

Interview with Frank Smith
May 23, 1986
Washington, DC

Frank Smith: ... Well, let's do this interview because I am going to run out of energy here soon.

J. Sinsheimer: Okay. I guess where I would like to begin is with your entry into Holly Springs-- if we are a little bit short of time I would like to focus on that particular experience and then moving into Greenwood and then moving back to Holly Springs. ... Whatever you can remember might be helpful. I am interesting in how a shifting of the resources affected things and how different campaigns in the state were affected, different communities. That sort of thing is what I am trying to track down.

Smith: Well, I have never thought about it quite in that sense because if you remember after I left Holly Springs Cleve Sellars and I think Charlie Cobb and a bunch of people came up there. By then I had gone from Holly Springs to Hattiesburg. So I came back to Holly Springs, didn't stay long, and then went to Hattiesburg.

But let me just say by way of introduction when I went to Holly Springs in '62 there was a small movement on campus at Rust College, which was led primarily by Leslie McLemore. They had had what you might call some forays into downtown Holly Springs. They had had students from campus had gone off into the city and they had some demonstrations there, primarily lunch counter type demonstrations.

By the time I got there the white power structure had cracked down pretty heavily-- not so much on Rust College although they had tried to intimate students-- but they had cracked down ... on the college across the street, MCI, which was part of the state structure. And they had-- some students from that campus had gone off to demonstrate and they came back and several of them had been expelled from school by the president of the school. So there was some sort of a pall there by the time I got there.

I went to Holly Springs. Did what we usually we did as our first kind of way of

getting involved which was to involve-- there was an older man there named Nero, S.T. Nero who was the NAACP person up there. And he and his wife took me in and sort of showed the ropes, told me how to do things. Actually, I went into Holly Springs by night, spent the night with them and the next day went up on campus and spent some time there and that is when I met the student leadership that had been involved in the demonstrations.

We spent some time around there going out into the rural areas primarily trying to work with people who were trying to register to vote. There were some really strong people around there who had been identified by Mr. Nero and by the students there on campus and they were sort of known around as the leadership. Many of them were associated with the _____ family which was associated with the NAACP too. So I went out and talked to them.

And then we decided to organize this kind of citizenship project where we would work with people who wanted to register to vote. Because Mississippi had the poll tax and the literacy test and you could take people to the courthouse up there and beside from being treated badly they were disqualified as registrants because they couldn't read or write under the terms of this literacy test. And like dummies we spent some time trying to teach people to interpret sections of the constitution, Mississippi state constitution. And I guess we should have known then that a person who was administering a written test doesn't want you to pass they can just not pass you, which is what happened up there.

Sinsheimer: Let me interrupt you. How did you make the decision to first go to Holly Springs?

Smith: It was something-- I was at Morehouse at that time, Morehouse College, when Bob Moses and Reggie Robinson I guess and a couple of other people went down to McComb, Mississippi. This was all pursuant to the civil rights movement. And you know we had been hearing things about what was going on. There were some demonstrations going on at Mississippi Valley State College, Jackson State, Tougaloo College. And I was involved in SNCC and the Atlanta civil rights movement. And one of the

things that we talked about occasionally was going to other places. We went to Albany a few times for demonstrations, we went to North Carolina for some demonstrations, things like that. And we had mainly during holidays, or on weekends or in the summer. And we had talked about going to Mississippi and then Bob Moses and a couple of other people, Cordell Reagon and Reggie Robinson went over there and got hurt up pretty badly in the summer of '62, in the spring of '62, winter or spring and came back to Atlanta and started talking to me because I was at that point chairman of the Atlanta student movement, about the Atlanta student movement sending some volunteers to go.

And I think it was-- I mean really you have to understand the theory here which I think was a good one, and it was primarily Bob's analysis. He and I disagree on a lot of things but this is one we would agree on I think. He felt very strongly--and think he was right about this, history proved him to be correct-- that the white people in the South controlled in effect the environment and actions of black people by just abject violence. And they did by occasionally just brutalizing somebody who was identifiable with the movement like Emmett Till and others. And they would not only kill them they would castrate them, burn them, and do all kind of things, you know mutilate them as a way to put fear in everybody else's heart. And that was a part of what the whole program was.

But Bob had this idea-- and as I say I think he was right and it was the heart of SNCC-- that you had to respond to that by saying, you know, instead of people running when they get trouble, we have to have people who are willing to go and say I am going to put myself into place where that person was. And you know if 1 and 1 and 50 make a million you can't arrest all of us and you can't kill us all. And that eventually got translated and escalated into the Summer Project.

And I remember having very vivid conversations with Bob about bringing white people down. After '63, and primarily starting with Greenwood, the violence had gotten so bad that I think he felt, and most of did, that none of us were going to get out

of there alive. I certainly had that thought cross my mind a few times that it was a slow walk to the grave.... And I think the idea was that we wouldn't run, that there had to come a time that not only white people knew we wouldn't run but black people when we wanted them to take a risk of life and job and family and churches-- all the things they loved that they had to leave-- that we were going to stay there and suffer with them. So that is how Bob really talked me into doing it.

Now I wasn't that brave, don't get me wrong. I think I knew something about what I was getting into but I did believe strongly at the time that it was something that we had to do, that there was no way to break this cycle. And you have got to remember also that I was in Atlanta but I was born in Newnan, Georgia on a farm, very rural and very much like Mississippi first of all. And secondly at that time in Atlanta even a black officer couldn't arrest a white person. You had to ride in the back of the bus, city bus as well as all the other buses. Lunch counters and everything were segregated. Couldn't get a job with the telephone company and there were no white collar jobs available. So although Atlanta was a little bit better the fact is that racial segregation was institutionalized in Atlanta by custom and by law. And although it was a little more civilized it was just, it was just clear and just as distinct.

So the point of Mississippi was going to a rural area where there was more outright and abject violence and where there was more suffering on the part of black people because of the poverty and the employment situation. But it certainly was a familiar scene to me, it was not unfamiliar to me at all. So I mean it didn't take a whole lot of effort to get to go. It took a lot for me to drop out of school but after that-- but I think also it was clear by the end that I was part of a movement, that there were many people, several hundred people like me, my age group from college campuses who were dropping out of school to go (into the Movement).

Sinsheimer: When did you enter Morehouse?

Smith: I went in '59.

Sinsheimer: So you had finished three years?

Smith: Yeah, three years. What happened was that I went over for the summer of '62 and just for the summer project, started a summer project, I went over for the '62 summer project to stay for the summer in Holly Springs. Bob had picked out several places where there were majority black populations, had done some demographic work on them, and had come up with some names of people that we could talk to and work with. And I chose Holly Springs to go because it was no worse or no better than anyplace else. Didn't know anybody anyplace. And I was there by myself too which when I think about it is rather remarkable. But I knew I had contacts. I had friends, I had people who would stand by me, and who did stand by me when I got in danger or in trouble.

So I went for the summer. Now what happened was sort of typical. I stayed in Mississippi for the summer. I worked with the student movement and we did some, primarily voter registration. We didn't have any direct action why I was there. Trying to build an organization, that was primarily what I was trying to do among students on the campus, out in the rural areas with these leadership training courses and these literacy courses trying to teach people how to read the Mississippi constitution. Taking people down to the courthouse to register to vote. They were all rejected. And got a little bit involved with the white power structure. They stopped my car a few times and harassed me and stuff like that. And a couple of times they called the campus and said they were going to bomb the campus if they didn't pnt me off and make me leave you know because they quickly figured out who I was.... And the administration and the student body stood by me through all this.

Sinsheimer: This was Rust?

Smith: Rust College. ... And then by chance one day I looked over-- I drove a guy home from Marks, Mississippi and on my way back I droved one of the students home and then on my way back I got lost kind of and came back

through Durant, Mississippi where I met an old man.... I stopped to get something to eat and stuff. An old man who had one arm who was sort of wandering around. I still don't know how they identified this guy but this guy was eventually killed.

This was in August when I saw him and then by the time, by the middle of September a note, somebody in this town sent me a clipping from the newspaper at Morehouse which said that this old man's body had been pulled out of the river and had been completely decapitated, his arms and limbs were all gone. They cut his limbs off and put him in a sack and dropped him in the big, black river. So somebody wrote me a note, a hand written note saying this is what happened when civil rights workers come into town and stay for a little while and then leave. Which really made the point that Bob was trying to make that you go in and get these crazy white folks stirred up and then we leave and what happens is that some local guy gets creamated as my son would say.

And that is essentially what happened. Now that happened-- I got that in the mail and by then I just felt like maybe it was time to leave school. And that is when I decided to drop out for a whole year. I had re-registered at school, gone back to Atlanta re-registered in school-- that is when I decided to go back in Holly Springs and spend a year. And that is when I dropped out for a year to go back to Mississippi.

And then we started for real with the organizing. Spent that year, '62, most of that year in Holly Springs organizing, primarily doing organizing and occasionally going into some other areas too. By then I was meeting people in Batesville who knew Emmett Till, who had been involved in the Till thing. Primarily through students I met people in Marks and Columbus and so we were beginning to start little chapters and there were students, primarily high school students in these towns, Columbus, Mississippi and Batesville and in Marks who were really involved in demonstrating at their schools, even going to the white lunch counters or maybe going to the courthouse to try to get their parents registered or something. And so that went on through the winter and into

January and then early February or something {Jimmy} Travis got shot down in Greenwood. And they pulled everybody out of wherever we were spread around the Delta and asked us to come down there for the same reason again. You know, here was a guy who had been shot.

Now previous to that the old man up there, his house had been shot into in Ruleville, Joe Mack. He was a good friend of Fannie Lou Hamer's. But Joe Mack was a leader, and Fannie Lou was just getting started. The shooting up in Joe Mack's house pretty much him off. He just dropped out of the nonviolent movement after that. And Fannie Lou rose to prominence. But it was about the same time because I remember very well I went into Greenwood and the first couple of days there, after the first couple of days there I went up to visit Joe Mack and saw his place that had been shot up and that is when I met Fannie Lou Hamer.

I will say this. I think that Greenwood, and I don't know what it was, I think it was something about the way this town was built. How it was just sort of laid out where the black part of town looks like you can't get in and out. I still remember that very distinctly. But I think that more than anyplace else the violence in Greenwood was absolutely just the worst I had ever seen. I was only there for about six months but during the time I was there they lassoed some seven year girl with a piece of wire and drug her through the neighborhood. Set up one of our cars that Sam Block had sitting outside of the office. Set the damn office on fire one night and tried to burn everybody. Lynched some guy on a pick up truck on a Saturday afternoon in the daytime. He was driving around some place just outside of Greenwood in Leflore County and had just a campaign of violence-- shooting up people's houses, the Greene's house.

And I remember one day-- I was by now-- and several things occurred while we were there but I think it was Saturday, I was in charge of the SNCC office there by then, and they had a, and we had, one of our staff workers was sitting outside of our office. Now these guys would do every goddamn thing. I was convinced, I know one of the ways that they found out where we were staying, whose

house we were living in, was that they had all these insurance agents and everybody, the postman, if you got a letter or if your car was parked some where, they reported all of this stuff back so that they could harass the landlord or they could try to find ways to get you out of town.

Sinsheimer: Somebody told me that they used to check the car rentals in Memphis.

Smith: Find out where you were going.

Sinsheimer: A white told me that {in Greenwood}.

Smith: Oh yeah, they had all kind of ways. I know at one time, the postman who was delivering the mail would write down the address where he saw the car. So we got smart about that we started parking our car there and staying somewhere else. But it was just a campaign of violence. It was like an occupied city.

But this Saturday, this sheriff whose name I can't remember now, police chief came over to the office-- they would harass our people when they saw them almost anywhere. {Short break} So they picked up one of our guys. I mean this guy was sitting there in front of the office in a chair on private property. Som cop pulled up got out of the car and went over and said something to him. They didn't arrest him. They just grabbed him and beat him up a little bit and shoved him against the wall and then they left. And so I called the police chief. Picked up the phone and said listen, "One of your goons just came by here and beat up one of our people. I just want you to know that we are taking a lot of heat out here from outlaws that you won't arrest and people that we know are helping you, informing you, but we will not take it from a uniformed police officer."

So about an hour later the chief showed up at the office. I didn't expect him to do that but he did show up. And It was kind of interesting because I remember distinctly that I had-- the thought went through my mind that he was challenging my authority.

Sinsheimer: Was this Buff Hammond, the bald guy? Or the chief? Curtis Lary.

Smith:

It was the chief. It must have been Lary. He came through there and I was standing in the office when he walked in. I was actually kind of surprised to see him because... So I went up to him and he said, "I just want to tell you that my police officers don't harass people. I talked to people about this and if somebody got hurt then somebody else must have hurt him." I was really just so insulted by this. I said listen, "Man, I can tell when somebody has been hurt, and certainly somebody on my staff knows when a police officer gets out of a police car and walks up and beats him up while he is standing in front of the room." So he went on for a little while and I finally said, "Do you have a warrant for my arrest? Do you have a search warrant for this building?" He said, "No," and I said, "Well, get out of here." By that time there were about 25 or 30 people in the house and they started chanting "Get Out, Get Out." And so he got frightened and he backed out and he said, "You know what, you are one of these guys, you are never going to get out of this town alive. I will tell you that right now." I said, "Well, we will see about this."

But I remember that very distinctly because I think that was the first time I ever challenged one of these guys face to face but I think we had pretty much decided that there was so much violence that sooner or later that they were going to get us. And they knew where we were-- the town was completely infiltrated and there was really that we could-- we almost didn't have a place to stay. We would find somebody and we would stay with them for two days and then they would get fired or they would get a call or something and you would be looking for a place to stay the next couple of days. Now fortunately we were able to find places and eventually we got a building over there where people stayed people in the building, which was probably dangerous because they had us all in one place.

It was an occupied city, and I remember that very well. On the other hand I do also remember-- and this was true in all the cases, places where we worker-- there were some really strong leaders in that town who were just dedicated to the movement. And in

many cases like the Greene family it was the whole family. Like June Johnson's family. June is here by the way. And other cases. I still remember very well almost the images of these people. They were really very courageous because they lived there. They knew sooner or later we were going to leave and go back to Atlanta or to Holly Springs or something and they were going to have to carry the burden of whatever we did. There were no two ways out for them. They had their kids, I think it was primarily they knew that they had children who were going to have to grow up and live with this kind of humiliation all their lives if their parents didn't do something to stop it. That there was not any way to stop it.

And I remember very well when I-- when I first heard, I remember this very distinctly-- I first heard it was Amzie Moore who had been killed instead of Medgar Evers. Now Medagr I had seen two days before that because he had been up at meeting up there in Greenwood, big voter registration rally. I had seen him and Dorie and two or three other people he had brought up from Tougaloo. They were staying at Tougaloo then.

But what I was told-- I think this might have been on the radio or somebody came and told me early in the morning, about 6:00 am and woke us up and told us that first it was Amzie Moore which was really real devastating for me because Amzie was the first person I stayed with in Mississippi. We went to Amzie's house to spend the night the first night I was over there. And I had known Amzie ever since I had been there. He was like a big brother or uncle or cousin or something. And we always considered him to be like the sly fox. He could ease in and out of more towns and more cracka and crevices than anybody we knew. And he sort of taught everybody guerilla warfare. This is what you do if you get in trouble and this is where you go and this is who you talk to. He gave us a list of names of people all over the damn state, just about every town that you could go to. He was sort of like a general.

And I remember being very devastated when I thought it was Amzie. Then when I realized it was Medgar Evers it was like a different thing. Medgar was not really-- you might say

there were some field workers and there were some city workers. Medgar was more of a city worker type. He really was primarily associated with Jackson and with the big city kind of movement, Jackson State and that demonstration there and stuff. Amzie was more the rural type. Amzie was really at home on the plantations out there and he had taught us how to do it. And thinking about Amzie was a blow, it would have been more of a blow to the organizational style to the movement we had there. Not that Medgar wasn't important. And then to find out that it was a guy from Greenwood who did kill him later on-- well I guess it didn't really surprise me that much because like I said it was pretty clear that there was an atmosphere of violence in Greenwood and we found out later that the FBI had infiltrated the police department down there and really knew a lot of this stuff in advance. And that really doesn't lend in confidence to me in them

But it was real clear to me that they were for about a year or two there was a real pattern of violence. And despite our best efforts to organize that town or to go after these direct demonstrations or boycotts like that we never really broke the back of Greenwood. We never did. I think we did leave behind some real tough people who in fact have struggled for a long time after we left.

But there were two big problems in Greenwood. One of them was that it was a very poor city. It was poor and it beginning to get a large influx of people who had lived on plantations before and who were day workers. Now they lived in Greenwood, but they depended on working on those farms out there for a living. So they lived on very menial wages in a day worker situation. And they weren't-- the plantations were beginning to mechanize and use these herbicides and stuff, really didn't need the labor all the time the way they used to, so they weren't willing to pay to keep them there. They weren't willing to supply them with food and housing and stuff. So you were getting a real change in these towns. Greenwood being sort of the hub of the Delta was getting a lot of that new population.

We never really succeeded in organizing them well. We tried, we tried to the point of

going out on the plantations and work with them. We used to catch the buses and go out with them in the mornings. We used to get out there in the mornings and meet them when they were getting on and meet them when they were getting off and talk to them about the movement and organizing and about some kind of a labor, farm labor movement up there. But we never really broke the back of Greenwood. Greenwood was sort of left....

Then I went from there back to Holly Springs where I started again to put the pieces together up in Holly Springs. And then the situation broke out down in Hattiesburg and then they moved me from Holly Springs down to Hattiesburg again to fight more fires. And I would say that in terms of organizing I will say from personal viewpoint that I did probably the best organizing down there that I have ever done in Hattiesburg. There was a time when we had every block in the city where black people lived organized by block with block captains and people who worked the watch for us. We had a strong voter registration campaign. We picketed the courthouse. We had people-- we had Nurse's day and we would have worker's day from this plant and that plant. We asked people to wear their uniforms.

I think in Hattiesburg, we really were able to turn, I think we were able to push the local population to almost total defiance of the white power structure for the first time, although that movement had failed down there two or three times before. You know we had gone in and tried to organize it and got pulled out to go somewhere else. We just put a lot of people in there when I went down there and tried to really work at organizing people there for the first time. I think we were successful at that.

And I will say that of all the things we did in Mississippi that in terms of straight organizing and looking at it in retrospect and even at that time it was pretty clear to me that that was our best organizing job.

And then that one, of course, was also accompanied by a lot of violence where the white power structure just reacted. There were a lot of arrests, a lot of shooting.... They killed a man there, an NAACP guy there (Vernon Dahmer), they firebombed his house

and shot him up.

Sinsheimer: Mr. Dahmer.

Smith: It was accompanied by a lot of violence but I think by then we had, we knew a lot more about how to organize, and we knew a lot more about how to convince people and how to show them how to protect themselves. So I think we were able to get probably our best organizing job down there.

Sinsheimer: When you went to Greenwood during that first series of marches Dick Gregory came down, were you involved in those marches at all? You were arrested weren't you with Forman and Moses and....

Smith: Yes I was very instrumental during that. As a matter of fact we were the street organizers who put the marches together so obviously when they started arresting somebody-- they actually had photographs and stuff so they knew who they were going after. At that point they were determined that they were going to arrest the leadership and they picked us all at. I remember them looking at photographs trying to arrest people. They used to photograph all of the demonstrations, that was part of their harassment tactics. They would get out there with these cameras and take everybody's pictures.

Sinsheimer: The reason I ask you that is that there was that famous Justice Department deal when you all were in jail. I mean-obviously-- but what was your reaction to that? Were you surprised at all that they had gotten involved at all in the first place.

Smith: Well, one thing that had happened that was pretty clear by then-- I think the Atlanta SNCC office-- and I remember discussing this with them very distinctly. The Atlanta SNCC office had decided-- we had a lot of people going in and out of jail-- and the Atlanta SNCC office decided in that case that they were going to try to build a campaign around us being in jail. And that is when Jim Forman and we had Mary King and _____ and Mike Sayre and 25 people around him that were real, professional press types. And they

really pushed that, they tried to exploit that by in effect telling the world that this crazy of government was putting people in jail. They were picking us up and spitting us out whenever ~~they~~ got ready. We would get in and stay a few days. That wasn't the first time, that was about my third or fourth arrest. And we would get in and stay a couple of days and get out.

That time we decided to stay in because like I say 1) they wanted to make a big thing about it and 2) and Wiley Branton at VEP project wanted to try to make a case, anted to try to attack the law under which we were being arrested. So they wanted to make us a test case. And I think that was really what got the Justice Department involved whne it became clear that we were going to appeal the case to get out of state courts and into the federal courts. That is how I remember the Justice Department getting involved.

I remember when they were moving us from the Greenwood connty jailhouse to the Greenville county jailhouse so we would be under federal custody that the US Marshall came to move us and Lawrence Guyot-- I will tell you two stories about that. One, Lawrence Guyot, the federal authorities had this regulation that they didn't move any prisoners that weren't handcuffed and shackled, so you had to have a handcuff around your waist, your hands handcuffed behind you and these goddamn leg irons on you. I mean it was just completely humiliating.

They first got Bob first and took him out and then they went for Guyot second and Guyot absolutely refused to let them handcuff them. And he was bigger then than he is now if you can imagine that. And Guyot was like a raging bull and he was throwing people everywhere and Bob was in there trying to talk to him trying to calm him down and by then everybody was saying we are not going to be handcuffed either. And they finally violated the rule as they told me-- they had to get some sort of special dispensation so they could transport us without putting these damn shackles on us. (Short Break)

Anyway, so they wouldn't-- and I will tell you something this was not the same occasion but on occasion before that when I was

arrested in Greenwood they had-- this was the second time I was involved in something like this, I was involved in a similar situation in Atlanta when I arrested there. They had a rule in the county jail and everybody who had more than a certain amount of time had to work, had to go work out on the county farm. People were getting arrested in stages and they a couple of people there who had been jail before I got there, a lot of which were some of our staff guys, a local guy who was on our staff which meant he would get paid about \$9 a week. And he had been-- there had been a incident where he had been hurt. He had been out working on the county farm and he was cutting down trees or something and a tree fell on him and broke his shoulder. And this happened early in the morning and rather than get medical care for this guy they made him stand around all day-- made him work for a long time then stand around all day and by the time he got back his shoulder was all swollen up and red and blue and he was in some kind of pain.

So I just told him I said, "Look I am not going out there to work." So I led this rebellion at the prison in there. "I said, "Look we haven't committed any crimes." So after awhile-- I remember this very distinctly-- they had some officer in there pleading with us trying to get us to get out to work, said we were going to lead the rebellion and noone else was going to want to work.

Sinsheimer: That was when a bunch of people got arrested in Itta Bena?

Smith: I think this was in Greenwood. It was around those mock demonstrations where we had marched people around the courthouse. I keep wanting to say that this guys name was Jimmy something but it wasn't Travis. It was somebody else who llooked a little bit like Travis. Anyway we finally negotiated a deal where nobody worked. Thed didn't even take the local prisoners out becuase they didn't want to have this dual system. So they didn't take anybody out for several days, we were in there for six or seven days. But I just wasn't going to go out there. I said, "Look this is the best excuse I can think of to get

shot or maybe to get bit my a snake or something and these guys would let you sit out on the road and let you die." Instead of you being lynched by some Mississippi cop it looks like you just got in an accident. I wasn't going for it and I just said no way.

But I was doing ... when I left Greenwood. I was glad to get out of there buddy. I wrote a letter to my mother when I got back to Holly Springs, I told her that I was glad to get out of Greenwood. I really did not believe-- I remember one night I was out, there was a restaurant on that little main street there that runs across the railroad tracks, the main street that runs through the black community.

Sinsheimer: MacLaurin.

Smith: Is that the one across the railroad tracks that sort of winds into downtown?

Sinsheimer: East MacLaurin?

Smith: Yeah, it was East something, East MacLaurin. There was a little restaurant there right next to the service station, it may still be there. One night several of us drove up and parked our car. You can park on the service station lot and walk over to get to the restaurant. It was about 9:00 pm or 10:00 pm. The cops were behind me when I drove up in there, I knew that. In those days you got used to watching for them and they got used to trailing us around wherever we went, part of them trying to intimidate us. Used to carry shotguns in their police cars. And we pulled up to this place and got out of the car and one of these cops stepped out and shot a dog that was standing right next to me with a shotgun. And if you have never looked down a barrel of a shotgun that fired it is a pretty frightening sight.... {Short Break}

We had one of these voter registration rallies at a church, rural church, I mean it was a rural church on a deadend road. Bob Moses was driving Amzie Moore's old Packard. And by the time was meeting was over somebody came out-- we had these lookouts out there-- when one of the lookouts came in and told us that the police and some white folks had blocked the one road out of there. And these

guys were sitting on the hood of a car with shotguns in their hands.

And I had been in one of these situations before with Bob Moses. He was one of these guys that was always mystic, who wanted to drive up there and negotiate with these guys. I said, "Bob, I will drive up there but I am not going to negotiate, I am going to try to run this damn barricade and if I don't get to drive I am going to walk." I am walking out of there because one of the lookouts had a shotgun. I said, "There is no way I am driving up there with these guys and surrendering myself to these guys." So Bob and I had one of these real philosophical arguments. "I said, shit, I am not going to driving to surrender myself to these guys. You have got to be crazy man." He finally agreed to let me drive his car and I remember snaking my way through these guys on a dirt road. They were drinking, apparently they didn't have their weapons on them or something. I mean that kind of stuff went on there all of the time. Shit, I was glad to get out of there.

Sinsheimer: I don't want to take up too much more of your time but one question I am curious about. I was talking to Joyce Ladner last night about sort of some of the philosophical divisions and orientations and how the different personalities fit into that. And Cleve Sellers called it the "floaters" and the pragmatists, and the northern-southern division and all of that. I am particularly interested in your reaction to the influence that Moses had in the organization and that Forman had.

Smith: Well, I think if you are looking at it now I would say that they played different roles. They were complimentary roles. I mean they played different roles. It is kind of ironic-- Bob Moses was born in New York and he came to Mississippi and spent a lot of time organizing in the rural areas. Forman was born in Mississippi and moved to Chicago and he was always in the office. He almost never went out of the office. His view was that you had to have an organization that communicated between the people in the field and the public. And you had to find a way to

bridge that. He set the office structure to do that with. I think that was always how he operated.

Bob was always better I think with people as a result but the Summer Project was put together primarily by Bob. I mean Jim may have made the contacts but it was Bob who persuaded all of the people to come, it was his ability to persuade people on a personal basis was much greater than Jim's. And some of it was because he was an intellectual on the hand-- Harvard grad-- and on the other hand a kind of a mystic who was working in these rural areas and risking his life everyday. You have got to remember you are talking about, I have described to you about fifty incidents of just abject violence that would probably color most folk's lives for a long time. And it colored our lives too.

So I think the roles were different. Bob I think was more philosophical in the sense that he was as I said was better able to relate one on one and to small groups. Forman was probably better at haranguing larger crowds and going out, and as I said reaching out to the world through the media, and manipulating the media and public opinion. And we needed that combination of people. And fortunately enough they didn't come into contact with each other that much. Forman had his gang of people who hung around the office and were in Atlanta and then in New York and in Chicago and places like that; and Bob had a gang of folk who were in the South, Mississippi, Alabama and Georgia who were the field organizers. And once or twice a year we got together in these meetings and then you could see some of the differences.

Sinsheimer: Did people like yourself and Peacock and Hollis {Watkins} look at him as sort of your representatives when you go to the big SNCC conferences.

Smith: Who Bob? To some extent yes, although we played our own role. We had, we eventually got a rule passed that you couldn't vote in these meetings if you hadn't been in jail because the people who played-- what Forman would do because he did a lot of speaking around the north in these cities he would bring students to the meetings-- the Stokley

Carmichael's and people from Howard and Southern and all of these places-- to these meetings wanting them to have full fare and full voting rights and dominate the meetings. There was tension about that. We handled that-- we handled it two ways.

One, we didn't do anything we didn't want to do anyway, we were the guys who were out there on the streets. And secondly we finally got a rule passed that you couldn't vote if you hadn't been in jail which took care of Stokley and that group because most of them were campus intellectuals, they would rap intellectual rap but they weren't activists. And it forced them-- now their reaction to that was to become more activist and then in the summer of '64 many of them came South, you know, Courtland, Stokley--that is where Jeanne and I met, my wife and I-- got involved, got arrested a lot.

Sinsheimer: Do you think there was a class element to some of those divisions?

Smith: I think there was a little of all of them. We had some of the same tensions that are in the society. Sex, race, class. I think there were-- let's put it this way, there were people who more comfortable working in the office than they were working in the field. My view-- and I think to some extent it reflected what you might call a philosophical difference in organizing. I felt, and I think many of us in Mississippi felt that you had to have a grass roots movement built-up where people got some confidence in themselves and got familiar with each other and then as they developed and evolved you would have, you could eventually have a mass movement. And there was no doubt about that. And we probably shared that concept with Martin Luther King that you had to have a mass movement to change the South. King just chose to go about it differently, going into towns with these hit and run deals, going into churches for these mass meetings and leave behind really the ministers and the existing organizations to sort ferret things out and push them through. We felt we had to build some people who understood and who by example became brave and with the examples of leadership, provide leadership to other

people. That was SNCC. I think there was a difference in SNCC and SCLC.

Within SNCC itself there were people who were more apt at doing that-- I mean somebody like Ivanhoe Donaldson, Ivanhoe really spent most of his time in the office except for a short time he spent in Holly Springs. And there were some people who never went outside the office who stayed there all of the time. But I think that the-- and on the race side of it I remember very distinctly that when Bob first talked to us about Summer Project, a meeting up in I think it was in Greenville. The Mississippi staff met in Greenville to talk about the Summer Project. And we voted overwhelmingly against it, participating in it. And our argument was that we had just started to build these little organizations all over the state and we had a lot of little baby organizations in the cities going on but we really didn't have anything that was big enough to stand up on the onslaught of a lot of influx of people from the outside. especially white people.

And Bob's view was that you had to put some light on this matter. We had just gotten, we were just losing too many people. We were getting beaten up. I think he was probably right, we had taken a lot so we needed to have some way to bring in people and that there were a lot of students-- and he was hearing this from this white guy ... Jewish guy who....

Sinsheimer: Lowenstein.

Smith: Lowenstein, Al. He was hearing it from Al who had a more global picture of America and was also was tracking some of the things that were going on in the Congress. And so they concocted this idea about the Summer Project. And I think it probably wouldn't have, wouldn't-- if we hadn't started of pushing to try to get the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, if we hadn't decided to try to focus on putting a parallel party together, a parallel organization together and force the issue of the Freedom Democratic Party at the '64 convention we may never have pulled off the Summer Project because I think that the way he finally got us interested in doing it, two ways. One he literally cried, said he was

going to quit because we were racists and didn't want any white people involved and he wasn't going to be involved in any organization that didn't let no white people in. He would go 180 degrees on this by the way before he left Mississippi and eventually went to Africa because he didn't want to be bothered with white people anymore.

So by his personal appeal, his personal persuasion he convinced us to reverse-- well actually we never did reverse ourselves he just said you have got to do this.

Sinsheimer: But the idea of building the MFDP made it more attractive?

Smith: Well, it made it more attractive because really focused us outwardly. You know you were building the Freedom Democratic Party because you couldn't-- and also I guess in a way, and now this is looking back and I have never thought about it quite this way but I am sure it is the case-- we were going nowhere with this voter registratin business the way we were doing it. I mean you would get one guy registered to vote in Panola County and three up in _____ and ten somewhere else. Symbolically it was important but you were never going to get anybody, enough people registered to vote to make any difference in any of these counties. So we were really going nowhere with that.

And I remember I had advanced at the SNCC meeting in fall of '63 that I thought that SNCC should come out squarely against the literacy test. I thought it was something that it was a thing of the past, belonged in the horse and buggy age and besides you couldn't pass a test that the giver didn't want you to pass. And there was just no way to pass a subjective test that the administrator who was adminstrating the test didn't want to test. And I thought that we were just deceiving ourselves and just wasting our time and money.

Sinsheimer: What was their reaction to that?

Smith: Well Forman, I told Forman this all of the time and Forman said he thought I was crazy. He said, "Look this guy has obviously been in Mississippi too long and needs R&R. You know

people have a sacred view in this country that person has got to know how to read and write before they can vote." He was right about that but he didn't remember that America had changed since the goddamn horse and buggy age. That people had televisions and newspapers and radios. You could learn everything to know about a candidate without picking up a newspaper, without picking up his resume. And times had changed and people were being kept from voting because-- people were using these things to keep people from registering to vote, to deny them their rights. And we had to face that if we were ever going to get anywhere with them. And eventually of course Congress passed a law banning the damn literacy test and the poll tax.

But that was a major thing for us because focusing ourselves like I said on the Freedom Democratic Party gave us a chance to examine all of this stuff, to look outwardly. And in the long run it made a lot of difference, there is no question about the fact the Voting Rights Act just changed the South. I think more than even school integration or integrating lunch counters. I think the Voting Rights Act was really one thing that eventually would change the South because it changed the way people had to look at who their voters were. It put the threat of political power there even if it never was realized. The fact is that if you ever got people registered enough to vote they could take over a town or a city and they have done it in hundreds of cases down there and it has made a difference in the quality of life. That together with other things-- school intregation and lunch counter integration and things like that have made a lot of difference. But I would say if you were talking about those three things on any kind of weighted basis the most significant one was the right to vote.

Sinsheimer: Absolute last question. How did you feel over the course of time about Aaron Henry?

Smith: Well, there were several people out in Mississippi that were.... I said Amzie was the first person I met when I went over to Mississippi to stay. The first person I met

when I went to Mississippi was Aaron Henry. I didn't go to stay, I went to get Ivanhoe out of jail. I was a student at Morehouse and the Atlanta student movement was the only movement in the country with any money and Ivanhoe got put in jail over there. He was still in college up there in Michigan and he came down there to bring some pharmaceuticals down there and got locked up. And we put the money up to get him out of jail. I went over there to put the money up to get him out of jail. That is when I met Aaron Henry at that time. There were several people like that in Mississippi who were sort of bigger than life, they stood out because they were activists, everybody knew it, they were involved in all of the protests. And there was somebody like that in almost every town. And we quickly became friends. We sort of became their legs and their mouths and their arms. And that really was our purpose too was to try to help them try to do what they were trying to do.

Now I think Henry has played a major role in that. Now he has done some things on a tactical basis from time to time that I didn't agree with. But I knew he had proven his stripes over the years, there was no question about that. And he was certainly in those days a key person in Mississippi. In the Mississippi Delta there was Aaron Henry and Amzie Moore and those were the two really outstanding teachers. You could go to all of the cities in Batesville, Robert Miles, and this was before Fannie Lou and Joe Mack and that group. There were people like Mr. Travis, Jimmy Travis' father who was very active down there. And people like that that everybody knew, that the state knew, state FBI and GBI and local police and everybody knew they were very active in the movement. And there was not a whole lot going on in those towns so they didn't have a.... {Short Break}

I think Aaron Henry-- he is in the state legislature down there now isn't he? People change over the years. You know there were times when people felt that he didn't, that he was not addressing them but I think some of that is a function of 1) age and 2) I think it was a function of something else which is that there were more younger people

coming along that were more militant than he was and more educated and better prepared and they pushed at the edges in ways that Henry wouldn't do. That is true everywhere, that is true here in politics. There are younger people out there that are willing to take more chances. They got less to lose, more to gain and that is the way it is. That is sort of the nature of this business that we are in. I think that some of that happened down in Mississippi fortunately for all of us. I mean Aaron Henry I am talking about 25 years ago, I mean Aaron Henry was a fully grown adult when I was in Mississippi so he must be in his 60's, late 60's by now. And he would have to move over and have some new leadership come up under him and those people are going to be more aggressive and they are going to be more talented, they are going to demand more, they are going to want to take over these offices. They are not going to be able to compromise as much in terms of their views. And they will probably for a long time are not going to be willing to play the backroom politics that an established person like Henry might be willing to (do). And that is where, and that is the group that has tried to discredit him but that is sort of the American way.

I mean that is the way you get power in this country. You have to challenge the guy that is in power. You have to challenge his ideas and you have to take it away from him. It is like boxing you know you can't beat the champion by stepping in the ring, you have to beat him. It has to be clear to everybody that you have got a better program, a better idea. And that you are better able to articulate it. And I think a lot of that is what is going on in Mississippi right now with Aaron Henry and that is why some people are discrediting him because they just feel like he is maybe out of his time. Some of that may be true. On the other hand still you have to get to take it away from him, you have to beat the champion, you can't just get out there and say I am the champ.

And I think McLemore is finding some of that down in Mississippi. McLemore has been very involved in politics for a long time and is sort of the resident intellectual and the

resident critic of Mississippi politics, sort of a guru down there. And yet he has never really run for office. And it may be that you can't, I mean he may have just missed the time. I mean timing is everything in this business. He may never get elected because he is identified enough with the old guard so that young people don't trust him that much. And there are young people out there who have more legs and have got more education as I said and have got more ideas and they are willing to-- they want the whole thing right now. And that is sort of the juice that keeps us all going. And so I look at it that way-- you know I am a little removed from it now and I can be more objective I think in looking at it.

But there is-- I think Mississippi has come a long way. I think it is limited somewhat by the economics of the state. There is no question about that. And if you look at this city now, I mean Washington went through this fifteen years of bad times and the economy down, no jobs, no economic expansion, very little money to do any kind of social programs with. Now in the last four or five years it has been on the upturn and there is more money being created to do things with here. It made life a lot better for politicians who want to try to implement some social programs. And I think that Mississippi has never had that so it has been a struggle for power right now, more than anything else because even if you got into power there is very little there that you could use to implement social programming. And it happened during the time when-- the bulk of the black leadership developed at a time when the economy of the country was turning down. Going through inflation and high unemployment. Federal government was cutting back on its commitment to all of its social programs.

Sinsheimer: People can't deliver like they used to be.

Smith: That is right....

End of interview.