



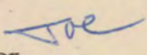
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MEMORANDUM

To: Tim West

Fm: Joe Sinsheimer 

Re: Hollis Watkins Interview (2)

Dt: September 22, 1998

Included in this package are two interviews I conducted with SNCC field secretary Hollis Watkins.

Watkins joined SNCC after working with Bob Moses on the McComb voter registration campaign in 1961. The next spring, Watkins and Curtis Hayes started a voter registration campaign in Hattiesburg, Mississippi with the support of veteran activist Vernon Dahmer. Watkins developed into one of SNCC's most valuable field secretaries and is still active in Mississippi politics and civil rights activity today.

I have enclosed several pages from Taylor Branch's, Pillar of Fire, which details Watkin's work in Hattiesburg.

Interview with Hollis Watkins
Jackson, Mississippi
February 13, 1985

Joe Sinsheimer: If you just want to start with some things about being in high school in McComb I guess, or even before if you want?

Hollis Watkins: Well, I guess I will start with-- see I didn't go to high school in McComb.

Sinsheimer: Oh okay.

Watkins: Well I guess I will start with-- well my name is Hollis Watkins and I am originally from the country of Summit. Summit is a little small town that is about three miles north of McComb. And I say I am from Summit because that is where I got my mail from but I actually lived across the county line in Lincoln County. Summit is in Pike County so therefore being from the rural I went to school in Bogue Chitto. And that is where I graduated from high school.

After I had graduated from high school I had decided to take a year off and attempt to work and make a little money before going on to college. During that period of time I ended up out in California. And while I was in California I began to see the Freedom Riders in different other parts of the country, riding on the buses and going into the different places and being beaten.

Sinsheimer: You saw it on television?

Watkins: Yeah, I saw that on television. And not really understanding what it was all about or what they were attempting to do. One day while watching television they said that the Freedom Riders were going into Mississippi and going all the way through to New Orleans. So once I saw that I decided that this was an opportunity for me to come back home and try and find out what they were really all about, and possibly join up with them.

So after getting back home I had no idea or any information as to how to get up with the Freedom Riders because from my understanding none of them were coming through the state at that time. However after I had been home for a number of weeks a friend of mine came out in the country and told me that she had heard that Dr. Martin Luther King and a lot of other big people were in McComb and were having rallies at night and speaking at different places. And she told me that they were at the old Masonic

Watkins (cont.): temple over the Burglundtown supermarket, that that was their headquarters.

So once she told me that then we walked a little bit and she went on home. I immediately notified some of my other close friends and told them what she had told me and we decided that we would go out the next to check them out and see what the situation was. So when we arrived at the Burglundtown supermarket we asked-- well I think Bob Moses was one of the first people that we had met. We told him that we had heard that Dr. Martin Luther King and some other big people were in town and asked him if he knew anything about it or could tell us.

So he informed us that he didn't know anything Dr. Martin Luther King being in town or even coming but he did tell us that he and some other students were there working on voter registration and trying to get people registered to vote so that they could become first class citizens. And he asked us would we be willing to join in and work with him and help them do that. So we asked him if he would explain to us what all was involved. So he briefly showed us a (voter registration) form and said this is the application that you have to fill out which has to do with certain questions about yourself personally. And then once doing that you are given a section of the Mississippi constitution and you have to tell in your own words what that section of the constitution is saying. And if you pass that then you are eligible to become a registered voter.

So after we had looked at the applications that he had given us and filled it out and read over the various sections of the constitution, certain sections of the constitution of Mississippi, then he came and he chose one and asked us to interpret that section of the constitution. Once we had completed that he looked over the applications and he told us that we had done fine. And if we had done that at the registrar's office that we would actually be qualified to become registered voters. And he said that in essence was what they were doing, working with people and teaching them to fill out the form and become registered voters. He also explained that from time to time we would be going out in the community talking to people about that and encouraging them to come to voter registration classes and to the mass meetings that they had at night.

So I told him that I didn't see any problem with it and that I would be willing to work with him, doing that kind of work. The other friends of mine told him that they would have to give him a decision later. As it turned out two of them did not come back because

Watkins (cont.): their parents didn't want them to get involved in the process. But one of them did whose name is Curtis Hayes. So we did begin to work with Bob and the rest of the people on voter registration, passing out leaflets in the community and encouraging people to come to the office to learn how to fill out the voter registration form and interpret sections of the constitutions. This is what they called the literacy test. The section of the constitution.

So we did that for a number of weeks and then finally after doing that for a number of weeks, Marion Barry, who is the mayor of Washington D.C. now, came down along with a couple of other people and he began to talk to those of us who were students and other young people like myself who were not in school at the time but was working, that SNCC had two phases of operation, one dealing with voter registration and the other one dealing with direct action. And that he was in charge of the direct action aspect of SNCC and he explained to us what direct action meant, and went through the whole process of explaining that they would go and try to integrate the various facilities that were segregated, be it lunch counters, be it swimming pools, be it churches, libraries or what-- but basically dependent upon what the people in the local area wanted to do and where they wanted to start first. And he explained that in many instances the students would form local organizations that would be responsible for those actions within the different communities. And based on that we did form an organization and I think we called our organization the Pike County Nonviolent Direct Action Committee.

And we began to think about the different places that were segregated, that blacks were not allowed, and talk about them. At the same time he would have workshops in, you know, nonviolent action with us and telling us about some of the philosophy of nonviolence and how in many areas students had been treated, and how to protect yourself in the event that someone attacks you and begins to beat you so that you wouldn't be injured severely if possible. So after going through those activities for a number of days we decided that our first target would be the Woolworth lunch counter in McComb.

And there was a number of us that had decided that we would meet at the office that morning and then go on down and have a sit-in demonstration and attempt to

Watkins (cont.): be served. However when we got to the office a number of students showed up, but for various reasons only Curtis (Hayes) and myself was willing and prepared to go through with the action. So we said even though it was only two of us we still would go ahead as planned.

So based on that Curtis and myself did go on down to the Woolworth's lunch counter and when we got to the store all of the stools were filled at the lunch counter so we walked down the street. And in the process of walking down the street when we got back-- a police officer was already in the store. So we decided to walk into the store and wait until the school became vacant. Then shortly after that one became vacant but that wasn't enough because we didn't want to divide ourselves up. So we had to wait. And eventually a lady and her daughter got up from the counter and immediately we ran and took the stools that the lady and her daughter had got up from.

Simsheimer: And the policeman had stayed at this point?

Watkins: The police at this point was already in the store. So immediately after we sat the lady behind the counter went down to the other end of the counter, opposite from us. And a police officer came and asked us to move on. And so we asked him if we were under arrest and he said not if you move on. So we told him that if we were not under arrest we would prefer to stay there and be served like the other people. And he told us this about three times and we replied the same each time. Then he finally said well you are under arrest. We asked him what were the charges. He told us not to worry about the charges to come on, that they we would be made out once we got to city hall. So we walked down the streets with the police officer to city hall and as we were walking, you know, we met people on the streets that we saw and just other black people in general who were trying to figure out what was going on and they noticed that we were being carried to jail but I think it was hard for them to realize exactly what was happening because we seemed to have been happy and joyful on our way to jail (laughter). Generally people are in a sad mood when they have been arrested. But it was just the opposite with us.

So we were carried and put in jail and we were fined and charged with disturbing the peace, refusing to obey an officer, and seems like there was some other charge, I don't remember. And on each count we were sentenced to six months in jail and fined a certain amount of dollars for each charge.

So we were put in jail and we remained in jail that time for thirty-four days. About two, no three or four days after we had been arrested Bobby Talbert and Ike Lewis and Brenda Travis had a demonstration. And they

Watkins (cont.): were also arrested and put in jail.

Sinsheimer: Was that at the Woolworth's store or somewhere else?

Watkins: I don't think they sat in at the Woolworth's, I believe they perhaps went to the bus station, Greyhound bus station I believe.

Sinsheimer: Let me ask you a question here. How did-- what was Bob's (Moses) opinion about the direct action? Was he encouraging you all to get involved in that or was he was thinking that-- was there any difference of opinion there?

Watkins: Bob was basically responsible for voter registration and trying to get people registered to vote. However he was not about discouraging any of the local citizens in participating in any thing that they felt was necessary for them to participate. So I guess you would say that he was open and willing to support whatever action that the community people felt that was necessary and appropriate for them to take.

So Brenda, Ike and Bobby, we all got out of jail at the same time which meant I guess that they spent either about twenty-nine or thirty days in jail. So after getting out of jail ...

Sinsheimer: How did you get of jail?

Watkins: We got out of jail on bond.

Sinsheimer: Who raised that money?

Watkins: SNCC. SNCC staff raised the money. But after they had gotten out of jail and Brenda and the other students attempted to go back and enter school, and it was at this point that the principle did not allow Brenda to re-enter school. And some talk had already initially taken place about that there might be a possibility that she might not be able to go back to school. And the students at the high school there had basically decided a number of them that if she (Brenda Travis) was not allowed to go back to school that they would have a walk-out from the school.

Sinsheimer: Okay. Now this is an all black high school?

Watkins: All black high school.

Sinsheimer: White principal or black principal?

- Watkins: Black principal. This is all black. Everything at this time was black.
- Sinsheimer: Okay. Was the principal under pressure, was his job dependent on him doing this?
- Watkins: At that time, as well as it is now, any public school comes, you know, under the auspices of the whites who are ultimately at the top of the system. So it is definitely a matter of taking instruction and dictates from the school boards. The school boards at that time were all white, just like so many of them still are today. So I am sure that the principal probably had been given instruction, you know, to do this. And even if he hadn't been given instruction he knew the wishes and desires of his white supervisors.
- So after they didn't allow her to go back to school that day the students ran from class to class and says they won't let Brenda back in school, come on let's go. Joe Lewis was one of the main leaders of that. I think where the initial announcement was made was in chapel. They were having chapel there at the school, in the assembly. So the question was asked the principal there in the assembly. You know, was Brenda being allowed to come back to school. Well, I think the principal told them well I will see you in the office. And after they asked the question several times and it was clear that the principal was not going to deal with it, and that in essence that she was not being allowed to get back in school, they just said come on let's go.
- I guess eighty to eighty-five percent of the student body, you know, there walked out. And during the process of walking out they headed toward the SNCC office and people were - that were on the streets, you know, began to join in because they didn't know what was really happening. Some joining in just to see what was happening and others joining because they did know. So that march ended up at the office. So people sang freedom songs there in front of the office and talked a little bit, made a couple of speeches. And someone and I don't remember who it was suggested that maybe what we should do was walk on down to city hall and offer prayer, you know about the situation on the steps of city hall.
- And that is what people did. Once that suggestion was given people just left the office and went on down to city hall.
- Sinsheimer: Where was the office?
- Watkins: The office was in the Masonic Temple which was on top of the Burglundtown supermarket, it was a little supermarket black owned and operated, downstairs and upstairs was the Masonic Temple.

Sinsheimer: Is that still there?

Watkins: It is still there, the building is I guess still there. So we marched from there downtown to city hall. And the first person stepped up on the steps and attempted to pray and he was arrested. And that process followed for a short period of time. And I am told after six or seven was arrested then they just brought everybody in without allowing them to step up. I think I was about the third or fourth person that was arrested because we had intended for it to be a long drawn out process if arrests were made we would step up one at a time, because in order to pray you had to go across the street so it was like we would go across the street one at a time and get on the steps and pray.

But I am told that after about six or seven they just got everybody that was there and brought them on in and arrested them. Some of the ones that were under eighteen whose parents showed up were released to their parents. And others whose parents didn't show up they remained in jail, you know, until they came the next day. Those of us that were over eighteen, we all were charged with disturbing the peace, and refusing to obey an officer, and contributing to a delinquency of a minor. I was charged for contributing in each case of those hundred and some students (laughter) that remained. So I had a hundred cases of contributing and was eventually sentenced to two years for each count of contributing to the delinquency of a minor.

Sinsheimer: Let me ask you about parents' reactions at this time. I guess you could start with your own, but in general what were-- were parents supporting their children at this point or ... ?

Watkins: The reaction from the parents varied, you know, from one extreme to the other. When I first got involved I was afraid to tell my parents all about what I was doing. I didn't know how they would feel and I was afraid that they wouldn't approve of me doing what I was doing so that fear, I never told them all about what I was doing because I didn't want them to say no and me have to go against what they had said. So I told them very little of the fact that everything that I was doing. For example, the day that I left home that I knew I was going to get arrested that day I just told my parents that I was going out and that I was going to spend the night in town and wouldn't be back home tonite. So they told me to be careful, be good, not to do anything that I would get in trouble for. So it was that kind of, you know, attitude. But as it turned out my parents did understand you know what I was doing, because I am told that after they

Watkins (cont.): had told my father about me getting arrested that day that my father was one of the guest speakers at that mass rally that night. So they did understand.

Sinsheimer: So that kind of surprised you then?

Watkins: It surprised me and it made me feel good. Because here I am sitting in jail and they come in and tell me this is what happened in reference to my father. They never actively participated but based on that gesture and everything I knew that, you know, I had their sentiment. And once I got out of jail and began to talk to them a little bit, you know I could understand that they didn't object to me doing what I was doing. They were merely concerned about my safety, that was the only thing. They would talk to me about safety precautions as I went about doing what I was doing.

Other students' parents, you know, were opposed to them. For example, many of the students who walked out their parents were opposed to the action outright. Some of them supported the action openly of what the students-- so there was a mixed reaction on the part of the parents. But you know in many instances there were some students that felt that whether the parents supported it or not, you know there were certain things that they just had to do. And that is what brought on the whole situation that led really to the Freedom Schools, setting up the Freedom Schools. Because the principal said that in order for the students that had been arrested to get back into school their parents had to sign a statement that the child would not participate in any other kind of activity, civil rights activity. That if they did they would be expelled from school permanently. So some of the parents weren't willing to do that because they knew it was wrong and they knew it might become necessary another time, that they wanted and felt that their children should participate. So they didn't sign the statement. So their children weren't allowed to get back into school so we set up alternative measures where these children could continue to be taught and get their education while we were trying to get them into a permanent school which eventually turned out to be J.P. Cambell College here in Jackson.

Sinsheimer: Now some of the, I don't what terminology, old guard leadership were opposed to that march as well, people like Nathaniel Lewis and (C.C.) Bryant told me that he-- that the NAACP position was that kids should be walking into school not walking out of school. I mean Bryant at this point was NAACP, would he ever come talk to students or was he so far removed that you all didn't care what he felt?

Watkins:

He would talk to students and people from time to time. See at that time the NAACP had what we considered was a much, much "to go slow" approach, because the approach that the NAACP was using at the time was that you fight it through the courts. You send one or two people down as a test case, you let them get arrested and you get them out of jail on bond and appeal that process up through the courts which would eventually would be thrown out hopefully once it reached the Supreme Court.

But we knew that it might be years and years and years before you ever get a decision based on that, and we felt that there were a lot of things that needed to be done and the time was now for us to do that. So it was approach of SNCC that we do what we feel is necessary to be done now. And if it is a situation that involves mass arrests we informed the people that were participating and let them know what the situation is and they be prepared for the worst. But hopefully that -- for example when Curtis and I went to jail that first time we went knowing, with the understanding that we might have to stay in jail to serve our full sentence out, you know, but SNCC would do everything it could to raise the bond money to get us out, but we were prepared to serve our full sentence out. So that was the attitude that SNCC had to change things through that process and rallying other people around the cause to come to aid of those that were initially getting involved to change the system in the process through massive participation on the part of the people. So that is how we did it, and for the most part that was prevailing sentiment that took place throughout most of Mississippi, again in the early sixties, 1961 and later on because all the time I am talking about now is in 1961.

So after I got out of jail the second time which was the march that we had I stayed and worked in McComb for a short period of time. And after that Bob (Moses) and other SNCC staff people had gotten a request for some SNCC staff workers to come to Hattiesburg to do a voter registration project over there. So I left McComb and went to Hattiesburg to set up a voter registration project over there.

So definitely going back to the thing with the NAACP, definitely NAACP was against the march. As a matter of fact most people were caught off guard by the march because it wasn't a planned march, it was a spontaneous reaction to the principal not letting Brenda (Travis) back into the school. As a matter of fact some of the staff workers for example, SNCC staff workers that were back at the office, they were caught off guard when they saw all of students walking up in front of the office (laughter).

Sinsheimer: Sure.

Watkins: The only people that really knew what was happening were the two or three SNCC staff that went with Brenda to the school to just sort of be there on the scene to see what happened. They were the only ones ...

Sinsheimer: Do you know who went with her?

Watkins: I don't know who all went. I guess at that time I was considered myself, I did go to the school, and you know I was considered, myself, a SNCC staff person at that time even though I wasn't getting paid. Because even when we got paid, when we got on staff to get paid (laughter), really didn't get paid, and even when you got it, it was something like nine dollars and sixty or eighty something cents, you know a week, even if you got paid. If you got paid you had a little less than ten dollars a week to survive off of.

So it was a spontaneous thing, it was an action that wasn't planned in advance, you know, and the whole thing over at the Courthouse. Whether people liked it or not, there was nothing that they could do, you know, about it (laughter). I think because of the situation, it open the eyes of a lot of people to just really what the conditions were, you know, there in McComb and how the white city fathers really felt about black people. I think based on that and the treatment that students received through that whole process made a lot more black people determined that yes, now is the time that we must fight against some of these conditions that existed. It caused a lot of people to come out and do things, be it voter registration, be it assisting whatever way that they could.

But Mr Bryant as I say definitely was opposed to it and tried to show us how through the process that there method was the best. We felt that it just would take too long for that to happen because we knew that cases could be put off and put off and put off. It might even have been ten years before we got a ruling.

Sinsheimer: There is an article, some article, that said the average, the average length of a court case in Mississippi for the first ruling during that period was thirty months, from the time it was filed -- let alone, I mean the first one always went against you, you didn't have a chance. So if it takes thirty months before you can even file an appeal. It proves your point well.

Watkins: Yeah. Yeah.

Sinsheimer: Then you went over to Hattiesburg?

Watkins: To Hattiesburg, right.

Sinsheimer: You just drove over there with some folk?

Watkins: Curtis and I went down in a car with ...

Sinsheimer: Somebody had a car?

Watkins: We went from Jackson. We had come up to Jackson and we went down from Jackson with Dr. Miller, Dr. Miller's son, his name was Bill Miller Jr., and he was supposed to have had some friends that he knew in Hattiesburg that could hook us up with Mr. Dahmer who the initial request had come from. Mr. Dahmer was the Forest County President of the NAACP.

Mr. Dahmer inviting us in and working with us, you might say was directly in conflict with the thinking and the attitude of the NAACP. He was the president of Forest County and his position was that from what he had seen the young people were doing quite well and they had a lot of time and energy of which they could put into doing things, which he did not have the time, being a family man and trying to take care of family obligations, so he preferred the young people to come in and do things and he support them in whatever way.

So we drove down in Bill's car and unfortunately we never was able to find his friends that he knew and we were left there searching and talking with people, trying to find out who knew Mr. Dahmer (laughter), and where Mr. Dahmer lived. And eventually we went into this little store on Mobil St. that was owned and operated by Mr. Bowings. Mr. Bowings was a member of the NAACP and he knew Mr. Dahmer and had a telephone in the store (laughter) and called Mr. Dahmer up and told him that two young men were here to see him, etc. And I guess in about forty-five minutes Mr. Dahmer showed up and we met. Mr. Dahmer carried us out to his place which was approximately seven or eight miles out of town, because he lived in a little area that was called Kelly's settlement. So went out there and we got a chance to meet his family and we began to talk about the situation in Forest County. And he told us he was willing to support us in whatever way. SNCC had given us a hundred dollars to go into Forest County and set up a voter registration project there. We were supposed to be there for three months, and we were supposed to set up a voter registration project and run it, pay for office space, supplies, feed ourselves, etc. for three months off of that hundred dollars.

But anyway while we were there we began to talk with people about voter registration. Mr. Dahmer either would bring us into town in the morning or send us in by his sons and come back and pick us up in the evenings. And in some case he would just let us use his truck. And if we didn't have anything for food, he would give us a few dollars to buy some food with while we were in town and he would feed us breakfast and supper in the evening. And he would take care of all of the gas, fill the truck up with gas and that kind of thing. So he really was the backbone of ...

Sinsheimer: Where was he working at the time.

Watkins: Mr. Dahmer was an independent land owner. He owned several hundred acres of land. He had a large farm operation, he would produce anywhere from seventy-five to a hundred bales of cotton per year. He had a saw mill so from time to time he would cut lumber.

Sinsheimer: So he was completely financially independent?

Watkins: Right. He was independent.

Sinsheimer: Did you find a difference organizing there because I guess in McComb you knew a lot of folk, or because you lived out in Summit ... ?

Watkins: No I lived out in the country from Summit, there was very few people that I knew in McComb. The difference, the basic difference was that in McComb we always had what we thought was the expert organizers, you know, to rely on. Which was Bob Moses and the other folks (laughter), you know, who we didn't realize at the time were just students, or folks that were just out of college, or what have you, that didn't really have no, you know, a lot of organizational background but just were people that had a vision, that had some knowledge and determination and will power to do things. But in McComb you know, these are the organizers that we had that we could always fall back on for knowledge and information.

In Hattiesburg we were on our own, we were that person. We had to be able to proceed and make plans, project, and deal with that there on the spot, with advice in terms of Mr. Dahmer and a few other people, in terms of their feeling in reference to how the community felt, how the community would accept this, accept that. And what kind of approach we should do in certain instances. So that was the basic difference.

Also part of that too had to do with the whole thing of you being able to actually communicate with people enough that where that you build your own protection around you through your ability to communicate and win over and make friends, you know, with the people in the community. Because in many instances we had been told where the police would come out right and beat you or they would put a few dollars in the hands of some black folks and have them to beat you. So we had to look out for ourselves, you know, from the total perspective, and be able to try to conceptualize what was going on and perceive the situation as it existed and how it might exist on certain kinds of things that were taking place.

So we worked there for awhile trying to get ...

Sinsheimer: Curtis and yourself?

Watkins: Curtis and myself. Curtis' stay there was fairly short because Curtis left me in Hattiesburg coming to Jackson to see about getting us some money. And when he got to Jackson, he found out that they had a boycott going on here in Jackson, so he began to work in the boycott (laughter) in Jackson and I was down in ...

Sinsheimer: You were left alone (laughter).

Watkins: Yeah, by myself. Finally some money did come. Jim Forman eventually sent us some money to Hattiesburg and he sent it in Curtis' name. Curtis was in Jackson. There was nothing I could do (laughter).

Sinsheimer: A check with Curtis' name on it?

Watkins: Right. And the second check came with Curtis' name on it and I complained about that, then they sent a second check and it had Curtis' name on it. (laughter) So I guess whoever was making the checks out for Jim favored Curtis over me. So anyway the checks were in his name. And eventually I did get some money and we began to move and organize, really set up things. We had actually, I had actually set up voter registration classes, well we because me and the people from the community, we had set up voter registration classes in different churches there in the city of Hattiesburg. And we had also set up voter registration classes in different little towns throughout the county.

That was a trip as an individual. In a county that you are going into for the first time and you are driving fifteen to twenty miles out of town to this little bitty town that was way back on the back roads and that kind of thing. And, you know, that brought on a much different feeling there.

So I worked there for a good period of time. After working there for a period of time, the area that Bob and other people felt would really be popping and things would really be moving seemed to be getting off to a very, very slow start which was the Greenwood area. Because Sam Block and Willie Peacock had been sent up there to do a project there. But it seemed as if they weren't able to really get things moving. So Bob asked me if I would be willing to go up to Greenwood and see if I could give Willie and Sam a hand and help them get things moving up there. We are talking about '62 now.

Sinsheimer: Now had you gotten any people registered in Hattiesburg.

Watkins: Yes. There had been just a few people registered but a lot of people had gone and attempted to register. And that was one of the things that was happening all over was that we had really begun to go in and register, attempt to register. But many of them were being denied.

That was one of things that really helped the court case in throwing out the whole literacy test was because in the

Watkins (cont.): Hattiesburg area there had been some doctors, a lawyer, a couple of law students, and some school teachers that had gone and taken the test and failed. And the registrar in Forest County whose name at that time was Theron Lynn ...

Sinsheimer: L-i-n-n?

Watkins: L-y-n-n-- I believe it was, I believe that is how it was spelled. At that time I believe his educational level was the six grade. Because all across Mississippi you had a large number of the county registrars that was flunking people who had from a sixth to an eighth grade education. So that was really one of the case in points that really helped deal with the suit in terms of changing and throwing out the whole literacy test.

So as I was saying earlier I agreed that I would go up to Greenwood to see if I could help

Sinsheimer: Let me ask you one more question before we go on. You said you were working a lot through the churches. Were ministers open to the idea? How were you ...?

Watkins: In some cases the minister would be open to the idea, in other case the ministers would be very closed to the idea, but by going through and finding the community leaders of that church, you know, maybe a couple of strong deacons, two or three strong mothers or sisters in the church that would say look, you know, this is our church and the things that these folks are doing and talking about are doing is for the benefit of all. "We want the doors open." So it varied from place to place, basically from church to church as to how the doors actually got opened.

Sinsheimer: Does that process still go on today in dealing with politicking?

Watkins: Basically, I think it still goes on today. One of the things that you are confronted with today-- the pastor or the members might say well we don't allow politics, any form of politics up in the church. So therefore you can't have any political what have you in that particular church because of that kind of reasoning. And because of not having a real overt unified force of movement of people that is working, then pressure is not really brought to bear on them, instead of going to them, I think there is (are) enough churches now that are open to people, you say well just forget them we will go on over here where we are now.

Watkins (cont.);

When we when to Greenwood, for example, the minister of one church that we really wanted to get would not allow us to come into the church. So we got into the church through his Bishop, it was a Methodist church. From the Bishop, and the Bishop called the minister and said, "You have got to open that door and let those folks come in. They have to have access to your church whether you are there or not." So that's how we got into that particular church.

Sinsheimer:

Try whatever you could in other words?

Watkins:

Yeah, whatever it took to get in there. If it was an important church then that is what we did.

So I went on up to Greenwood and started working with Sam (Block) and Willie (Peacock). And we talked about what the situation was there. And it was hard there because it was in the midst of the Delta and you had a lot of people that lived on the plantation and even the people that lived in the little towns were in a much more destitute situation than people down in this part of the state.

So we basically began to touch, continue to touch bases as they had been attempting to do with a few leaders of the community, a few churches. And I think the thing that really kicked it off was after I had gotten there then we looked at the situation with the youth and we were able to pull in a large number of youth and got them involved, working in the office, passing out leaflets, going all over the place. So that kind of opened up the doors, you know, and we began to get a few more people to go down and attempt to register.

But the thing that really threw the doors, made the doors swing open, was a -- people had began to solicit food and clothes, and to send food and clothes into that area. So every so often, every number of days we would be giving out food and clothes to the poor, the poorest of the poor I should say (laughter).

Sinsheimer:

This was the stuff that was being trucked down from the North?

Watkins:

Right it was being trucked down from the North. Dick Gregory got involved in that whole process and he came in himself a couple of times and Prior to that at one of the times (food distribution time) Bob (Moses) was there and we were giving out clothes. And we had hundreds of people standing in front of the church waiting to get food and clothes. And Bob suggested

Watkins (cont.): that, you know, since we were all here it would be good if we just all walked down to the courthouse and registered to vote, and then come back and get the food and clothes. And then we would be in a better position to elect people that wouldn't cut off certain things.

So we did. We left the church and began to walk down to the courthouse and there we were met by the police officers and dogs, and billy clubs and all of that. So there were several marches in Greenwood around, you know, the whole voter registration thing. And it was those marches that really kind of opened the door that really swung Greenwood open.

As I said Dick Gregory came in a couple of times, and he marched with the people downtown. Knowing that Dick Gregory was a national figure, it was interesting, they really didn't want to arrest him.

Sinsheimer: Hmmm.

Watkins: They would put him in the car and drive him to the office (laughter), you know, and around, and that kind of thing. They didn't want that kind of adverse publicity.

Sinsheimer: A lot of people mention Amzie Moore but-- I know that Bob talked a lot about him in his presentation (at the Smithsonian) but I am really curious about what ... was he helping you all at this point or ... How was Amzie helping? I know he recruited people ...

Watkins: Amzie was like the man behind the scene. He was working at the post office so he was supposed to have been in some kind or another under the Hatch Act. But what Amzie would do, Amzie had contact and connection all over the state. Amzie would meet with us as the leaders from time to time, suggest certain things that we do, suggest certain tactics that we use, suggest certain areas that we go into, give us names, addresses, telephone numbers of people that were in the different areas for us to see and talk to when we went into those particular areas. (Break)

So he would give us names, addresses, phone numbers of people. And in many instances he would have already contacted these people and told them about us coming. In certain other instances he would go with us at night into areas and introduce us to people.

Sinsheimer: So a lot of people knew Amzie?

Watkins: So a lot of people knew Amzie all across the state, because he had traveled across the state working with the NAACP, as the NAACP representative, he also had a

Watkins (cont.): group at one time that he used to take that would go into the various churches, you know, and they would sing, that was like an entre into the churches for him to talk about voter registration through his whole NAACP thing. this is even before, you know, the early 1960's. So this is the kind of thing that Amzie would do. He was the kind of person that was not interested in seeking glory or publicity. He was interested and concerned about having certain things done, having certain things accomplished. As a matter of fact he is the one that recommended and told Bob (Moses), and made that suggestion that he come to McComb and start there with his voter registration project and to get in touch with C.C. Bryant in McComb. So it was Amzie through that. And it was a similar kind of situation that it was Amzie, through his contact and working behind the scenes with us, that we got to meet people all across the Delta and the whole state of Mississippi.

It was Amzie Moore that people in Holmes County, he made that connection of hook up with us. We were working in Greenwood, just north of Holmes County. So he made the hook up with us and the people in Holmes County, for us to move into Holmes County. So he was like the major conduit by which many of the things that we did, much of the expansion that we made from one area to another, he was the conduit for that. So that is how Amzie worked.

Sinsheimer: Okay.

Watkins: He worked with those who were in charge that were running things in small meetings and introducing them to other people in other areas that were about trying to do some things and make changes.

Sinsheimer: Question. Another question. I don't know how to put this one. A lot of people talk about Bob, you know, capital M or whatever. I mean what were people's reactions to him (Bob Moses). I mean was he more successful than other people? Why Moses with a capital M?

Watkins: I think Moses became, or was the kind of person, because of his sincerity about what he was trying to do. I think it also had to do with him coming to Mississippi and being prepared to stay here and work with people in Mississippi over a period of time, rather than running in for two or three weeks or month, and going. But they saw Bob as someone that was serious, that was sincere, that was dedicated, and that was willing and prepared to be here and suffer along with the people of the state, if suffering had to take place. Right along with them as

Watkins (cont.): opposed to being an outside force, you know that runs in and runs out, and deals with the situation from without, without being there actually in the midst of it, to reap all the glory and benefits of within, or to suffer all of the brutality that existed.

I think the situation in McComb that happened helped to really make Bob become much greater than -- you might say, than he really was. And thank goodness it came down that way because I think in certain instances that actually provided shelter for us. And that was perpetuated by the local officials of McComb. And I think it had to do with of when he left coming to Mississippi, he told John Doar of the Justice Department that he was coming down to Mississippi. And he (Doar) told him to, you know, to be careful and all that kind of stuff, and if he ever needed him to call him.

So when Bob got here and was arrested than he had one telephone call to make. And from my understanding since John Doar had said if you need me, call me and not said how to call him, Bob called him collect (laughter). And he was afraid to accept the call and afraid not to accept the call, because Bob is arrested, calling him collect from this place where he know white folks kill black folks, you know, wholesale. So he went ahead from my understanding and accepted the call collect from Bob. And Bob told him about the situation and him being arrested and the whole thing. And after they hung up, the police department attempted to call him collect (laughter) and he didn't accept it.

And from my understanding that put fear to a certain extent, definitely serious questions on the minds of the white officials, of what kind of nigger is this that the Justice Department of the United States will accept a collect call from, and won't accept it from us.

Sinsheimer: Right.

Watkins: And they kind of passed that around.

Sinsheimer: And no one else even knew who John Doar was until then.

Watkins: Right.

Sinsheimer: Right.

Watkins: You know (laughter). So that perpetuated that kind of . And naturally black folks that knew or heard about that, that made them feel good, because it said hey we are working with a man that has connections with the Justice Department. You know, because it is like

Watkins (cont.): the Justice Department, you know, for the most part folks considered to be with us. And they considered the same thing until we really got into a lot of deep stuff about the FBI. Sent in the FBI, you know, the Justice Department and the FBI is like with us against you white folks.

Sinsheimer: Right.

Watkins: Until later when we found out that the FBI was coming in from next door and calling you niggers and boys almost like they are on the spot, just like the folks that you were dealing with. So that was, I think that was the thing also that helped build Bob and give him that great big thing, the great big M.

Also I think the mission that Bob took of coming into Mississippi, being the kind of place it was-- and still is to some extent-- set Bob, well Bob went on a similar mission to what the Moses in the Bible went. Delivering the children of Israel. People in the South being very religious, you got the same name and you got a real brave and courageous man to come into here, that is willing to stick here and go through all of this kind of suffering. They kind of put that kind of religious connotation and saw that in the same light. So that raised the M a little bit higher.

Sinsheimer: So that, so it really started really early then?

Watkins: Yeah. But, you know, he was just a regular brother that was serious and dedicated and willing to share in whatever anybody else had to share in, willing to take and go through whatever anybody else in the struggle, because he saw all of us in the struggle together. And what one has to go through with, than the other goes through with. And he was willing and prepared to make that kind of sacrifice. And that was one of things that I think those of us in the early sixties really cherished, that kind of relationship that we had towards one another, that closeness, that whole thing of knowing that you had somebody that you could depend on, somebody that you could really trust.

And it was like when you went to jail, you know, you knew that if there was any way possible that folks were going to get you out, because they were going to do everything in their power to come up with the bond money, you know, to do that. It is not like you get in there and are just forgotten about. So it was that closeness that, that confidence, that trust, that people had and shared within one another.

And when you talked with him (Bob Moses), you could tell that he wasn't just talking, he just wasn't running

Watkins (cont.): rhetoric or some theory that he had read, you could tell that he was talking sincerely, you know, from his heart, and believed in what he was saying and was willing to help demonstrate and participate in the practice and carrying out of what he was carrying out what he was talking about to the fullest extent that anybody else was willing to do. So all of those things I think combined it was made many of the people see the big M.

Sinsheimer: Okay. Were did we take off there? With the food. Now it was the winter of '62 that some people got cut off of the food, off the food rolls that existed, is that right?

Watkins: Yeah.

Sinsheimer: In Leflore county?

Watkins: It was happening, it was happening not just in Leflore county but in other counties too. But this was a county that we had moved into, you know, when I say we I am talking about SNCC, had began to organize and had some remnants of an organization and a movement that was going. So that was kind of like our base for the Delta area, that was definitely one of the bases. For example, the McComb area was the base for the Southwest Mississippi area, and from the McComb base we went into Amite County, we went a little bit into Franklin county, and we went also all the way over into Adams county, which is Natchez. We went into Walthall county and a little bit into Marion county. So Greenwood and Leflore county was like the kind of central base for us in the Delta area.

Because of a lot of people being cut off of the food program, a lot of people not being able to get work, that whole thing, which prompted us to attempt to meet the needs. All the while wherever we went we would attempt to deal with whatever the major needs of the people of the area was, and use those attempts as organizing tools, and getting the people organized, and getting them registered.

Sinsheimer: There was-- I don't know-- I guess it was a series of different comment, I guess Moses and some other people said at some point-- I guess Amzie read some things The reason they started with voter registration was that there wasn't much point in -- well, why desegregate something when black people couldn't afford to go there. So, I mean, they were interested in desegregation, but that wasn't the real need. I guess-- I don't know how to put this without this sounding backwards, but in some ways voting is that way, I mean it is not. I guess what I am trying to say is were people starting to think about

Sinsheimer (cont.): economics at this point. I mean were you trying to, when you were trying to sell voting rights were you trying to link that with jobs. Was that something that was developed, I know that in '64 and '65 some more ideas came up about what we could try to do to get economic development-- does that make some sense?

Watkins: All along the whole voting was tied to economics, it was also tied to education. Because we were dealing with a situation where that we knew that if we had the voting power we could elect people to office that controlled the money, that controlled the flow of industry, so all along, you know, it was definitely the connection between registering to vote and building and developing an economic base, as well as improving the educational system in the state.

Sinsheimer: Were people getting that message do you think? Is that why people were, I mean when someone made the decision to register to vote, I mean you would work on somebody or with somebody, what do you think were some of the "triggers."

Watkins: It is hard to say. And it is a thing that I think we never really took time to really try to analyze or pick out, which was the ones that really triggered them off. Because also in addition to dealing with the whole economic thing, you know, connected to that whole thing too was slavery and you are not to being a first class citizen unless you have the right to vote. So you went through the whole thing, you knew that all of the different things that you went through was, you know, right. You never really realized which was the one that actually was the triggering point, unless later you got to talking with that person and they kind of confided in you which is the one that really triggered them off. Because people could see their economic condition, people could see the condition of the school. And people could see and understand that they were not first class citizens if they could not register to vote. You could express all of the segregated places, you know, that existed, and how other people had the rights to use those places. How we didn't have the right to use those places. And even though we didn't have the right to use those places we didn't have equal places that were our own.

So you would just shoot the whole line (laughter) and hope that something in there would stick and cause them to go down and register.

Sinsheimer: Right.

Watkins: The other thing I was about to say is that I think the the thing of the direct action was a thing that was

- Watkins (cont.): more exciting, and was more appealing to the youth, because, you know, you have a lot of excitement caught up in things, you know how wehn you are young and wild (laughter). Young and wild and you don't want to just be doing things, so you want to be doing things that are exciting or at least seem to be exciting.
- Sinsheimer: How were you recruiting youth, I mean kids just stopping by, or did you go to schools and try to pick people off?
- Watkins: Kids stopping by, and people that you knew, that you would meet in the streets. We would have to be very careful about how we went to schools, see if we went to schools we would be arrested for trespassing, black schools not white (laughter).
- Sinsheimer: Right.
- Watkins: Yeah we would be arrested for trespassing on the schools, so that was a thing that we had to be very, very careful about. And the word was out about these civil rights workers, you know, and folk that were caught up in the public system didn't like us and were all against us. I remember we went over to Little Rock, Arkansas to see how we could assist and talk with some of the folks over there. Not Little Rock, I mean Pine Bluff and they found out we were on campus and they brought the football players out after us. You know we had to head up because the whole football squad was ... (laughter) from what was that Arkansas A&M from Pine Bluff. Yeah. So you know, going ...
- Sinsheimer: Got you running from the football team huh ? (laughter)
- Watkins: So going on the campuses was, especially initially was kind of serious thing, you had to be extremely careful. So you would talk with them (young people) when you met them in different other settings, different other kinds of programs and activities that would be going on, and try to recruit.
- Sinsheimer: Did you all run any special programs to get young people involved or did you have to ... ?
- Watkins: (Laughter) No, not really.
- Sinsheimer: All right I am allowed a few dumb questions, all right.
- Watkins: No problem. (more laughter) No we didn't run any special programs that was-- it was pretty much a straight line, you were dealing with voter registration and those kinds of things. One of the things that I guess could be

Watkins (cont.): considered a special kind of program is the whole singing of the freedom songs, that was something different, that was something that was closely related to the spiritual life, you know, of black people in the South. So people could get involved in that whole process.

Amzie-- I think the whole idea of the SNCC Freedom Singers really came from Amzie (Moore), because he was talking about how you could use, you could get a quartet going that would get us into the churches and places, and raise money in those places. And I think from that perhaps initial concept of Amzie's really was the birth of the whole Freedom Singers.

Sinsheimer: Right. Okay. Well let's move on ... so you stayed in Greenwood the whole winter? Winter of '62-'63 right?

Watkins: Yeah.

Sinsheimer: And then Peacock told me that-- he has changed his name is that right?

Watkins: Wazir.

Sinsheimer: Should I call him that?

Watkins: Well I think it depends on what context or however, I think for, I would suggest so people would know who you are talking about that if you use it, you use it in conjunction with the other because a lot of people don't know that name, and if you are just talking about Wazir, nobody know who you are talking about.

Sinsheimer: Right. I talked to him once. He told me to call him again. Mr. Wazir? Wazir?

Watkins: Wazir.

Sinsheimer: Wazir. Okay. Because I didn't know that until I forget who it was, but somebody mentioned it to me. Anyway, but he was telling me that the day that Jimmy Travis got shot was sort of the breakthrough day, the day before, when they had gotten, what was it a 150 people to go down to the courthouse. And then Moses had come on because he didn't believe it. And then he was telling me the story of when they were trapped up in the office.

Watkins: Him being trapped in the office was earlier, that was before I got to Greenwood. He and Sam (Block). That was actually before I got there.

Sinsheimer: That's right the Travis-- Jimmy was shot before you got there?

Watkins: No, when he (Willie Peacock) and Sam were trapped into the office. That was the office then-- he probably mentioned it-- over Burn's studio.

Sinsheimer: Right.Okay.

Watkins: That was a period of time important, but I was in Greenwood at the time when Jimmy got shot. And that did bring about a different feeling, a different kind of attitude, a mentality on the part of all of the SNCC folks. Because based on that SNCC decided that maybe we would should just converge on Greenwood and bring the whole national office, and move it to Greenwood. That is what did take place once later with the whole Summer Project, and SNCC actually had brought itss, considered bringing its national office to Greenwood.

But people definitely had been surprised, as I said, we had really begun to get a lot of folks involved. And as you said Bob and a lot of others didn't really believe (laughter). "How are you all doing this up here?" Because as I mentioned things really hadn't began to move in Greenwood, you know, and it was all of a sudden after we had put a few things in place that people could really begin to, to really go on down and register. And that is what actually brought that kind of in.

The whole thing when Jimmy was shot, he and Bob and Randolph Blackwell were coming through. I think at that time we were trying to get some Voter Education (Project) money from the people over there partially in conjunction with Randolph's trip, with the whole Voter Education money. So we felt that the atmosphere and everything was real tense. We felt that something was going to happen, because people were riding around in unmarked cars, cars without liscense plates, all that stuff. We expressed that to them and tried to get them to stay in Greenwood that night. But Randolph kind of insisted that they go on to Greenville. And it was just outside of the city that Jimmy was shot.

Sinsheimer: (pause) So that was February of '63? Is that right?

Watkins: I am not sure what month it was, but is was fairly early.

Sinsheimer: So what happened between that period and when the idea came up that you should do the mock election? What were you doing? What did you do during the mock election, what did you do before then, that summer, summer of '63.

Watkins: We continued to get people registered, to carry people down.

Sinsheimer: You were still working in the Delta at this point?

Watkins: Yeah we were still working in the Delta. Also while we were working in the Delta, I had also began to work in Holmes County. I mentioned that Amzie had made that hook up, that connection. So I was also working in Holmes County while I was in Greenwood. It was a continuous thing of trying every way possible to get folks to go down and register, to go on down to register.

And in addition to that we would also try to set up what we considered to be literacy classes, or voter registration classes, and trying to assist and teach people how to read.

Sinsheimer: Was that more of a problem in the Delta than other places?

Watkins: Not really, because the literacy thing really was a thing to off set the excuse about "can't read and can't write." We wanted folks to go and see, and to go to those things because we knew that even if they couldn't they were supposed to be able to do it verbally, you know, and still do that thing. But if you had a person that was self-conscious about the whole thing, and said that they couldn't read and write, so I will teach you to read and write a little bit.

Sinsheimer: Right.

Watkins: So it was really a thing of, that whole thing was really a thing in winning the confidence of the person, getting close enough to do him. Because you know in most cases you probably won't be able to get him to that point where he can read and write enough. But through that process of you trying, you get close enough to convince them to let's go on down and do it anyway. So that was just another method of really trying to deal with them, and win their confidence and get close enough to shoot him on through there, rather than actually doing the whole literacy thing.

Sinsheimer: What about men and women, were more men interested, more women interested? Was it easier to get women to go down? To get men to go down? Did it matter?

Watkins: I don't know, seemed like in some areas, it varies, but it seems like I am more inclined to say that we had, we probably had more women to go down then we had men. I don't know whether that was because for the most part there were actually more women than men, or whether the men were for the most part away in service, or working on a job, or having left town and gone North, you had all these women head of households, I don't know whether it was that, but it seemed like-- I hadn't even really thought about it from that point of view, but I guess I would say there were probably more women than there were men. As for the specific reason I really don't know. But I think there were perhaps more women than men.

Sinsheimer: Okay. So then you stayed in that area all the way up through the fall of '63.

Watkins: I stayed there through '63 and during the '64 Summer Project I was project director in Holmes County.

Sinsheimer: Okay. In '63 did you get a chance to work with any of the white kids that came down from Yale or Stanford? Were any of them in your area.

Watkins: In ...

Sinsheimer: '63. When they had them come down, when Aaron Henry and Ed King ran.

Watkins: Yeah. I did work with ... I am trying to remember some of those names. I did work with some of them but during that time, because of having been one of the earlier staff people, as opposed to one particular county during an election, I kind of served as a state person, rather than confined to one area.

Sinsheimer: I don't think I have to ask a lot of questions about (the Freedom Vote of '63)... obviously it was a good organizing technique. Is that true? (laughter)

Watkins: You mean the mock election.

Sinsheimer: The mock election. It really got people fired up ?

Watkins: It was an organizing, it was definitely a good organizing tool. See what it did was that all of those people that had been wanting to vote, but had never had the opportunity to vote, got a chance to vote. They got a chance to go through that process. A lot of those people that had attempted to register and vote, and had been turned down, they got a chance to exercise their vote. So it gave people, you know, inspiration. It gave them ... (end of tape). It showed people that this is not a helpless situation. And it showed people how easy it would be for them if the system was just, and treated them fairly. And at the same time it showed them the power that black people had if they had the right to vote, and if they used the vote in a unified manner. Showed them that they actually could have people elected in the various positions that would have meaning on their lives--economically, educationally, and socially.

Sinsheimer: Now did, were Aaron Henry and Ed King, did they, was it run like a normal campaign to that sense? Were they able to go places and make speeches uninterrupted, or were they harassed a lot?

- Watkins: From my understanding, as I remember, I don't think they were harassed a lot, you know, as they went places because this was really an activity that was taking place in the black community. We knew that we didn't have the white community with us, and it wasn't like we had to try to go to some integrated place, or we have to try and go and get some white votes. This was an activity and effort that was done basically just for black people, to give them, you know, inspiration, to give them insight on what it could be like, and would be like if they did it together.
- Sinsheimer: This controversy about whose idea it was... to the best of your knowledge do you where that idea (the Freedom Vote) came from?
- Watkins: I am not sure where the idea started. But there is controversy (laughter).
- Sinsheimer: Right. We might as well pick it up right here (laughter). I will start with my impression about Lowenstein. It is a question that I generally stay away from-- this class at Duke-- "ask difficult question last," you know. But even with-- maybe I shouldn't say even with-- the first time I talked with Bob (Moses) up in Boston, we sat down and four hours later I walked out of there. But the only time that I felt that he was kind of hedging, even listening to the tape I could tell that this was just something that he was ready to go off on, but just said well okay, I won't. Why is there such a reaction-- well I know some of the things-- but I guess we might as well start talking about it.
- Watkins: Such a reaction to ...?
- Sinsheimer: To Lowenstein, to his involvement. Even in the conference they had here (at Tougaloo and Millsap Colleges) in '79, a lot of people just didn't feel that he should be up there talking about it.
- Watkins: The bottom line of the reaction in terms of Lowenstein has to do with people having information that seem to have been proved beyond the shadow of a doubt that Lowenstein was a spy, working against us, and the whole process. That is what, that's what the whole controversy over him participating and being up there and that kind of thing, and him supposedly putting himself up as the author of certain things. But that is the bottom line with the controversy over Al. That based on certain things that went down and certain information that people were able to get, that he was directly hooked into the CIA, the informant thing, that was planted in the midst of us in the movement. And people resented that, you know, tremendously. And there were people who from time to time, you know, who talked about, you know, seriously doing things

Watkins (cont.): in a violent manner to him because of having found out that kind of information. So that, that is the bottom line on Lowenstein.

Sinsheimer: Is that that he was used that way, or that he was overtly acting that way? Hooked into that system?

Watkins: The problem is that based on the information that people are supposed to have come up with, is that he was not overtly acting that way, he was covertly acting as the agent, but because of different people having questions and feeling certain things, and then doing some investigation, seem to have come up with what people felt was substantial evidence to prove that he actually was the man that was sent in as a truly interested bona fide civil rights worker that has the interest of people, you know, black people in particular in Mississippi and the South at heart. But actually was the spy that was to keep our oppressors informed of our every move, and everything that we were about to do. So that is ...

Sinsheimer: Okay ... (laughter)

Watkins: That is the bottom line to that. And then the whole thing around the idea of the mock election thing which really set a lot of people off is when that word finally came back around that he was the author of that idea. And truthfully and honestly I can't say whether he was or whether he wasn't. But I know I had talked about the idea with several other people much, much before I knew that he knew anything about it. And with my talking with them, his name never came up. You know but in all honesty and fairness I can't say whether he was or whether he wasn't. Because it was a shock and a surprise to me when it eventually came to me that he was the author of the idea. I said what, you got to be jiving.

Sinsheimer: Right. Well, Bob (Moses) told me that I should ask Aaron Henry who came up with idea for him to run. I have gotten hold of him, I don't know if I am going to get him this trip, I may get him next trip-- but I was down in Hattiesburg and they have a bunch of interviews down there (at the University of Southern Mississippi). They have a long interview with Amzie (Moore) down there as a matter of fact. And Aaron Henry makes the comment, you know, if you take that as historical fact, that Lowenstein, he says Lowenstein. And he makes that fact, that he was one of two or three people that was in the room when that sprang up. I guess that is just something that I have to wrestle with. But it is interesting,

Sinsheimer (cont.): Cleveland Sellers in his book, which was written way back when, had Lowenstein as the author. And I am not so sure where-- Cleveland wasn't here then-- so he probably got that from somebody, but where? So it is interesting ... I don't think that it is the most important thing in the world but it is something that ...

Watkins: I know in my discussing it with several people we had talked about, we talked about the concept of a, of the election much before names began to be put, you know, into slots. And it was a couple of months before we actually got to start talking about and looking at the names that were ...

Sinsheimer: You mean in terms of Henry and Ed King?

Watkins: Yeah, of who would actually run.

Sinsheimer: Do you know who approached them with idea?

Watkins: Because see just like, I am trying to remember the sequence. I am trying to remember ... see Reverend R.L.T. Smith, he ran for ...

Sinsheimer: Congress.

Watkins: Yeah, he ran for Congress. So we had, like I said, we had talked about, you know, just the whole concept and the idea long before we began to try and look at who the people should be that actually would run in those positions. And I know the reason that, the reason that Aaron Henry's name emerged really was as a token to, to try to really not leave the NAACP out (laughter). To try not to leave the NAACP out, and to, you know, to put their top man out there to get them to participate in the whole thing. Because they basically hadn't been participating very much. Especially on any mass level, in (on) a statewide level, or regional for that matter. We had certain individuals that were NAACP members on local levels that were participating in the major things that would be going on, but, you know, that is how Aaron Henry got to be the person. We could bury all our little personal feelings that we had towards him and the NAACP as a whole for that matter because they wouldn't do anything and wanted to go through the courts-- so we could bury all that and run a NAACP top man to get folks out, for the good of what we thought the election was going to be about. So, you know, his name finally emerged a couple of months after we had been talking about the concept. But

Watkins (cont.): that first idea of the concept, I really don't know. But I do know if people are talking about the beginning of it being when Aaron Henry was asked to run, I know they are way behind schedule in terms of that.

Sinsheimer: Okay.

Watkins: Because the idea and the concept of the thing we had talked about for months before we had ...

Sinsheimer: When you say "we" who would be, who would have been ... the SNCC workers in the Delta?

Watkins: The SNCC workers not just in the Delta but SNCC workers that were across the state in other areas. Because we were trying to, we were trying to operate under the whole COFO thing, here again to try to show some kind of resemblance of unity on the part of the civil rights workers. So I do know that there is, there is definitely at least a couple of months difference in the time between the concept, you know, was talked about as opposed to when folks began to seriously look at who the people who would be put into those positions.

Sinsheimer: Okay. Well it seems from an historical perspective not only difficult, but it does make a whole lot of sense to try and put, to sign one person's name to something that developed I am sure out of series of conversations. That is so hard about writing-- have you looked at (Clayborne) Carson's book?

Watkins: Yeah.

Sinsheimer: I mean I give the man credit for just tracking down where the meetings were held and trying to decide which conversations took which place. I really give him credit for that. Because it is difficult and I think it is one of the big dangers you run in anything in politics like that, to try to pin things down like that doesn't make a whole lot of sense. Well we can try and get into the summer or we can stop and try to do that tomorrow. What do you think?

Watkins: We can go another ten minutes or so.

Sinsheimer: Okay. Let's talk about then-- I have talked about it a lot, I think I have pretty much got it-- the way people lined up for the Summer Project. I guess... how many or how much of the Mississippi staff do you think was opposed to it?

Watkins:

I really don't know in terms of percentage wise, but I do know that a certain number was opposed and a certain number was definitely for it. I would suggest, I would think that the greatest percentage-- and I don't know what that percentage would be-- but I would say I believe the largest percentage of the Mississippi staff opposed the Summer Project. I was one of those that opposed the Project. But since the Project was decided, and, you know, I decided that I definitely would work with the Project. And I went to the training sessions, and I went to discourage as many people as I could, to keep them from coming. You know, because I knew that a lot of things would be all buttered up, and my method of encouraging people was simply at the orientation sessions was just give them the hard, cold facts, which was the truth.

You know I just told everybody in all of the sessions I attended that if they were coming that they definitely need to be prepared for three things: one to be beaten, to go to jail, and be killed. And if they wasn't prepared to accept those three possibilities, those three realities, then they shouldn't come. Because if you come to Mississippi I told them, I said, "All three or any one of the three could happen."

But I was definitely opposed to it, because I felt that in the long run it would be a detriment to the movement that we had started. Because as I could see all across the state in different areas, what I considered to be indigenous movements where the people at the local level had began to take some initiative in terms of having a project and doing things with them running it, with them controlling those things themselves. I could see those kinds of activity taking place and I felt that with an influx of students from the North, and most of them being white, I felt that they would come in being egotistical, being forceful, and just take over the local leadership and carry them in most cases in a direction that was contrary to the direction that things had been previously going. And do that for three months, and after three months they go back to wherever they came from. Then you had a period where things had been going in a different direction, and that that initiative that people had once had, I felt that they would lose it. And it would be just like trying to start all over again for the most part.

So those are generally the basic foundations for my objection to it. And in many instances to a great extent I think that is exactly what happened. I can't deny all of the good things. But over all I think it did do that. Because ... it kind of wiped things out. Then in the short period after that in trying to get people to regroup and rebuild themselves, and that whole kind of thing. We were soon faced with the whole anti-poverty program, which was a another whole different monster there that kind of kept people, even maybe those who perhaps would have got back on the track from doing it. So I was on the opposing team. And basically for that same reason because of all the influx is the reason that

Watkins (cont.): I chose to go to Holmes county. I was given, or tried to be assigned some other place. But I refused to accept the assignment and I chose to go to Holmes county. Because I had previously worked with Holmes county and I knew at that time Holmes county was a county that was seventy-five percent black, and that the blacks at that time seventy-three percent of the land. And I was not about to entrust that county into the hands of what I considered some greenhorn young northern student. And we got into a big fight over that thing-- me and Stokley (Carmichael) in particular because Stokley wanted to entrust it in some of his Howard students that he was bringing down. And we went through about three or four of those, you know, and I just flatly told him no. And he brought Jim (Forman) into the thing. So I just told all of them, you know, the hell with you, I am going to Holmes county and anybody that comes down there is (laughter) I threw away all my nonviolence and I picked up my violent stick and I told them I am going down there, and I am the project director, and if anybody comes in there talking about they are the project director they are going to have to deal with me (laughter).
(Inaudible portion)

Sinsheimer: And you had some white kids down there, didn't you?

Watkins: I had twenty-three.

Sinsheimer: Twenty-three, your children huh? (laughter)

Watkins: And I think I had four or five blacks.

Sinsheimer: Did you have a freedom school down there?

Watkins: Several of them, about eight.

Sinsheimer: Right.

Watkins: About eight Freedom School in different places around the county.

Sinsheimer: Did you allow white students to do voter registration?

Watkins: Yes, I divided, I divided the full group in two areas, had a certain group that was working on voter registration and another group that was working specifically with the Freedom Schools. There were some whites that were doing voter registration.

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Sinsheimer: I am trying to think of his name-- the kid was from Iowa.

Watkins: Mike Kenney.

Sinsheimer: Yeah.

Watkins: Big guy, Mike Kenney.

Sinsheimer: Yeah, was he one of the better ones?

Watkins: He was

Sinsheimer: The reason I ask you is that he has got some papers at Chapel Hill. Some archives. He is just one of the few people that is a face and that you have all of this stuff... .

Watkins: He was close to one of the best. He was a little bull-headed and would get frustrated when his opinion wasn't the prevailing opinion. But other than that he, he definitely wasn't one of the worst ones (laughter). If you from a scale of 1 to 10 he would range into the upper 7's to 8's.

Sinsheimer: Did you have any 10's or 9's?

Watkins: I am not sure whether I had any 10's or not. I guess there were two or three that probably would range in the 9's. Mario Savio.

Sinsheimer: Oh, he was in your program?

Watkins: He would probably range 9, he would touch 10 sometimes (laughter). There was another guy whose name was Don Hamer who I guess ranged somewhere 8 to 9.

Sinsheimer: Was Hamer doing voter registration?

Watkins: Yeah.

Sinsheimer: I think Kenney set up, help set up that sister program, they had county out in Iowa.

Watkins: Yeah.

Sinsheimer: That was mostly what he had over there (Chapel Hill) was a bunch of stuff (on the sister program).

Watkins: So I implemented, and I ruled in Homes county with an iron hand (laughter). I had a dictatorship going over there.

Sinsheimer: Did you teach any of them to sing?

Watkins: Yeah, we would sing and, you know, centered around sometimes and sang. And we would sing at all of the meetings we went to, we always sang.

The reason I said that (about ruling with an iron hand) is because my project was different I think from all the other projects in that the law that I laid down on the first day after I gathered them all up in one place-- they had scattered all over the place-- I laid the law down that there would be no drinking or any going out on the project for three months. And that if people weren't prepared to deal with those that they could go to the national office, or state office, or see where else they could go and work. That's the law that I laid down, because I told them that they were coming under the guise of helping people in the state, they didn't need to be going out, drinking and partying. I told them that the only way that they drank was that if they were in the home with some individual, and that individual was drinking and offered them something, that they could do it.

Also unless you were going to a meeting at night, no one was to be outside of their living quarters after dark. All of that was protective.

Sinsheimer: Did you have a lot of violence in the project?

Watkins: No.

Sinsheimer: Because it was so heavily black or?

Watkins: I think it was basically not so much that it was heavily black, but because of how I had it organized. Because for the most part, you know, at first I was doing voter registration-- it was a matter of going into a community. Of course in some cases the police would try to drive around and catch us. We would watch them go from house to house after we had passed down the street, you know, and that kind of thing. But I think it was because of the strictness and the discipline that we exemplified that kept that from happening.

On the last evening that folks were on the project, a couple of the white guys and white girls and one black guy went to a little joint, little cafe down the road. Which was a place that, it is a store and a little cafe all combined. And a couple of the local white guys was in there. They decided that they just wanted to do a thing, you know, the guys just pulled out their guns and talked about doing some things to them. You know, I think it was basically because of the discipline that we exemplified on the project that really kept the violence down. And it was not a time that there was that freely contact with the white community, you know, to provoke that old rebel spirit.

Sinsheimer: Right.

Watkins: Because we weren't doing things. They were the people who were there and they knew that we were doing things. But it wasn't like we were waving a red flag in front of them.

Watkins (cont.): We went about what we were doing and the manner that we were doing it, and that was it. So I think it was basically because of that violence was held basically to a minimum.

Sinsheimer: Right. Well, I think that is pretty good for now.

Watkins: All right.

End of Interview.

Interview with Hollis Watkins
Jackson, Mississippi
February 14, 1985

Joe Sinsheimer: I guess one of my questions is directed toward something that (Lawrence) Guyot said in one of these conferences is that-- well Bob (Moses) told me that in the beginning he didn't feel like he was taking a side about whether or not to have the Summer (Project). Maybe he was leaning toward having, bringing all of the white volunteers down. But he felt that he was letting it play out. And then when Louis Allen ...

Watkins: Louis Allen.

Sinsheimer: Louis Allen, right. When Louis Allen was killed, he said that kind of pushed him over. And his reasoning and thinking that the only way, you know, to protect people was to bring, get all the advantages that the white students would bring in terms of press and federal protection. But one of the things that Guyot said was that when Moses did finally did throw his weight, that was more or less it. And I am curious did he really have that much impact on people's thinking or was it already decided and he was the final straw or? Could it have gone the other way against his inclinations?

Watkins: As to, as to whether Bob really had that kind of weight, I think you could say in one sense, yes, and I think it was because all of us in SNCC, we had a certain amount of respect for one another and each other's territory. And when you looked at Bob you were looking at the first SNCC worker to come into Mississippi. And he was the state man, you know, in Mississippi. So naturally with there being a division among the Mississippi people as to whether the Project should come about or whether it shouldn't come about, so naturally SNCC workers from outside of the state would definitely respect and have a lot of respect for, you know, the first person from SNCC to come into Mississippi, you know, he was serving really as the state director. So in that sense you would say, yes, that Bob would. Because if you didn't respect that then it would be kind of like somebody from without saying, hey we are fixing to do this in your hometown. You know which is not proper, it is not correct. And I think once Bob did take a definite stand on that particular side, I think that was the thing that gave the majority of the people enough ammunition, enough guts or whatever, to say well we are going to go with it.

Sinsheimer: When people were, what were the arguments at the time for the Project, and who was leading that charge?

Watkins:

- Watkins: I don't remember exactly who was leading, specifically who was leading the charge. But it was, it seemed to mostly have been coming from SNCC people that were outside of the state. There were a few-- and I can't remember specifically who they were-- but I do know there were some inside of the state did support that argument. But it was basically around the whole thing of trying to get more exposure on Mississippi, you know, wide open, so people nationally, internationally could take a real good look at Mississippi. And felt that a lot of things that was going on hadn't gotten the proper exposure simply because there weren't a lot of whites involved, wasn't a lot of northern people. But people had just kind of basically written Mississippi off and let them do their internal fighting and killing one another, however they deal with it, without the media really getting, doing any mass exposure on that whole process.
- So people felt that this would be opened up and in that whole process it would provide more protection, you know, for the workers. So that was the basic argument of the side that was for having the Summer Project. And they said well you know we bring a lot of these northern white kids down and a lot of being from rich, white families and things start happening, or looking as if they are going to happen to their rich little white kids then they would insure that the Justice Department and people get involved and begin to do some things.
- Sinsheimer: Right.
- Watkins: So once Bob took a definite stand, I think that made it much easier for the final decision, you know, to really be made. I think for the most part people had made a final decision but because of not really knowing where Bob stood was afraid to say we are going to push this on you Mississippians.
- Sinsheimer: Right. So when you say you went to Oxford, you drove up to Oxford, Ohio?
- Watkins: Yes.
- Sinsheimer: And how long did you stay there?
- Watkins: I stayed up for, I think I was up for two weeks.
- Sinsheimer: And did that support your conclusions that it was a bad idea or ? It is hard to ask you your reaction to ... but going into Oxford and actually seeing the students, you know, was your reaction that it still shouldn't be done, or maybe it could be done, or you know, this might work, or do you remember?

Watkins: Well, my reaction and my opinion never changed even after being there, meeting with students, and seeing how some of them seemed to have been really been interested in really trying to do something. And there were others that seemed as if, had the attitudes of hey, this is a good vacation to go down South. And really had no understanding of the seriousness of the matter. And because of a lot of the things that I saw then I really felt sorry for a lot of the students, you know that was coming. Coming, putting their lives on the line, into a situation that they were considering kind of like a vacation, summer vacation, in which they were going to have a good time. And at that same time deep down within I felt like that to a certain extent that they were really being used, not really knowing it, because in essence on one hand what we were saying is, "Hey, let's bring them down here, let them get the hell beat out of them, let them get thrown in jail and what have you." And their parents with a lot of money, you know will see that certain things take place. Without them really knowing and understanding that whole thing.

You know, I think there was a few of them that really did understand, but so many of them didn't. So my opinion never changed. As I said since it had been decided that the Project would come about, then I just decided that I would work with it, and try to make the best out of what I considered to be a bad situation.

Sinsheimer: Right. Did, well if you were there the two weeks, do you think that-- I want to ask a two part question-- how quickly did you think, how quickly did you know the reality of what happened to Schwerner, Goodman, and Chaney? And did the students understand what had happened or was there a difference there between your all's reaction to that (the staff) and their (the students) reaction.

Watkins: There was a definite reaction to their's and to ... there was a different reaction on the part of the students and on the part of those of us who had been here especially in Mississippi. On one hand, you know, we felt sorry and couldn't figure out on the other hand how, at least some of us, that that thing really happened. And we just knew that it didn't happen, you know, we wasn't convinced that it happened the way the media said it happened. Because for many of us especially from Mississippi, that had been working in the Movement, we knew that you just didn't leave (jail) in the middle of the night without having, you know, the whole thing lined up, with people knowing your whereabouts. So based on that we said it couldn't have happened that way, because for certain they wouldn't have just left. Even though they were being freed, you know, you don't just leave. Because many of us knew that that was the kind of trap that they would set

Watkins (cont.): ~~any~~ up for you. A lot of the students were shocked, you know, and dismayed, and really couldn't believe that that had actually happened.

Sinsheimer: Well, they couldn't believe that the three were missing or that the three might have been killed?

Watkins: They couldn't believe that the three were actually missing. And we were saying that they were killed, because we knew. The situation had come down like that, that you are killed, you know, there ain't no doubt about it. So we began to tell folks that, we thought that they were dead and that there would be no hopes. And many of them began to try to rationalize and maybe they disappeared, they have been held, maybe they are not here. Which was hard for them to see. But those of us, you know, we know when we you get out of hand, well not out of hand, but when you come up on the dark side of the street and are missing for a certain number of hours without people knowing where you are. And them knowing that people don't know where you are, then it is, the chances of you coming through that are very, very slim.

Sinsheimer: Let me ask you a few more questions about the summer. In your project, where did the volunteers stay?

Watkins: We had a house, that we called a Freedom House, that some of them stayed in. The others lived ...

Sinsheimer: Which city, or town was that in?

Watkins: This was in Mileston.

Sinsheimer: Mileston. So some of you stayed there and what about the other volunteers?

Watkins: The rest of them lived in the homes of people from the community.

Sinsheimer: Had you recruited those places to stay or?

Watkins: Yeah. (Break) No, they weren't just dumped. You know I had a thorough session with the students to try to explain to them what the lifestyles of the people of the county was. And how the people in many instances would probably go overboard in trying to insure that they were comfortable and had things. You know, so we talked about that, and wanted to make sure wherever

Watkins (cont.): possible that they just didn't see the generosity, you know, and hospitality of the people in one way and really just take advantage of the people. Because it was a tremendous sacrifice that the people were making anyway to be putting people up in their homes. So we had a long session, you know, where I talked and explained certain things to them.

Sinsheimer: What did you tell them about that, about how to react to that, that kind of ... ?

Watkins: Well, one of the things that I told them that if it was situation where there ... that it was not absolutely necessary that they should turn down a lot of the things that the people would be offering them, or offering to do for them. You know because it could have possibly turned out in some instances where, that the people really would have been living in a luxury situation, you know for a few minutes, or a few weeks, and the people just couldn't keep it up for a certain period time and then would come with an excuse as to why they wouldn't be able to continue to let them stay there.

So in many instances I told them, you know, that many of the things that people might offer you, or might offer to do for you, you just simply tell them that it is not necessary, and you appreciate the hospitality. Because that was all related to the basic reasons for them saying that would, had come down. Which was to work in the civil rights movement to help advance the situation of black, and poor people in Mississippi. And if that is your intentions, that is why you came down. That is what all of your efforts, that is what all of your activities should be geared towards, as opposed to reaping all kinds of personal benefits for yourself.

Sinsheimer: Start getting into generalizing, but what was, but what were types of responses that the black families had towards the white students? I mean were they, was it easy to find people who would be willing to house them? Were they fearful? Many of them probably hadn't had white people

Watkins: There were certain families that was fearful of it. But the people in general was willing and open minded to receiving help. So it was thing of well if they (the students) are willing to take off, and come down here, and work on our behalf, for no pay and that kind of thing, then certainly we can give them a place to stay, sleeping on the couch, or sharing a bed, or giving up

Watkins (cont.): a bed, and giving them a meal to eat. So certainly we can do that for our freedom. You know, regardless of whether they are black or white if they are fighting for our freedom then we should be willing and prepared to give up that little bit, or offer that little bit to them, to try to help make them comfortable. And generally that is the way most of the people felt. And it really wasn't hard to find places for them to stay.

Sinsheimer: Right.

Watkins: Because the Freedom House for example that we had was a house that one of the black families owned, nobody had been living in it so they just kind of fixed it up, you know, and put a few facilities in it.

Sinsheimer: Was it also like the headquarters, or did you all have an office as well or?

Watkins: That was part of the headquarters and then we also later had an office in Lexington.

Sinsheimer: Tell me some things about Freedom Schools. Had the SNCC staff talked about, I know there were a bunch of memorandums and things that talked about what was to be taught in the Freedom Schools. And then there was all that training. Were you going around as project director visiting the schools or were they just happening?

Watkins: No they weren't just happening (laughter).

Sinsheimer: I know these questions sound ...

Watkins: No, that is perfectly all right. They weren't just happening. As project director and me working with different people on voter registration, as I went into those areas working on voter registration I would constantly stop in and check with the people that were working in the Freedom Schools. Plus we constantly had staff meetings. Those of us that were working on voter registration, we would have staff meetings when there weren't, when we didn't have mass meetings at night we would have a brief staff meeting every night. Those of us that were working on voter registration. And even when we would have mass meetings at night, sometimes we would have a brief meeting that night, or we would have our brief meeting early in the morning before we would hit the streets.

And as far as the people who were working in the Freedom Schools, we would have a meeting of everybody at least once a week. So it wasn't a situation where folks was just loosely out there on their own and doing whatever. In the Freedom Schools we had people, you know,

Watkins (cont.): dealing with the basic educational needs of the students and that kind of varied from community to community, because we were geared towards those that were basically coming to the Freedom Schools. At the same time also there was the whole thing of that we considered citizenship education, and voter registration, voter education that was also incorporated in the whole process of teaching.

And at the same time at some of the schools we would have what we considered citizenship education especially for the elderly, and older people, at night in the same areas that the Freedom Schools students would be during the day. So that's a gist of what the Freedom Schools was like.

Sinsheimer: Do you think they were successful?

Watkins: Yes, I definitely do.

Sinsheimer: So, at some point in the summer did your voter registration become geared toward MFDP? And were you also beginning to go through all the precinct and county, and all the different caucuses and all that?

Watkins: Yes. That was done all across if you are talking about getting ready for the challenge thing. See and the reason that we wanted to do that is because-- well initially we attempted to go to, you know, the regular precinct caucus meetings and what have you. And in many instances they didn't exist, and in certain instances where people went they were not allowed to go in, and in other instances people would just pick up whatever they had and had their precinct meeting in the car or went on down the road and what have you.

So since it was clear and obvious that they weren't going to allow us to attend those precinct caucuses meetings, then we set up and tried to implement as closely as possible the process of which the regular Democrats were supposed to have been going through. And here again, you know, we would wherever possible we tried, because we were talking about Freedom Democratic Party, wherever possible we tried to not push our status as SNCC, or SNCC staff workers, but that was supposed to have been the local organization. So all of us that were SNCC workers then we just kind of like absorbed into and considered ourselves members of that. Because that, you know, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party was supposed to have been something that superseded and going beyond what the civil organizations was, but we saw it as actually becoming a viable and the party that represented the majority of the people

Watkins (cont.): in the state.

Sinsheimer: Right. So after the FDP-- the final sixty-four, was it sixty-four or sixty-six actual delegates? Was anyone picked from your county? Was there a representative from your county that you remember?

Watkins: Yeah, there was a representative from Holmes County. Hartman Turnbow I think was one of the representatives from Holmes county. It seems like there was another representative from Holmes county, but I can't remember.

Sinsheimer: Did you go to Atlantic City?

Watkins: No, I didn't go.

Sinsheimer: Why?

Watkins: I didn't go because I realized there was a financial burden there, you know. Where people were raising money and going through that, and I had not become one of the delegates. And we had already had certain people that was working to perform the role in working with people at the national convention. And it would have been kind of like me just jumping on the bandwagon to be there without me having had a real in doing things there and setting that up. So it more or less would have been escorting the delegates which I felt wasn't really necessary.

Sinsheimer: So you watched it on television?

Watkins: Yeah.

Sinsheimer: Did you organize around that, I mean were you encouraging people, or people knew that ... ?

Watkins: People knew that it was going to be taking place so wherever possible we organized around television. But here again at that particular time there was not a lot of televisions out in the black community especially in poor rural counties. You know in the urban areas like Jackson, Greenville, and the larger cities, you know you had a large number of people who had them, but out in the poor rural areas, you know, there were a lot of people that didn't have. So, however as we got information about it, we kept the community informed about the situation that was taking place, you know, through mass rallies and that kind of thing. Because at different times we would be having mass rallies every night, you know, in different locations throughout the county.

Sinsheimer: And who would be leading the mass rallies, local people or SNCC people?

- Watkins: Both. But in some, wherever possible we would attempt to get the local people to lead it, and at some point they would call call us, the SNCC folk, they would say our organizers, or what have you and we would talk about certain things. But wherever possible we would try to leave it into the hands of the local people. And this was a part of that overall effort and process that we had started, you know, initially in trying to develop local leadership. And you develop local leadership by giving people leadership roles, giving them responsibility.
- Sinsheimer: What was your immediate reaction to Atlantic City? I mean when you heard about the two seats and when you heard about the decision?
- Watkins: My immediate reaction was that I didn't expect, you know, us to really get anything out of it. But the thing that really disturbed me was when Ed King and Dr. Henry were willing and prepared to trying to get folks to accept, you know, those two seats. That is what really upset me. You know I am glad that there were strong people a part of the delegation like Mrs. Hamer and Mrs. Devine, you know, a few other people, Hartman Turnbow, whose was strong enough to say, "Look if we all can't get seats then no one gets seats. We didn't come here for no two seats." So that made me feel good, you know, it let me know that our sincere organizing effort had not really been in vain because we had people that were really steadfast and understood the overall cause of what the fight was about and was not willing to take crumbs which were given them.
- Sinsheimer: How did you feel about King's role? (Questioned was interpreted as Ed King)
- Watkins: King's ... ?
- Sinsheimer: His speech to the delegation. That I guess King favored the compromise.
- Watkins: Well, my ... I will tell you my gut feeling about that, my gut feeling about Aaron Henry, my gut feeling about Ed King and all the staff. It is a very few people that have reached a certain level of accomplishment in the system, it is a very few that won't accept compromise that gives very little to the masses. And that is a thing that you have to be always conscious of and prepared to deal with in the event that that does come up. And I saw them as people that were in positions that the system felt that they could put pressure on through some means or another and be able to deal with it. And I think for that, you know, for the same reasons that the system just picked them as the leaders for the group. You know, they wasn't the leaders, they had

Watkins (cont.): not been chosen to be. But the system just zoomed and says you are our boys, you know, and we are going to deal with you all because you should be able to handle them, your folks. You know, so that is how I felt, I felt about that.

And here again it is very hard, very hard for a person to really understand the struggle of someone that is very poor, that has been tremendously oppressed, if you have not gone through that. I myself, for example, as a black person having grown up in Mississippi and had caught all kind of hell, that had suffered, that had been poor, you know all my life. But still there are other people in Mississippi that have been, and are much, much worse off than I and my family. And sometimes I have to ask myself if I even who have gone through and caught all of this hell can really grasp their plight and understand their situation, you know, and not sell them out.

Sinsheimer: Right.

Watkins: Because of really not understanding their plight, not really understanding their situation because of not having actually experienced and gone through that. What seems to be all right for me, you know, could be hog slop (laughter) for them. And I think that is what you saw in that whole effort. And too often people in struggles are willing to accept tokens of accomplishment, they become too impatient, so they accept the little, and by accepting that little offsets everything and prevents you from being able to get much, much more which would have come had that not been accepted, you know, at just a little period later.

All of those however are judgmental situations, but I think that was part of the whole thing that we saw and were dealing with in that. Looking at King and Aaron (Henry), what they had done, how they had come up, their experience. You would have to do some serious thinking to be able to see and understand how that other person felt.

Sinsheimer: How did people feel about (Martin Luther) King, I mean he didn't spend a lot of time in Mississippi. I remember when you made your presentation in Washington (at the Smithsonian) and you talked about that image that a lot of people had, I guess that you had as an eighteen or nineteen year old. But he didn't come to Mississippi very often, and he really wasn't part of that struggle.

Watkins (cont.): People saw him, they respected him, they accepted him as being a great leader, a great spiritual man. When you looked at the South, then certain organizations basically had certain territories that they operated in, and basically controlled. And that organization's territory, you know, was there domain. When you looked at Louisiana for example, you basically was looking at CORE, Congress of Racial Equality. When you looked at Mississippi, you basically was looking at SNCC in Mississippi. CORE had a couple of counties, SCLC had one staff person, you know, here in Mississippi. When you looked at Alabama you know you looked at ... so when you looked at all the different the states you saw that there were certain organizations that was the prevailing organization that was the dominant force and existed in that state or in certain areas of that state.

And Mississippi was just not one of those that SCLC had a lot of visibility (in), because of _____ Ponder being here, workind along with us and she trying to set up and establish citizenship schools. Then naturally when certain things would go down, especially big things it was imperative that King, who was the head of a national organization, that he be on the scene or his organization be, look as if they were someone that was turning their backs on the struggle which you couldn't afford to do. You know, by the same token the heads of SNCC in certain areas, you know, it was just to show up on the scene thing.

Sinsheimer: Right.

Watkins: You know for the most part in southern areas, and it was left up to those staff folks that was working, that was committed to remain and work in those areas with the indigenous people of the area to see that certain things were done. So that's in general how people looked at King, and other leaders for the same for that matter. I guess the only organization that was basically everywhere was the NAACP, you know, who had branches. But because of their policies and their philosophy of going slow and doing test cases and fighting it in court, then you didn't see them so much as an organization even though many of the people from the area who were actively working with us were NAACP members. But they were not doing it under the name and auspices of the NAACP.

Sinsheimer: What happened right after Atlantic City? The project continued a little while and then the students went home, then what were you doing?

Watkins: I stayed here in Mississippi, you know, my home and continued to try and organize people to continue to try to pick up the pieces that we once had before all of the 1964 Summer Project and all those activities. Tried to wherever possible to touch bases with people, to keep them motivated and doing things. To keep the Movement alive. During that whole process from time to time I attempted to get a little education, you know, in there. I also attempted to work during that time immediately after that with the Head Start program.

I figured that if I could work in the social services department that I could draw a check from that and be able to finance my working and living and staying with people. Because what you are faced with then it was kind of like the organization and all of the efforts having peaked. And you know once you have peaked you either maintain that level where you are peaking or you come (laughter) ... you start on the decline. So it was impossible that level of peakness because students and everybody has gone back home so that there was a natural decline in things after that. And once you begin to incline you have all kinds of people who once were motivated but are no longer motivated. And you see a dramatic change, change taking place. And people began to reassess their situation, and began to reassess their lives.

Part of the problem initially, you know, anyway was the thing when you moved into an area that made people hesitant about doing things was how long are you going to be there? They felt that you would come in stir up a lot of things and get certain things in motion and then you are gone. You left the burden on their shoulders.

Sinsheimer: Were you part of, were attending SNCC staff meetings through this period as well?

Watkins: Wherever possible.

Sinsheimer: Were you part of the discussions about what should happen in Mississippi after that? Was SNCC talking about-- I guess what I am saying is it seems that a lot of "leadership" had different ideas about what they wanted to do. Someone told me that Forman wanted to do it all over again the next summer, and that people wanted to take the MFDP they wanted to do the Congressional challenge. Were you part of those types of discussions.

Watkins: I was part of some of them. And some of them I didn't go to because at different points to be honest I was perfectly disgusted with the Because I was from Mississippi

Watkins (cont.): having become one of the SNCC staff people-- and I saw what I felt was too much of people from the outside imposing certain things to take place on people in Mississippi. And those people not being prepared and willing to stay here and stick it out and go through the agony and consequences of whatever that initial thrust was. And, you know, I couldn't deal with that, because to me that was too much of a thing where we you were using the people, using them as guinea pigs, constantly throwing something on and see how they react, see what is going to happen. And you go and you go on back and you think of something else and you drop that all ...

Sinsheimer: Right.

Watkins: You know without building a lasting organization that's going to be made up of people that is going to be here, you know, their thing being perpetual. That is one of the things that I have to cast off, and graduate, and conquer. Charles Sherrod in southwest Georgia because he went in there and he is still with them. You know that's the spirit, the attitude, that is what it really took to really build. You go in and you work with people and you stay there long enough at least to build and have that local leadership able and prepared for them, to call their own shots, to stand on their own feet, and direct, and help direct programs that they decide that are in the best interest for them.

Sinsheimer: Right.

Watkins: I saw too much of the outside imposition on people where they would only be there for a short while.

Sinsheimer: I guess-- I don't know how to put this-- but from a cold historical perspective did ... if you look at Atlantic City you got all these delegates and you have got this beginning of this political party. That seems like the tool to continue organizing people, but then it seems the direction was everybody wanted to do this Washington (Congressional) challenge. The MFDP wanted to challenge the Congressional delegation. I mean do you think that the MFDP could have been used more in those years? If people had been willing to stick through it do you think that was the tool to use.

Watkins: I think the MFDP could have been used more, I think it should have done more, but at the same time I think you had to be realistic about who the MFDP actually was. Who were the people who were actually calling the shots.

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Watkins (cont.): And to a greater extent the majority of the shots of MFDP were being called by staff people of the four or five major organizations, for the most part. All right so that within itself, you know presents a problem. When you have that you don't actually have a bona fide MFDP, you have MFDP really serving as a front. So I think it could have had people been willing and prepared, could have developed into really being a strong organization that was actually run by people that were indigenous from the different communities and different counties.

At the same time you had the Democratic Party who was trying to figure out how to offset and destroy the MFDP. And I think right as an offshoot to the MFDP is where you had the Loyalist Democratic Party which is saying forget MFDP then we will be Loyal Democrats, isolating ourselves from those that are not loyal. Loyalist Democrats will have all these things. So that was within itself was a problem because most of the leadership as I say for the MFDP coming from organizational staff people and from those staff people, and when those staff people move and go elsewhere, when that leadership is gone that leaves a void.

And by this time you are also having really began to run into some serious monetary problems as to how you are going to support yourself as you organize. So I think all of those really led to you know it not really doing, and able to be the bona fide organization that they perceived or even wanted it to become. But the structure very clearly saw that this was the making of a third party, basically all black with some whites in it. That is why instead came up with the Loyal Democrats to keep the power and control in the hands of the Democratic Party. I will never lie (laughter).

Sinsheimer: No, no that is a good answer.

End of Interview.