was all about. If you didn't organize right Then on occasion when you really needed something you could always go to the farmers and say do you need some help picking the cotton or chopping the cotton or whatever it is. And return would be some, you know, some collard greens or something out of your garden in order for you to survive, whatever it was. But that was a part

Sellers (cont.): of it. And it was always a situation where you would have to kind of show people what you were really about. You had to do that on a continuing basis. Not because people were that critical, but because you wanted to be absolutely clear. A lot of rules and regulations were in place. We talked about how people carried themselves, we didn't want people carrying themselves and (people) think that the only thing that was going on in these Freedom Houses was sex and all that kind of thing. We prohibited, tried to, females, particularly white females from having relationships with just folk in the community. That was-- and I say particularly white females because generally black females ... back in their own environment and that was, you know, there wasn't nothing unique about that for them, so they wouldn't-- initially refrain from that kind of experience.

But we tried to encourage black staff not to have that kind of open courting relationship with other white staff members, that wasn't a healthy thing. Because it looks as if the objective was for you to be involved with white women, and that comes over on both sides as being very negative. So we tried to impress upon people how they carried themselves. You would have to go to church on Sunday, generally there would be a meal somewhere involved in that process. Everybody visited church just about every Sunday. And some Sundays they would have Homecoming, and Founder's Day, and revival and all that at the church; so they would have a big spread and everybody would want you to have some of theirs-- that would be a meal. All that kind of thing-- you know you would go and introduce yourself, telling who you are, where you came from, what you are doing. That's for the pulpit, that wouldn't necessarily hook you into anybody, but that is what you would do. And then later on you would find out what the persuasion of the minister was and if you needed a place for meetings that is where you would go.

The Mississippi experience was a complex experience; many people got a lot of different things out of it. I was just recently rudely awakened to the fact that Mayor Koch (of New York City) was in Mississippi the summer of '64. I did not know that until that time; he was an attorney.

There a number of struggles that went around the whole summer of '64. Struggles with the formulation of COFO, struggle over who was going to be responsible, who was going to get the credit, who was going to do the work. The major organizations in COFO were CORE and SNCC. Local NAACP's were involved. SCLC nil, Urban League nil. The (NAACP) Inc. Fund, the NAACP Legal Defense Fund wanted to prohibit the National Lawyer's Guild and we just said no. We were not going to allow that, we would accept services from any organization that wanted to provide services. At that point I think our position was non-

Sellers (cont.): ideological, and that is that if somebody wanted to buy into what we were doing we would accept them. We wouldn't question them, we did not expect them to push or try to drive their ideology down our throat, and we wouldn't try to do the reverse. So we fought very hard and very dilligently for the representation of the (National) Lawyer's Guild.

We also had the formation of a medical committee, of doctors, that was centered out of Chicago ... what is the fellow's name ... Dr. Quentin Young, assisted with putting that together. That committee is probably still in existence to some extent, the Medical Committee on Human Rights, which got a lot of socially active physicians from around the country involved, including Alvain Poussaint who ended coming-- and who ended up later becoming a SNCCer himself, and later he is one of the authorities on black child development, and pyscho-political kinds of condition of black people.

We had a host of automobiles, we had a number of school teachers who came in through different school unions who came in to participate. We had nurses, we had other professionals, we had a whole host of people coming in. So we had a good array of people coming in for that summer of '64. And it was not an easy time. It was almost like a shorter version of probably the Viet Nam war, there was something going on all the time. Each day we would read the _____ out of Memphis, each day you would read about a bombing, a house burning, an assault, whatever it was. And then the WATS reports you would get on about a weekly basis, and they would go down the number of incidents that were called in. As a matter of fact we were set up so that any incident that occurred in your area would be called in to the Atlanta office pronto, and then there would be certain kinds of things that the, certain kinds of responses that the Atlanta office would make. One of which is to contact the FBI and see if you could get them to investigate or the Justice Department and see what they were willing to do. Or if it was a medical need or a need that had to be satisfied outside of the state of Mississippi, they would contact those respective people. If it was a need that needed to be dealt with inside of Mississippi, a staff change need or whatever it might be, then they would make the proper call there and move people around if necessary and it was so needed.

But it was a highly emotionally charged summer. There was a lot of intensity on a lot of people's part. We had a lot of successes, built a lot of community centers; did the Freedom Schools, got people involved with the reading and math and science; encouraged people to learn Black History, to develop some sense of Black pride, a certain consciousness; and a political organization which to some

Sellers (cont.): extent is still in place, the result of which is very clear in Mississippi today. Those areas where we had projects, most of those areas, many of those areas are still fairly active politically. The projects have long since gone, some of the leadership and the leadership styles that grew out of that kind of stayed in place. And one of things that we were able to impact on was the fact that leaders were generally of the cloth--religious-- or they were NAACP. And what we did was we stated that there could be a leader who did not have any of those leanings or those persuasions. And that we insisted that leaders, that there was a specific role relationship of leaders to the community. And that we created a climate where we could have leaders emerge, but the wider community would have some kind of control over what they would look like or what they would be. (Pause)

Sinsheimer: Do you want to go into Atlantic City or do you want to go to ... ?

Sellers: I am going to take about a two minute break and then we will go to Atlantic City. All right? (Break)

Sinsheimer: Well, I guess what I am most interested in-- so you don't have to go through the whole thing, unless you really want to-- is the church scene, you know, where the delegation was in the church and the big guns were being thrown at them by Johnson. And then talk about the falling out after that or how people felt afterwards-- those are the two specifics.

Sellers: Right. Let's, first I want to pull in something which we probably need to just so note. I was talking about the period preceding that and that is '62-'64, my being at Howard. One of things that happened while we were at Howard was the Port Huron Declaration was put together. And one of the SNCC people had gone up-- I think it might have been Courtland (Cox) and Charlie (Cobb). I am not sure who it was. But they were assigned to go and represent SNCC to help draft Port Huron. And that began a certain relationship with the New Left, if you want to use that term as. And so when I was talking about a broadening of our experiences and the Nation of Islam, and other kind of left orientated organizations-- SDS would probably be one of those kinds of experiences that we dealt with.

We spent a lot of time in combat with ... what is their name ... YAF, Young Americans for Freedom, they were all over the place and they would go around and talk about how Negroes should not be concerned about the overthrow of a government, overthrow of the country, that is

Sellers (cont.): what Martin Luther King was all about; and we used to actually engage them in debates at different institutions. And in many of them ended up winning. But those are some of the kinds of activities. We were not just located primarily on the Howard campus, (we) talked about the University of Maryland, but I wanted to make sure that we talked about expanding that just a little bit because we were at other places. We did have an opportunity to travel up to Swathmore and I am trying to think of some of the other schools-- I can't-- seems to me like on the Hudson, I can't remember what the name of it is. Maybe I will but we began to do some of the, take over speaker loads for the SNCC people. And that required that we go up to some of the other campuses and actually do the speaking for them. And people-- Stokley who had gone down to Mississippi during the summer of '62 and '63, summer of '63-- because of his experience, he had gotten arrested and all, he was considered a seasoned veteran.

Then to talk, to get to talking about going from Mississippi to Atlantic City you have to give it some kind of context. Many of the people in Mississippi because it is a poor state and because many of the people kind of legitimately fitted into that, or fit into that peasant class; they did not have, there was not a lot of mobility. So when you talk about going to a place like Atlantic City, you are talking about a whole new orientation for many of those folks. They had never been outside of the state of Mississippi, many of them; they had never been in a situation where they would have to leave the responsibility for their farm or their family or whatever it might be, to somebody else's charge. So you are talking about a pretty heavy commitment on the part of many of these people. And this people were not "middle class" blacks who could afford to do these kinds of things. So you were asking them to commit themselves to something that was probably on the verge of being at the end of the rainbow. I mean it was just way out there.

Sinsheimer: It was as foreign to them as to the white students coming down there (to Mississippi).

Sellers: That's correct. I mean this was really a real trick. What we did was we collected, we went across the state, for example we got the bell from the Neshoba county church where Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney were assassinated. We got the car, the car that they were in before they got assassinated, burned and all. And we got some other cornerstones from churches that had burned; bullet proof, I mean bullet damaged car windows and the whole works. We carried up a whole display to try to point out the

Sellers (cont.): amount of terror and violence that went on. We compiled data on the amount of acts of violence and all that kind of information that we made available to people in Atlantic City. And we moved in-- the Mississippi team-- and we had a pretty crack team by that time. We had three months and once again the largest part of your delegation came from the Second Congressional District. So the staff from the Second Congressional District made the trip too.

They used a bus for all of the delegates, so what we did was we took, the staff went up separately from the delegates themselves. And our job was to go up and to set up and get ready for the people when they came in. And our job once we got there was to facilitate, making sure they got to where they needed to get to, and making it as comfortable as possible. And we did leave some people back in Mississippi to be responsible in those areas where they needed somebody just to stay there, watch over and keep an eye on the meager possessions.

People, you know, about what to wear and going to the big city, I mean there was just a whole lot of things that had to be taken into consideration. We got a trailer, put the station wagon on the trailer. We got I think a van or a truck, and we got all the other stuff, the bells and all that kind of stuff, and I was a part of that crew that was going to do the visual display. And we went through Atlanta, South Carolina, and up to get to Atlantic City. We got up and we set up the trailer and put signs on there-- we displayed it on the boardwalk of Atlantic City so that we could get as much attention as we could. And it attracted a tremendous amount of attention.

When we got there we made sure that the delegates had a place and that all those things were taken care of. We had good communication, we had radios in all the cars, and we moved in a base station at the hotel so that we could communicate all over the city. We brought in most of the cars which were new, a whole fleet, maybe about twenty cars that could move people around. The delegates primarily went by bus, and when they didn't go by bus we had to get a number of cars that would shuttle them back and forth wherever they wanted to go to try to keep the delegates together. We had a central post that we operated out of the hotel, kind of control post.

We spent a lot of time taking care of the basic kinds of things but generally we would be required to like picket. And that picket went the twenty-four hours. Atlantic City was an all night kind of place. There were occasions that I ended up staying on my feet probably about thirty-six hours, just the one thing to

Sellers (cont.): another. And then at one point the Klan showed up and I don't remember where we were, we were somewhere downtown (in) Atlantic City. We got a call-- the Klan had showed up on the boardwalk and it instantaneously kind of triggered Mississippi again-- that was we got people out there and they come all the way up here-- we didn't bring them all the way up here to get hurt. So the call was to go to the Boardwalk. Shoot we started flying through the streets and we all got back over there.

By that time the cops had already shown up and had escorted them (the Klan) away. But that was a pretty dramatic and intense moment. And you could tell because everybody kind of was like-- it was almost like you see on TV with the police responding to something that is an emergency. All these SNCC cars all around the Boardwalk, doors open, and they are still coming in, and people are running around. I mean people just-- I mean you got that old Mississippi let's not take no chances, we got these people out here, lot of them are old and they can't defend themselves. What is the Klan going to do? Some of our people are up there, so that is what we are back in.

So that is one incident that I remember very well. And we went and like I said the police ushered those people on away. We made some friends and we had people operating on different levels-- like we had a focal worker at the Credentials Committee trying to get credentials. And we had-- usually I found myself in the field area primarily-- that is I am in direct relationship to the delegates themselves and the delegates needs as opposed to the administrative and management kind of things, of talking with the Bayard Rustin's and the Martin Kings and all that.

Now we had probably some of the most strong willed people that we could have found in the state of Mississippi who were very conscientious, and very ... had a tremendous amount of integrity ... that is probably the proper way to put that. And they had made the ultimate sacrifice to get to this convention. So when the Credentials fight came up and we ended up not getting very much of anything there. And then we had one occasion the convention was going to-- the Tv was going to spotlight Ms. Hamer and everybody was ready and set to go for that and all of a sudden (Lyndon) Johnson came on TV and he had ney message at all. But the Democratic Party at that point began to feel the heat and they were willing to do anything that they could to keep that issue from coming alive at the convention. So he blocked that out.

Ms. Hamer under any circumstances was a dynamic orator. And the reason for that is that she had felt so many things as a person growing up in Mississippi. She

Sellers (cont.): had been beaten, she had been shot at, she had been split up from her family, her family had threatened, she had to be separated from her family. I mean she could-- she could in her own way, she could tell you all those things and it had a lot of meaning and it had a lot of meaning. So she wanted to tell the story of why we were here. And would have done a tremendous job of that.

What we ended up doing was that on the first couple of days we ended up getting passes for different people and let people go in. And we wanted to make the most of the official challenge but we wanted to get people involved as much as possible so they could have a feel for what was going on. So, you know, the delegates from New York would, you know, throw us two or three passes for that day and we would let some people go in and sit over there. We would juts go in and meander, just go around the hall and see what that was all about. And the negotiations were taking place.

Now I don't know what the role is, I haven't been able to pinpoint it. But during that time the main communicator between Johnson (and the MFDP) was Humphrey. And if I am not mistaken the person who was the strategist at that point was Mondale which is the irony of this whole past situation.

Sinsheimer: I have heard that.

Sellers: And I never really found out, and because I was not negotiating that, it made it extremely difficult. Now there were a number of people who wanted to come in and negotiate on behalf of the MFDP. And that is when everybody began to talk about their role in COFO-- the NAACP, Martin King, and any number of other people. Because they began to see was that this was a golden opportunity to step almost into history. I mean you could take a real big step into history. And they saw it as taking the compromise step. Okay. All right. So these groups-- the group (delegation) had to meet just about every few hours. They would meet so they could talk about what was going on. I mean just to refresh them. And the people who would generally talk to that group would be Moses, Jim Forman, Ivanhoe, Charlie (Cobb), -some people like that, people that they knew. And like I said the majority of the delegation came from the Second Congressional District. And they knew these personalities, they knew them. I mean they felt very comfortable with the information.

Plus Ms. Hamer was there. And then they would use people like-- the NAACP would use Aaron Henry to try to get to that position. And Martin because of who he was, was just going to be Martin and was going to use that to get you to that position. The idea was to convince the

Sellers (cont.): the National Democratic Party that you had a legitimate case in Mississippi, that blacks were disenfranchised, and through force kept out of this Democratic process. And we had documented the fact that people had attempted to go to meetings, even the delegates themselves. We had some of them to test cases so they could actually talk about the time when they met to meetings. And what would happen was that they would be told that the meeting was one place, and when they got there there wasn't nobody there. Or they would be just actually barred from going into the meeting. Or any number of other kinds of things happened, occurred.

So the notion was to convince the Democratic Party of a couple of things. One is that there was a disenfranchisement on the part of the local Democratic Party. Two, that the local Democratic Party had no intentions of supporting the National Democratic Party.
(Break)

Atlantic City. Well okay (laughter). Anyhow the discussions got very heavy after it became evident that the Democratic Party was not buying the argument that we were making. And the whole question of inclusion-- the whole question was being loyal Democrats. We raised the question about Dixiecrats and we had evidence that in the 1960 election, the Mississippi Democratic Party voted Republican. So we had raised that question about whether or not you wanted people who were in fact loyal and faithful to you and if it were the Freedom Democratic Party was saying that we would in fact be loyal and faithful Democrats.

The whole question of interracial delegations came up. And the fact that you were disenfranchised from voting did not mean that the Party should encourage that disenfranchisement, the Party should in fact address the right to vote as well as the right of equal representation. So those were some of the issues that were targeted and addressed, being addressed. But like I said there were a number of negotiations that were going on on a continuous basis. Most of the delegation was they were kept up to date on a daily basis on what was taking place. But they weren't brought into all of the discussions and who was saying what, why and where. They were just briefed about what was going on. They really did not care because concern of theirs was to become the official delegates from Mississippi. And that is what they went to Mississippi for. And that is what the staff had hoped for. They had spent a lot of time collecting all this data and going through all these exercises to try to collect up enough evidence and data to appeal to the moral consciousness of the Democratic Party. The Democratic Party alleged to be the party of all people, then the notion was to present to the Democratic Party that it would be a just party and go on ahead and kick the delegation out. Did

Sellers (cont.): not happen.

The other thing that happened was that the compromise came down the pike, that was worked out-- I am almost sure that was worked out by Mondale through, and then sent through Humphrey back to Johnson as head of the Democratic Party. In any event the delegation was to meet at the church and have that option presented to them. And believing in the traditional and true democratic process we allowed different people to present, to give them the option of hearing Martin King and Bayard Rustin and some other folk come in and make the case for the compromise. But we insisted that, we insisted that the delegation would be the only group that could decide what to do. The final decision rested with them. And they were going to do that without coercion, they were going to do that within their own restraints and confines. And then Jim (Forman) I think went in and kind of went back over, you know, the trials and tribulations of getting there and what we had come for, kind of setting it And then the delegation kind of on its own, led primarily by Ms. Hamer-- they already managed to I think deal with Aaron Henry a little. He in principal kind of stuck with the delegation, politically ... (Break)

So what happened was that the class question kind of caught Aaron Henry up. That he was state NAACP president. He was a business person-- most of the other people were basically farmers, just residents, I mean they were not business people and did not understand what people were saying when they were talking about practical politics, did not have a lot of meaning (to them).

So the group sat and Mrs. Hamer talked and they all coalesced and listened to Bob. And they went back over the fact; the trial and tribulation of coming up there; they thought their case was legitimate; they thought that they had raised questions about concessions that were reasonable; and that they didn't come from Mississippi to sit with any other delegation; they came to represent Mississippi. And that is the way they wanted to do it. If they could not represent Mississippi then they would just accept that defeat and go back to Mississippi with their heads high. And that was tremendously important to them, to maintain their integrity. Once they started talking about who they left behind, and how far they had come and traveled. And many of them being religious-orientated people-- they felt very committed to the idea of sticking with the principles and maintaining some respect and integrity. And they said no. And then there were some other attempts to try to change that, but their answer was no, they were not going to accept a compromise of that nature. And then that was pretty much it. That was a period in which you start packing up and getting ready to get people out of there and taking them, you

Sellers((cont.): know, going on back down to Mississippi.

But at the point where they said no, the staff, internally there is conflict. The conflict is wanting to come up with something. You know you have convinced yourself that you have one of the best cases that you could ever have. You convince yourself that America still has a moral consciousness and the Democratic Party in particular. You convince yourself that you have done everything and touched every base that you could possible touch; there is no way that you are going to get out of here without having at least half of the delegate seats. And all of a sudden you are empty handed. Now the question is was it worth it?

And so the "no" conjures up a lot of internal kinds of conflicts and contradictions. And if it wasn't worth it, than why did you did go down there and risk your life in the first place? Why did you spend all that time down there when you could have been doing something else? Why do you bother to talk about Democratic Party, you know, when they in fact cannot take the high-roads and in fact support the morally right position. So you had that kind of dynamic was going on and the further you get away from Atlantic City, the more the question becomes paramount, and you begin to second guess, and you begin to raise serious questions about the whole summer, even prior to the summer. The kinds of experiences and the battery; the whole thing of going back through-- (the city of) Jackson spent all this tax money on guns and tanks and all this to be prepared for the onslaught during the summer. I mean it just in essence beat people all over the head with police state and violence and oppression. Then you come up here (Atlantic City) and there is no relief.

So for many of the staff that was a real, real, real bad experience. As a matter of fact let me do it this way. I think it had a more detrimental effect on the staff than it did on the delegates. The delegates had to make that decision and it was the correct decision to make. But they were able to live with that, maybe they were more mature, maybe they were more realistic coming in, you understand. But a lot of staff had a lot of high hopes and they were listening to a lot of propoganda. And they still had, it was almost like still believing in the principals of the American democratic process. I mean really having a lot of, a tremendous amount of belief in it, and not recognising the practical politics often times transcend that.

Sinsheimer:

But if the staff swayed the delegation at all-- I mean I understand the efforts that were made not to do that-- but if they did then they were swaying them to say no. Is that correct?

Sellers: Yeah.

Sinsheimer: Then at the same point though ... so there is another kind of

Sellers: Yeah. There is another contradiction, clearly. Clearly.

Sinsheimer: I mean I will be quite honest-- Leslie McLemore was telling me, he remembers, you know, he said, "There was Cleve Sellers going from pew to pew talking to the delegates."

Sellers: Right.

Sinsheimer: While Martin (king) was speaking. And I mean you don't have to read too much to know that if Moses doesn't say anything anything, he is saying a whole lot.

Sellers: That is right.

Sinsheimer: By just not

Sellers: Absolutely.

Sinsheimer: And all those things went on. That is interesting.

Sellers: Yeah, well you were caught between a rock and a hard place. I mean the idealism is the thing I think that tripped everybody up. You did not, you went into it still thinking, you know, because you went to Mississippi and you dealt with all those contradictions and you survived. Okay. So now you figure that is one up; you take the delegation to Atlantic City and the MFDP, they have a case-- I mean any fool, a blind man could see that they had a case. A legitimate moral, political, social case. And zero.

Sinsheimer: Do you think-- I mean this is a hard question to ask-- but do you think it would have been different had Johnson said, or had the compromise been you pick your own two delegates. Because Johnson, the compromise was not only that it was going to be two (seated delegates), but it was going to be Aaron Henry and Ed King.

Sellers: Absolutely not. The objection was to the two delegates which were going to be at large (in) what New York's (delegation)?

Sinsheimer: Michigan, somewhere.

Sellers: Michigan, somewhere. That was ...

Sinsheimer: Do you think half ... I know this is just guessing. Do you think if they had gone for half the seats?

Sellers: In Mississippi.

Sinsheimer: Yeah.

Sellers: Oh yeah.

Sinsheimer: Okay, I see what you are saying.

Sellers: I am saying that the thing that most people missed was that these folk were representing Mississippi. They came, they had Mississippi, their concern was Mississippi-- the parochial content kind of overrode everybody else. So ...

Sinsheimer: Because there is a whole lot of that ... I am going to die in Mississippi... .

Sellers: That is right.

Sinsheimer: That is something that was really ...

Sellers: It is there.

Sinsheimer: I mean I have moved around here, there, and everywhere. I don't understand that . I mean I do to some degree now as I get older but, you know, when these people they are going to stay in this town, let alone the state, and they love the state of Mississippi.

Sellers: Yep. Okay so that was the-- and when we talked about a delegate at-large, they didn't want to hear that. They wanted to deal with the contradictions of Mississippi, okay? They wanted to deal with the fact that the Mississippi Democratic Party was as guilty as anybody else in Mississippi for upholding segregation and oppression. And the Mississippi Democratic Party was not, did not give or take a damn about the National Democratic Party and whether or not it supported it or not. So based on those two reasons they were saying Mississippi.

Now if you raise the question of whether or not they picked Aaron Henry and Ed King as two at-large delegates from Mississippi. I don't know, they might have bought into that. But I think that the issue was that they wanted to, they were going to unseat the Mississippi delegation. That is what they wanted to do and that is the way it was said, that is the way they understood, that is the way they comprehended it. And you didn't unseat anybody. They still stayed in full force. So you hadn't had an impact directly on that group that you were coming in to impact on. And that is the difference between the national perspective and the parochial and local perspective. They had an impact on the National Democratic Party, but in terms of that particular challenge in and of itself there was little or no impact with the compromise coming from some other state at-large, Michigan or New York or whatever it was. Just was not sufficient. Might have been Minnesota, I don't know.

Sinsheimer: It was either Michigan or Oregon or New York. One of those.

Sellers: Yeah. Now these states had already on occasion allowed some of the delegates to sit in, in the places of their regular delegates.

Sinsheimer: They would give you passes?

Sellers: Yeah. Now there was one case where the Mississippi, I mean some of the delegates had gotten in. And the Mississippi delegation was not there, was coming in or something, and the Mississippi delegates went on and took the seats. Which-- I mean the MFDP went and took the seats. That is how important it was, that was the issue.

Sinsheimer: Right.

Sellers: And I think it was a legitimate issue. You know you don't spend that kind of time, money, and energy and involve people and make them make that kind of commitment just to play pretending like. You have to have a serious concern here; and the concern was that people were dying in Mississippi, they were being maimed in Mississippi, and a lot of it was in the name of the Democratic Party. Democratic Party was not addressing that, did not address the question of registering to vote, none of those kinds of issues. And all the flowery talk and all the other rest of it, did not address those kinds of concerns. Plus the fact is that the state Democratic Party was not loyal to the Democratic Party, to prove that. So why is it that you keep somebody that don't care nothing about you and is discriminating against those people who you say that you are supposed to be in support of. So no, the compromise didn't go. And yes we worked the crowd, the delegates, to point out essentially the same thing-- that is that we have come a long way, we want ot be able to keep our heads up. But when it came time for them to make a decision, everybody was excluded. And they just thought and they made their decision. I think it was between Aaron Henry and Ms. Hamer. I think they voted on it, I am not sure what method they used. But whatever method that was used, it was overwhelmingly in favor of not accepting the compromise.

And you know like our job always that we had delegates there. I had delegates there. And we worked our own delegates, you know. And tried to once again mantain that kind of relationship that if you need something then whatever it is you need, then we are going to get it. That kind of thing.

That had a tremendous impact on not only the people who went there representing SNCC and MFDP, but it had impact on the organization too, SNCC as an organization. I mean that plus John Lewis' censure at the March on Washington, the church bombing after the March on Washington; the Goodman, Schwerner, Chaney assination; and coming after that the challenge, you know, it was just a time to sit down and

Sellers (cont.): reassess your priorities, time to sit down and reassess your direction. And that was the next thing that had to happen.

But that was the last time I think for SNCC that there was an opportunity to kind of step off to the side, take a few minutes to take a real good look at what had happened. After that it was like you had a hole in the bottom in the boat and you had a choice of rowing or bailing. And you have to figure out how to do both at that same time. And so you never got the chance to stop and pick the boat up and fix the hole. But this time we did have an opportunity to sit aside and take a look at it. And all kinds of questions start emanating, coming down the pike. One was the question for SNCC-- the reality was that you needed to have white volunteers to allow you to even get to that point which was another kind of whammie because it was a question of how valuable is your own life. I mean what does it mean, what is it worth to the government, to the Democratic Party, to anybody? And the conclusion obviously was that it wasn't quite as valuable as Karen's or Connie's or somebody who was in fact a white school teacher. It just didn't-- that is the reality. And you had to deal with that and it wasn't a pleasant kind of thing to come to that kind of conclusion.

So you had, there was an attempt to assess the whole of Mississippi. Who carried the weight? CORE did the best it could, probably had the largest presence second to SNCC in the state. SCLC, NAACP didn't do very much of anything. And then when it got to Atlantic City where you are talking about wheeling and dealing and you talk about negotiations, who shows up first? And who wants to have a big part in that negotiation? And what are they using? We are more experienced than you are. We have been around longer, we know how to handle these things more. It just created so much animosity that you hear that kind of thing.

Sinsheimer: Right.

Sellers: And the other thing was that when you go to wait in jail, you don't have no money and we have to put up our money to bail you out. I mean it was just a point where the organization was getting tired of all the rhetoric and wanted to establish itself as a peer or comparable to the rest of the organizations. We no longer wanted to have somebody look down their nose at us as the offspring or the child, we wanted to establish ourselves as an efficient, effective organization in and of itself. And did not want that kind of relationship to remain. So those are the kinds of dilemmas that we were confronted with and we certainly had to go off into deciding what was the next step in

Sellers (cont.): Mississippi, how do we follow up on the challenge; did we want to follow up on the challenge; how do you turn that energy and remobilize; how do you get people back on the track. There was a tremendous amount of pressure to be in Mississippi and once again, you know, you talk about war fatigue, which is a legitimate disease and a lot of people burn out. Lack of hope, a lot of things happen. And we never-- we were able to put it into perspective, but it was not a pleasant feeling when you left. You just want to go take some time and sit down and go fishing even if you didn't put anything in the water, you just wanted to kind of sit by the water, take some time off and unwind. Breathe fresh air again, get ready to go back because the battle was certainly very much still in need of being fought.

So that is the particulars, now unless you have some specific questions you have about Atlantic City. I remember, like I was saying, I stayed up probably about thirty-six hours and went to sleep at about two o'clock in the morning. And I was supposed to get up about three o'clock and I don't remember anything until about eight or nine o'clock. And it was just-- but I felt very good about what I was doing. I felt committed, I felt-- it gave you a certain amount of esteem and tying back into growing up -- there was a purpose and there was the niche that I, we were in fact doing things for people and we were moving the group, the masses another step forward. And that was very important for me and probably for other people who were involved. Maybe they didn't get the same message in high school but our message was like I said, go out into the world and make some changes and create some things and make things happen. And for me that was a fulfillment of that to some extent. I felt extremely good about that and welcomed the challenge. Had probably as much difficulty responding to what appeared to be defeat initially and was able to put that back in perspective and ended up going to Washington when we actually went before the Congress to make the challenge. And did the coordination for bringing some additional people from Mississippi up to actually go before Congress and have the (1965) Congressional challenge. So we managed to come out of that. We did, some people didn't. And it was extremely difficult getting back on course again for the organization. A lot of people did not want to deal with their fatigueness, some people did not want to deal with their anger and hurt. The pain was extremely extruciating, you learn how-- as a young person you lose some of your idealism there and certainly some of that got lost. And it makes you much tougher and you want to _____, probaly zip over to the other extreme and get to the point where you want to inflict pain. But that has to be a balancing off, but you go through that kind of experience and you learn how to deal with that kind

Sellers (cont.): of thing.

There were a lot of people who were disappointed with King because King came in at the tail end. And we figured that he didn't understand all the dynamics of the Mississippi challenge. He was not in Mississippi during the summer that I can remember, he might have been there once. But did not have anybody there working on a regular basis that experienced all the firefights and all the bombings and burnings and arrests and murders. During the period when they were looking for Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney they came across the top torso of one person and the bottom of another. Apparently they had been students at Alcorn State. They came across any number of other bodies that were just found.

In Holly Springs in particular we had a case where one of the, Wayne Yancey, one of the field workers on the staff there had gotten killed. And the conditions were always very suspicious on what really happened to him, why he ended up getting killed. So he was killed in a car accident and there was another fellow riding with him. They got trapped in the car and apparently he went through the windshield and the windshield cut his throat and the other fellow got thrown out of the car and he said that he heard-- I don't know-- somebody coming up and saying we got you huh, they are all dead, or something like that. And he was half asleep when Wayne actually went off the road or whatever he did, but the thinking was that it was a straight road, didn't make a lot of sense to be running all of the road on one side or another. There wasn't anything, there wasn't any ditches or anything. So there was some concern about whether or not he was forced off the road. And then they picked up Wayne and brought him to the hospital. They never took him out of the ambulance. When we got there we could see blood dripping from the ambulance onto the ground. He was just laying out there, bleeding and nobody had ever examined him. They just left him in the ambulance, they pronounced him dead and that was the end of that.

And then the other fellow was in the hospital and the sheriff and everybody had him all surrounded, so what we ended up having to do was we ended up having to ask permission to get him to Memphis to the hospital. And we had to go through a whole bunch of rigormoroll, because they were going to lock him up and probably charge him with the murder. And we couldn't figure that out because Wayne was driving the car, but they switched them up and said he was driving the car. And so we ended up putting him in an ambulance and getting him to Memphis. And he never did come back, couldn't come back to Mississippi again because they were still trying to pursue him. But in any event it was a traumatic time, that whole summer of '64.

Sellers (cont.): We, some managed to survive it. We had one church and one school in our area that was burned. The Natchez Trail area down in Amite and Pike county and Natchez and McComb was the area that was generally the hardest hit. And some over in Clarksdale, no not Clarksburg.

Sinsheimer: Vicksburg?

Sellers: Well, over by Philadelphia.

Sinsheimer: Meridian?

Sellers: Over in Meridain and over in that area they had some places that got hit pretty hard. Some of the places in the Delta, but, you know had churches burned and bombed. But there was an account. I think they ran up about sixty churches at least. And the number of arrests went well over 4,000 I think. And the number of additional burnings and bombings went up, increased that sixty number. And there were a lot of people who were injured through some form of police brutality or attacks by local whites or whatever, or a combination of both. So it was a very heavy price to pay and there probably have been a lot of feelings of schism since that time for many of the people who went through that experience. I think fairly legitimate kinds of schisms about the role of the Democratic Party.

So now what were your questions?

End of Interview.