***Civil Rights History Project***
***Interview completed by the Southern Oral History Program***
***under contract to the***
***Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African American History & Culture***
***and the Library of Congress, 2011***

| | |
|---|---|
| Interviewee: | The Reverend Joseph E. Lowery |
| Interview Date: | June 6, 2011 |
| Location: | Sanctuary of Cascade United Methodist Church, Atlanta, Georgia |
| Interviewer: | Joseph Mosnier, Ph.D. |
| Videographer: | John Bishop |
| Length: | 1:02:49 |
| Special Note: | Cheryl Lowery-Osborne, Reverend Lowery's daughter, drove him from his home to the church and stayed to watch the interview from a rear pew. |

John Bishop: We're rolling.

Joe Mosnier: Today is Monday, June 6, 2011. My name is Joe Mosnier of the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I am with videographer John Bishop. We are in Atlanta, Georgia, at Cascade United Methodist Church to complete an oral history interview for the Civil Rights History Project, which is a joint undertaking of the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture.

And we are especially privileged and very pleased today to be with Reverend Joseph Lowery. Um, Reverend Lowery, thank you so much for sitting down with us.

Joseph Lowery: You're quite welcome. You'll get a bill in the mail. [Laughter]

JM: I thought I might, um – I thought, as we're going to be talking here today mostly about, I think, the '50s and '60s, um, and then a little bit, um, a little bit – a few questions thereafter, mostly '50s and '60s. And I thought I would – I thought I would take you back to, um, Warren Street United Methodist [Church] and have you talk a little bit about, um, Mobile, Alabama, and, uh, and Alabama more generally in the '50s, and what you encountered there, and, um, how you began to lead your congregation and participate in efforts to change the –

JL: Well, I went to Mobile, Alabama, to Warren Street Church, in 1952. And, uh, the, uh, NAACP was holding its regular meetings in Warren Street, so I just jumped right in with them, because, uh, we had not organized SCLC at the time. Uh, SCLC came into being in the latter part of the '50s, uh, following the, uh, [clears throat] Montgomery Boycott. But the NAACP was active and, uh, as I said, they met in Warren Street Church, usually on Sunday afternoon. And so, I had already been active in the NAACP in earlier years, and so it was just a natural for me to join with them. And, uh, uh, we engaged in voter registration and in educational activities designed to, uh, help African Americans understand our predicament and how it was incumbent upon us to, uh, find a way out. And, uh, uh, it was an interesting journey.

The NAACP was headed by a man named John LeFlore, who was, uh, active in Mobile, and, uh, until my arrival, I don't guess John had any, uh, opposition – not opposition, but competition for activism in the city. He and I became friends, uh, and then later, the friendship experienced a meltdown, [laughing] as we, as we sort of went our separate ways in terms of activism. Uh, John was a typical NAACP and a great person, but his, uh, uh, forte and his – probably the maximus of his activism was filing suits and writing up complaints and, uh, protests against what happened.

Uh, but, uh, Mobile was an interesting town. It was racist but not the same toxic racism that you found in Birmingham and Montgomery. So that, even during later years when the Movement became, uh, prominent and active, uh, you didn't read as much about Mobile as you did about Montgomery and Birmingham, because Mobile was, uh, in many instances quietly effecting change, uh, and there had to be an occasional, uh, explosion of activism to keep them honest.

But, uh, Mobile had some interesting leadership. A guy named Joe Langan, who was a Roman Catholic, uh, was a city commissioner, and he was a man with a warm heart and did not have the cold and icy [5:00] stare of the heart toward the black community. And so, in many instances, we were able to achieve change without the, uh, disruption of the community that we had to have later to achieve even more drastic change.

But, uh, Mobile was, uh, sort of like a little New Orleans. As a matter of fact, the people in Mobile claim that the Mardi Gras was initiated in Mobile, not New Orleans. I never bothered to research that [laughing] to decide where I come down, but, uh, Mobile, uh – the Roman Catholic influence did not lend itself to activism in terms of, uh, of change, social change, so that, uh, resolutions and lawsuits and, and, uh, that sort of thing were the main focus of the Civil Rights Movement. And as the years progressed, activism progressed, and we moved away from just resolutions and, uh, statements and so forth, uh, to activism, uh, to sit-ins and march-ins and other things.

JM: May I ask –?

JL: And –

JM: I'm sorry.

JL: Oh, it, uh – when the Montgomery Improvement Association, when the boycott started, I was president of the Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance, and, uh, we carried the first thousand dollars, I think – [laughs] which was a lot of money at that time – from the churches in Mobile to the Montgomery Improvement Association. And I spoke at a mass meeting that night, and when I announced we had a paper sack full of money, the crowd went wild, because that was the first outside support they had received for the boycott, and they were very happy about that.

And, uh, then later, we initiated our own bus movement in Mobile, which, uh, went off much smoother than it did in Birmingham. And there again, I credit Joe Langan, his leadership with the City Commission, for the attitude that, uh, existed. We – the, uh, ministers decided that since I was president of the Ministerial Alliance, I ought to ride the Pritchett, Pritchett, Pritchett Route, which was perceived to be the, uh, the most dangerous, volatile route. Uh, the KKK had, uh, considerable routes in Pritchett.

And so, we chose one day to ride. We'd had workshops. We had people down from Fellowship of Reconciliation to lead workshops on how to conduct nonviolent demonstrations. And, uh, so we met that morning, and everybody cleansed themselves, purged themselves of weapons, and had prayer, and we took out on the bus route sitting in the front of the bus. And Reverend S.M. McCree, who was pastor of Mount Zion Baptist Church in Mobile, was my partner, and we rode on the first [clears throat] seat that faced the front on the bus, [clears throat] going toward Pritchett. I think it was Number Five.

And, uh, not long before we got started, a fellow got on the bus with a sack in his hand, with, uh, obviously a bottle [laughs] in the sack, and he sat down on the little side seat right behind the driver. And at first he didn't notice us, but as he experienced a sobering ride to

Pritchett, uh, he recognized that here were two black people sitting on the front pew or seat. And so, he told the, uh, bus driver to make us move. And the bus driver said, "You just ride and leave the driving [laughs] to me."

And he said, "By God, if you don't make a move, I'll make a move." And so, he stood up. And there was our first opportunity to put into practice the, [10:00] the nonviolent tactics that we had learned in the workshop. And the bus driver, in the meantime, was pulling the bus over. He was going to intervene, I think. And, uh, I – Reverend McCree punched me with his arm, looked like he put his hand in his pocket. I said, "Uh-oh." And anyway, the fellow kept coming.

I said, "Sir, please be seated." I said, "It's dangerous to stand up while the bus is moving. I know you don't want to get hurt, and we don't want to see you get hurt. You mean us no harm; we mean you no harm. Please sit down." And, uh, everybody held their breath, not knowing what the reaction would be. And, believe it or not, he sat down, [laughs] and, uh, we were the most – two black preachers were probably the most surprised people on the bus. And in two more stops, he got up and got off the bus, slammed the door. He was very angry. He said something back to the bus driver. I don't remember what he said.

Then we went on, rode on to Pritchett, to the end of the line, and there were some black people on the front. When we got off, uh, we mentioned to one of the ladies. She said, "Y'all are segregating the buses?" [Laughs] I said, "Yeah, we're segregating the buses." I said, "Aren't you tired of having to ride in the back?" She said, "Yeah, I guess so." She said, "But I've been back there so long, I'm not sure how I feel right now. But I'm glad y'all are doing it." We said, "Thank you."

And so, we caught another bus going back to town. That was the end of the, uh, the experience that was worth sharing in Mobile. But, uh, Mobile, uh, as I said, was racist, but the racism wasn't as toxic.

JM: Let me take our, let me take our conversation toward Montgomery.

JL: All right.

JM: We're just going to stop for just –

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay.

JM: Okay, we're back after a quick pause. Reverend Lowery, let me, let me have you describe, if you would, those, um, very busy and tumultuous months through late '55 through '56 and the boycott, and how that context would give rise to SCLC. And, in part, originally, I think, because the Alabama state officials, of course, had come down so hard on the NAACP that there was a place now for a group of ministers, pastors, to begin organizing.

JL: Well, of course, the Montgomery Improvement Association was organized to handle the boycott. The NAACP was outlawed in Alabama. And Governor [John] Patterson, uh, saw to it that, uh – well, he demanded the roll, membership roll. And, of course, the NAACP refused to give it, because that meant they were going to harass, uh, the members. And so, they held the NAACP in contempt and eventually went to court. But, uh, the people refused to give up the membership rolls, and the Montgomery Improvement Association was organized.

Uh, Dr. King and Dr. Abernathy [Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Dr. Ralph Abernathy] were the leaders, and, uh, uh, Dr. King's leadership was pivotal in the, in the effectiveness of the boycott. And, uh, even when they bombed his house, he challenged the crowd to go home and not return an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, and that we were on the right side and that,

uh, we'd win because we were on God's side. And, uh, that movement, of course, spread to other places, to Tallahassee, Baton Rouge, and other places. And that led us to the experience that I mentioned earlier, our riding on the bus. That was after the Montgomery people had, uh, had begun their initiative.

And, uh, the conversation among leaders of the movement in Tallahassee, in Birmingham with [Reverend] Fred Shuttlesworth, Tallahassee with [Reverend] C.K. Steele, uh, in Nashville with [Reverend] Kelly Miller Smith, uh, in Baton Rouge with [Reverend] T.J. Jemison – uh, all of us came together to meet in Atlanta. And we decided that we were going to organize a South-wide movement to strengthen each other, support each other and to have a national impact. [15:00] And while we were meeting in, uh, in, uh, in Atlanta, uh, they bombed Ralph's [Ralph Abernathy's] home and church.

And we adjourned the meeting and reconvened later in New Orleans. And so, the official birthplace of SCLC was New Orleans, and, uh, only because we interrupted the meeting in, uh, Atlanta to, uh, so that Ralph could go home and see about his church and home and family. And, uh, of course, great turmoil ensued in Montgomery and Birmingham, Fred Shuttlesworth leading in Birmingham and, uh, Martin [Luther King Jr.] and Ralph [Abernathy] in Montgomery.

Uh, they had a big mass meeting one night in Montgomery, and we drove up. And when we got there, the Klan had already seized the town, as it were, and we ended up not being able to get to the church. Uh, the Klan was – we went to the hotel, the old Ben Moore Hotel [in Montgomery]. And, uh, while we were, uh, hiding, I guess, as it were, in the hotel, we were cut off from the church. And, uh, Martin called the Attorney General, and they dispatched law enforcement to the church, and disaster was avoided.

But that was the beginning of SCLC. We, uh, decided that we'd have a South-wide organization, that we could strengthen each other and, uh, spread the Movement across the nation.

JM: Sure.

JL: And Dr. King was elected president, and I was voted vice-president. Well, I think I was elected secretary at first and later vice-president. But, uh, that was the beginning of SCLC.

JM: Let me ask you a couple more questions about those – that period when SCLC was coming into being. Um, did you have much contact with Bayard Rustin?

JL: Yeah, Bayard came down to Montgomery.

JM: Yeah.

JL: Uh, several times, and met with us, uh, in pulling together the, uh, written theses that formed the basis for SCLC, and, uh, he was very helpful in that and, uh, he was a brilliant man. And, uh, uh, we welcomed his assistance, uh, and he didn't charge us anything, which was good, because we didn't have anything – [laughs] so, no charge, no debt. But, uh, Bayard Rustin, yes, he came down several times and worked with us for a long time. Uh, later, there developed some differences in the Movement, and, uh – but Bayard was a very influential figure in pulling together the paperwork, particularly, in the early days of SCLC.

JM: Let me ask, if you would, just reflect a little bit on young Reverend Doctor King's emergence through those several years.

JL: Well, Dr. King, of course, emerged in Montgomery, uh, leading that boycott. It was the first time that a city with fifty thousand black people had successfully and effectively, uh, implemented a boycott. Uh, [pause] their houses were bombed, uh, threats came, but Dr. King stuck to the nonviolent motif and, and, and led the people to accept nonviolence. Many of them

accepted nonviolence because they had confidence in the leadership, not because they were convinced that nonviolence was necessarily the best way. Because I remember in Mobile, some of the ministers that worked with me used to tell me pointblank, "I'm not going on this march with you, because I'm not sure I can be nonviolent." [20:00] I said, "Well, don't go. If you can't be nonviolent, don't go, because you'll bring harm to the Movement if you resort to violence. We have to – we have to take clean hands."

And, uh, of course, Martin's leadership was recognized. Uh, the Montgomery Boycott for over a year was effective, the first time in our history we've been able to sustain that kind of boycott for that long a period of time. So, he was heralded, uh, across the nation and then across the world, as a nonviolent leader. And, of course, his eloquence as a speaker, his personality as a minister and a pastor, was extremely effective, and, uh, he became the natural leader. And when we organized SCLC, it was natural that he was the first person who, who came to mind as, uh, as the president and went on to, uh, to give the kind of leadership that justified our confidence in him.

JM: In those early first few years, late '50s, for SCLC, much of the day-to-day work through the late '50s was carried by Ms. Ella Baker, and I wonder if you could reflect, share some recollections –

JL: Ella was, I guess, the first real executive director, fulltime executive director that we had. We had a fellow named M.E. Tilley, who came out of Baltimore, who had done an effective voter registration drive. But he didn't last long and didn't – and then, Ella Baker became the fulltime executive director. And, uh, I think history may have overlooked – she was the first woman to give that kind of executive leadership to the Civil Rights Movement and she was very effective.

She, uh, didn't get along very well with the preachers. Uh, I'm trying to remember what was at the bottom of that. I don't remember. But, uh, she was a strong woman. And there may have been one or two, maybe, *maybe,* preachers who had some problems with strong women, like some of you fellows may still, in this time, have problems with strong women. But, uh, she did a good job. She was effective. And out of her leadership and inspiration, students, uh, were inspired and organized SNCC, uh, and they became this young wing of the nonviolent Civil Rights Movement.

JM: Let me ask, um, and we're going to turn to that history from 1960 forward in just a minute, but I want to ask one last question about – two questions maybe – about this critical period. One is: In your own thinking, as it evolved through the '50s, what was your perspective on – you've already touched on this, but can you say a little bit more about the theory of nonviolence, and how it connected to your Christianity and to your both tactical and theological perspectives about the Movement?

JL: Well, it – you're right. It had a practical aspect and it had a theological aspect. Uh, from the practical perspective, uh, we looked at our Army and we weren't very – there weren't very many of us, we didn't have any weapons, [laughing] we didn't have any uniforms. And we looked at the National Guard and the state troopers and the deputy sheriffs and police in cities, and we were outmanned. So, from a very practical perspective, uh, we could not have won a violent confrontation. It would have been, uh, catastrophic for us.

And, uh, it's also interesting that the white organizations, the Ku Klux Klan and others, they didn't know how to deal with nonviolence. Uh, they were frustrated, because the more they, uh, were violent against nonviolent people, the more they were criticized and the more the world saw them for what they were and began to sympathize and support. Even those who may

not, at first, uh, have supported [25:00] sit-ins and direct action were disgusted with the violence, and it turned the tide.

The other side, the theological side, was [short unintelligible phrase] because if you notice, the leadership in the Movement was almost always preachers and in the churches. And that was – there were two reasons for that. One was the preacher was the most independent leader in the community. He was accountable to the congregation, not to the Chamber of Commerce. And, uh, so therefore, he could withstand, uh, oppression from the white community, economic oppression or otherwise, better that anybody else. And secondly, uh, the example of Jesus, the teachings, particularly in the New Testament, led, uh, led us to nonviolence. Uh, Jesus on the cross, uh, asked his Father to forgive those who had nailed him to the cross.

And that spirit of nonviolence and non-retaliation and non-hatred of those who had hated you, uh, was a thing that we went through, so that, theologically, we were committed to love, and, and "Love your enemy," as the New Testament says, and, "Bless those who persecute you." And we discovered that that was – it was not only effective, uh, outwardly, but it was effective *inwardly* for us. *We* became new creatures, uh, because we pursued that theology. And we actually avoided hating.

I never will forget the two or three times I met with George Wallace that he, he, uh, remarked – he was astounded by the fact that our spirit was, uh, was nonviolent and reflected love, or if you couldn't quite make love, we did not reflect hatred, uh, in, uh, our attitude toward even those who persecuted us. And, uh, that was a strange weapon for white ruffians. [Laughs] And even the Citizens Council, who were the respectable, you know, group among the two, but they couldn't understand it and, uh, they tried to call it cowardice. But you couldn't call cowards

people who would, who would, uh, walk into the face of fire and into the face of the beast, uh, unarmed and, uh, singing, "Glory, glory, Hallelujah." And that was the *power* of the Movement, and it touched people's hearts everywhere.

I remember a white lady saying to me once in Nashville that she was opposed to the direct action movement. She thought it was stirring up trouble. But once she watched how we conducted ourselves and how, uh, our oppressors conducted themselves, she said, "There's no comparison. The Spirit of the Lord is upon *you*, and I'm opposed to what they're doing." And it was a long – she'd come a long, long way, because at first she was opposed to – she wanted everything to be settled through the law.

But, you know, we never did, we never did get a clear judicial interpretation of the sit-ins. Uh, I don't think, even to this day, we have a clear-cut opinion from the Supreme Court about sit-ins. But, of course, they outlawed segregation in public accommodations – the Congress did – and so forth, so it became a moot point. But, uh, the power of the Movement, both in terms of touching those who opposed or oppressed us, and in terms of our own spiritual behavior and our spiritual strengthening, it was a great experience for us.

JM: Yeah. Let me also ask you – in '59 – oops, John's going to switch tracks. [30:00]

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay.

JM: We're back on after a quick break. Reverend Lowery, let me ask. Obviously in – through the late '50s, um, you and others were targeted in a libel campaign meant to obviously harass and knock you back a notch, and it did have its effect. I mean, ultimately, the Supreme Court would reach its decision, but that was years down the line. Can you talk a little bit about the personal ramifications of, say, the property seizures and others in '59 for you?

JL: Well, you might talk to my children, who, uh – some of them can remember when the, uh, officers came and took our car. When they got the judgment, uh, all they could find was my automobile. I was living in the church parsonage, so they couldn't attach my house. And, uh, so that was the only thing that was clearly in my name was, uh, was, uh, the automobile. Now, I can say it now, but I lived in Mobile, but my home was in Huntsville. And I had inherited – my sister and I – some property from my father in Huntsville. And so, we told our attorney, "For God's sake, don't, don't mention Huntsville, because we don't want them to, to be awakened to the possibility that they might take our property in Huntsville," as they did [Ralph] Abernathy. They took farmland from Abernathy, uh, in Merengo County [Alabama]. So, the lawyers agreed they'd not mention Huntsville.

So, when I got on the stand in Montgomery, they first asked me, uh, "Where do you live?" I said, "306 North Warren [Street] in Mobile." "And where were you born, Reverend Lowery?" And I almost, uh, fainted, because we had already agreed, but the lawyer forgot. He was following his routine questioning. And I guess my answer should have been, "Huntsville," but the Lord spoke to me, and my answer was, "Madison," because Huntsville was in Madison County. And there was a little town in Madison County named Madison, but I didn't say – I just said, "Madison." And so, they never discovered the property that we had, which they would have seized, as they did Abernathy in Merengo County, because they found out about his land.

But, uh, that was an interesting suit, uh, when it was argued before the Supreme Court. Uh, one of the justices was Jewish, and, uh, the, uh, little lawyer, Nachman [M. Roland Nachman Jr.], who was representing the city of Montgomery, uh, persecuting us. Uh, and the *New York Times* was sued, along with the four of us, Abernathy, Shuttlesworth, [Solomon] Seay, and myself. Uh, the *New York Times* would not let us be covered under their bond – they made what

they called a supercilious bond – and [clears throat] I'm a little reluctant to buy the *New York Times* today. [Laughs] I usually read somebody else's. But they would not let us be protected under their bond. And their reason was that, if they did, it would give them some stake in Alabama citizenship where they could be subject to persecution by the Alabama authorities if they had any reason to claim Alabama – they claimed they didn't belong to Alabama, and the Alabama authorities had no power to attach them. But, uh, it didn't help us any – they took our property. And, uh, the, uh – of course, the Supreme Court later reversed the lower courts.

And in our argument before the Supreme Court, I was about to say, this lawyer named Nachman, uh, was asked by the Justice, said, "You, you, you demanded that, uh, the defendants produce their property and you kept –" uh, Sammy Davis had just married – I think her name was May Britt – a blue-eyed blonde, and, uh, [35:00] the white folks in Alabama were very displeased with that. And Sammy Davis was on the list of citizens that sponsored the ad that gave them the right to sue in the first place.

And when Nachman was making his summary to the jury, he said, "You ministers were sitting there with an air of injured innocence. You were proud to be on the stand with, uh, Reinhold Niebuhr *and Sammy Davis Jr.* and with Harry Belafonte *and Sammy Davis Jr.*" They called Sammy Davis's name every other name because that reminded the jurors that Sammy Davis had just married a blue-eyed blonde, and that was very, very unpleasant for the Alabama jurors. And so, they didn't stay out very long. They went out and came back almost immediately and found us guilty and, uh, took our, took our property. But the Supreme Court later, of course, uh, vindicated us, overruled the lower court.

And, uh, when they sold Abernathy's car and Shuttlesworth's car, and Seay, they all got new cars. But my members were more astute. [Laughs] They're Methodist boys! They went

down to – when they auctioned my car off in Mobile, my members went down and bid. I think they bought it for eight or nine hundred dollars. And then, they brought it and gave it to my wife. The fellow who did the bidding was a fellow named DeWitt, R.B. DeWitt, who was secretary of the YMCA, which was right across the street from our parsonage. And, uh, he bought it and brought it back and drove it in the yard and gave my wife the key. And she gave him a dollar. And, of course, the community raised the eight or nine hundred dollars and gave it back to DeWitt that he paid for the car. But I'm the only one that didn't get a new car! [Laughter] Because those, those smart astute Methodists, uh, went down and bid for the same car and saved money. But the Baptists let them take the car, and they bought Abernathy and Shuttlesworth and Seay new cars. But I drove my same old car. But that was a – that's a historic case in libel.

JM: Let's pause for just a moment.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: [Clears throat] When the Supreme Court said that – [clears throat] reversed the – what happened with the property? Did you get the property back?

JL: Yeah, they never took it. He got – everything – the Supreme Court returned everything. They had to turn back everything. They, uh, they turned back, uh, the money we got – the money that they got for the sale of the car. They had to give it back to us, and we gave it back to the organization, which had furnished the money in the first place to reimburse the man who spent it.

JM: Let's pause just one quick sec.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're good.

JM: Reverend Lowery, you mentioned a few moments ago that, uh, obviously, when the students get involved in 1960 and the dam sort of breaks with the direct action sit-in movement, um, the tenor of the Movement shifts pretty quickly forward. And, uh, I'm really interested in your perspective on that period between early 1960, the Greensboro sit-ins, say, and that several years through the early sit-in phase; the Freedom Rides of '61; Albany, southwest Georgia, '62; and then the eve of Birmingham in '63, when SCLC will really now take a first step that will really shift SCLC onto the national stage in a very, very dramatic way.

JL: Well, the Movement was, uh, evolutionary, although it seemed revolutionary at the time. But, uh, uh, things changed considerably, and, uh, it became a worldwide movement. And, uh, it not only dealt with voter registration and public transportation, as it did in the beginning with buses, but it had to do with segregation as a whole. And public accommodations were significant. The, uh, court did rule clearly on public accommodations. And in '64, the, uh, the, uh, Courts made it very clear that segregation in public accommodation was unconstitutional, and, uh, that was a tremendous move.

And I remember I was in Nashville at the time. [40:00] It may have been '63 or the first of '64, I've forgotten which, and we were demonstrating at various restaurants. And we were demonstrating, and Morrison's [Cafeteria] was one of them. And Morrison's, which is out of business now – I think they were bought out by Piccadilly [Cafeteria]. Where do you live?

JM: North Carolina.

JL: All right, there's Piccadilly in –

JM: We had, uh –

JL: Well, there were Morrison's in North Carolina.

JM: Yeah.

JL: But anyway, uh, uh, they, uh – the fellow who owned Morrison's, I've forgotten – I think they were based in Mobile. And I was living in Nashville. I went to the governor of Tennessee and asked him to ask the president of Morrison's to desegregate, uh, and we could stop the demonstrations. And he called the head of Morrison's, and I was sitting in his office. And he told – the head of Morrison's said, "I will never – over my dead body!" And the Civil Rights Act took effect, I think, in June –

JM: July.

JL: Of '64, and Morrison's was desegregated in July, and the president died a month later. So, he was true to his word. He said it would be over his dead body [laughs] that blacks would eat in Morrison's. He went on and died. [Laughter] I don't think he planned it that way, but that's the way it happened.

But by that time the, the, uh, the issue was universally recognized as a new era. And it was – I think the new era began in Montgomery with the boycott. The Montgomery Boycott was the first, uh, boycott of an entire community that worked, uh, and that was what I call the beginning of the era of self-determination. It didn't matter what the courts said or what the legislature said, we were through with the back of the bus. And blacks took responsibility for their fate in their own hands, uh, and decided we weren't going to ride the bus as long as they were segregated. So, I think that was the era of self-determination.

And later, the sit-ins was another expression of self-determination, where we decided we weren't going to permit them to sell us toothpaste and safety pins on one counter, and we had to go to a black counter to eat lunch at Woolworth's. And, uh, I got an award from the people in, uh, in Greensboro, North Carolina, uh, some years ago, uh, people who were responsible for the sit-ins in, in North Carolina, which was another expression of self-determination, that, "You can

say what you want in the courts. We're not eating at the black lunch counter." And so, eventually, they disappeared.

JM: Just a last couple of questions.

JL: Okay.

JM: Because you're being very generous with your time, and I want to not keep you too long.

JL: All right. I like you. I like the rate you pay. [Laughter]

JM: Okay. Um, let me ask about, uh – when you think about the spring of '65 and, uh, Selma, uh, I'd like for you to describe your, you know, what comes to your mind when you think about that, that, all of Selma and all of that march. And, in particular, I'm very interested in how you yourself confronted and dealt with all of the fear associated with facing that kind of situation. It wasn't new to you by then, but nonetheless it was acute.

JL: Well, it's interesting, uh, as I said to you earlier, that the spirit of nonviolence not only had an impact on the oppressors, but it had a spiritual impact on us, and we became new creatures. We did not hate Bull Connor. We did not hate, uh, the man who killed Dr. King, James Earl Ray. We would never – we wanted them not to – to spare his life. We wanted them not to execute him. Uh, uh, it had a spiritual impact on us.

And, uh, the Selma Movement, uh, was an interesting movement, in that it was after the, uh, Birmingham Movement that we went to the [50:00] A.G. Gaston Motel in Birmingham and, uh, held a retreat and decided that we were going to Selma to conduct a campaign to get the vote. Because we went to Mr. Johnson [President Lyndon B. Johnson] and said, "We can't vote!" He said, "Well, we've got to slow down, fellows." Said, "We just passed the Public Accommodations Act." Said, "We can't have another Civil Rights Act this quickly. Y'all take it

easy." So, we left and went to Birmingham, met in A.G. Gaston Motel and planned the Selma Movement.

Picked Selma because, I think – SNCC may have been already there, but they had been abused and persecuted terribly. They were even forbidden to hold meetings. And, uh, also the Black Belt of Alabama was a natural place because it was so black. They said it was black because of the dirt, but I think they called it black because so many black folks – we were the majority of the population. And Dallas County [Alabama], where Selma was located, uh, was majority black and didn't have but a handful of black registered voters in 1964 and '65. And so, the Movement was begun in Selma.

And, uh, the march from Selma to Montgomery, which was the climax of that Movement, began after Jimmie Lee Jackson was killed, uh, who was killed in Marion, Alabama. And, uh, my wife has a project under SCLC Women, which she heads. She, uh, has put statues and memorials of people like James Reeb and Jimmie Lee Jackson and others who died. Jimmie Lee Jackson was the first death in the [Selma] Movement. And we, we, we determined – we were determined to get the right to vote. And after we had Jimmie Lee Jackson's funeral, we were marching to his grave, that's when somebody suggested we ought to march to Montgomery, to the state capital, to demand the right to vote. And we did.

And, uh, that Bloody Sunday, uh, they didn't get any further than the bridge. But that next few days we did go on across that bridge. And then, in the next few days, we let out for Montgomery and reached Montgomery. And you know the rest – history. Uh, after the mass meeting in Montgomery that day, when Martin spoke – "How long? Not long –" and he named a committee to take the demands of the march to Governor Wallace and he named me chairman of the committee.

And Mr. Wallace had sent word he wasn't going to meet with anybody who wasn't from Alabama. And so, I was pastoring at Birmingham, so he named me, E.G. Gaston, L.H. Foster, president of Tuskegee, several outstanding citizens of Alabama, to meet with Governor Wallace to discuss the demands of the march. And, uh, so I had the demands at the close of the mass meeting and I went to the general who headed the National Guard and said, "I want to take these demands up to the capitol." So, he got on the telephone. I assume he was talking with the Governor. And finally, he said, "Go ahead. You can go."

But when we got to the steps of the capitol, the troopers, what I call the "Blue Sea" – they had on these blue uniforms – uh, they lined the steps of the capitol and would not let us through. And, uh, uh, I know how – who was that – Moses felt when he faced the Blue Sea. [Laughs] He – it was the Red Sea he faced, but I faced the Blue Sea. We couldn't get through. So, I looked back at the general and I said, you know, pointed to the troopers, and I said, "I thought you said we could go." And he yelled out some military command. I don't know what he said – Hup! Hup! And the National Guard came from around the corner, and they stood in front of the troopers. And they put their bayonets across their shoulders, and the Blue Sea parted [laughs], just like the Red Sea did. They parted, and we walked through [50:00] and went up to the Governor's office.

When we got to the door of the capitol, the Governor sent his secretary to say he would take the petition. I said, "No, no. We walked fifty miles. We're not about to give it to a secretary." So, I refused to give it to him. And about four or five days later, the Governor called and said he would meet with certain members of the committee, and he picked out some. I was not one of the – [laughs] the chairman was not one that he picked to meet with. But I polled the committee, and the committee voted unanimously: It was all or nothing at all.

So, the next day, he called and said he would meet with us. So, he did. He met with us for about ninety minutes. And while we were meeting, the Governor had a little piece of paper, he tore up a little piece of paper, and by the time we finished, we had a big mountain of little scraps of paper he had torn up while we were meeting. And, uh, I told him that God was going to hold him accountable for how he stood in the way of people making progress and coming together as children of God. But, uh, that – and, of course, pretty soon we had the Voting Rights Act of '65, which is probably the most significant piece of legislation in our lifetime, because it changed the whole voting pattern of the nation. And that fellow we have in the White House today would not be there had it not been for the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

JM: That's my last question [clears throat], um, is to have you reflect a little bit on – of course, you gave the, uh, benediction in D.C. I was there that day. I heard you live in person and was very pleased for that opportunity. Um, just your reflections on, on, on, uh, how that long arc from, from Mobile and Birmingham and Montgomery all the way to the Mall in Washington –

JL: Washington.

JM: Yeah.

JL: Well, you know, we were talking the other day. And I noticed for the first time during the Freedom Riders film I heard Bobby Kennedy say that there's going to be a black President one day. Now, somebody said he said "forty years." I didn't hear the "forty years," but I did hear him say there'd be a black President. We all felt one day that we'd have a black President, but none of us thought we'd live to see it. It just – the way things were at that time, we just couldn't foresee a black President.

And here, in 19--, uh, in 19--, what year was that we had the –? Anyway, when Barack Obama decided to run, something happened to me spiritually, and I became one of his early supporters. When hardly any other civil rights leaders were supporting him, I was out there supporting him. And I just felt like God was moving in history, and the time had come. And I wasn't sure he could be elected, but I thought the time had come for him to run.

Unlike Jesse's campaign [Jesse Jackson's presidential campaign], which was purely symbolic – none of us ever, you know, nobody ever thought Jesse was going to win. But it was a symbolic run, and it was a good thing. But Barack Obama's campaign took on a different hue, and it appeared he *might* have a chance to win. And so, I went all over the country and went to Selma in March of – now, what year was that?

JM: 2007, I think – Brown's Chapel [Brown Chapel A.M.E. Church in Selma]?

JL: Yeah, Brown Chapel. It was 2007. And, uh, I was supposed to speak at First Baptist Church. I had spoken at Brown Chapel the year before. And Barack Obama was scheduled to speak at Brown Chapel. When I got to First Baptist, I heard Obama was supposed to speak at Brown Chapel. I got a headache. And I – [laughs] I said, "I can't. I'm going to send you to somebody." So, we sent somebody, and I went to Brown Chapel [laughs] to hear Barack Obama. And, uh, he made an interesting speech.

Uh, I said in my remarks – they called on me to make remarks before he spoke. [55:00] I hadn't counted on that. But I said that, uh – I talked about "good crazy." There's "good crazy" and "bad crazy." The YouTube picked it up, and people have seen it all over the country. But I said that I was going over to Brown Chapel to meet with the crazy people who talked about a black President. And I said, "People are saying you're crazy," said, "but there's good crazy and

there's bad crazy. And, uh, good crazy, uh, you know, is on the right side and the right side of history."

And he spoke that day and he said that he represented the Joshua generation. He looked back at me and John Lewis. He said, "You guys represent the Moses generation." I thought that was a sneaky way to call us old, you know, [laughs] but he was right. And he said he represented the Joshua generation, and something happened in me, that this guy's inspired, and I think God is moving. And, uh, I decided at that time that I would support him and I marched across the bridge with him that day, my wife and I together.

And, uh, and then, later he came to Atlanta and spoke on the Georgia Tech campus, and he asked me to come out and pray that day. And, uh, maybe that's where he got the idea that I might want to pray at the Inauguration. But that was at Georgia Tech, and about twenty or twenty-five thousand students and people out there. And I went all over the country.

He, uh, he, uh, he asked me, called me once and asked me if I'd fly to Jackson, Mississippi, to speak for him. He had – uh, couldn't keep it. He and Hillary were supposed to speak. And this daughter here, Cheryl [Lowery-Osborne], uh, said she was going with me. They were going to send a plane. And I don't think she knew they were going to send a little small plane, because I didn't know. [Laughs] I'm not sure I would have agreed to go if I had known there were sending such a small plane. But anyway, he sent this little small plane, and we flew over there, and I spoke that night. [Someone coughs] And I went all over the country, speaking for him, North Carolina, Virginia, Alabama, Georgia, Iowa.

Matter of fact, after Georgia Tech, I went to Iowa. I wanted to see if the white folks were serious, whether they said they would support him. I wasn't sure. I knew he couldn't win without getting white support. And I went up there. It was getting chilly, and I saw people

standing on the corner with red noses and red ears and little signs that said, "Yes, we can." And I said, "God is in this plan." And I went all over the country speaking for him, and he won.

And, uh, most of my friends, uh, Andy Young and John Lewis, they supported Hillary. They couldn't see it. But I told them it wasn't because – [laughs] they weren't living close enough to the Lord. But, uh, we felt it was a God-inspired plan. And surely enough, he was elected.

And, uh, when he called me, he called me on my cell phone. And I wasn't there, and he left a message. And when I got the message, he asked me to call him. And I called him back and I said, "I want to speak to the fellow who's going to be the forty-fourth President of the United States." And he said, "That would be me, Brother Lowery." And I said, "You called?" And he said, "Yes, I called you. I want to ask you if you would give the benediction or the invocation at the Inauguration." I said, "Well, let me check my – let me check my calendar." [Laughs] And quickly, I said, "I've checked it and I'm free that day. I'll be glad to do it, glad to do it." And he said, "Well, we'll call you."

Well, he called me – well, in fact, it appeared in the paper before he called that I was to do the benediction. And some of my friends called and said, "Oh, we're going to protest. We want you to do the invocation." I said, "No, no, no! I'll take the benediction and I'll have the last word at the Inauguration with the benediction."

And, of course, it was a good – people told me in Washington, they said when you stand on the steps of the White House [nb: he intended Capitol], you'll be able to see the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial from that, looking down that Mall. And I looked forward to it. And I could see a little of it, [1:00:00] but there was a slight haze that day, and these old eyes were – they were about eighty-seven or eighty-eight years old at the time and they failed

me. I couldn't see both the Monument and the Lincoln Memorial. But I didn't have to see it, because I *heard* [the word *heard* echoes in sanctuary] that day, from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, I heard the voice of Martin Luther King forty-some years earlier, uh, summoning the nation to come up out of the lowland of race and color to the higher ground of content of character.

And here I was witnessing and participating in the nation's response to that summons in the election of Barack Obama. And I think it was God's plan and God's intent, and, uh, I think the will of God was fulfilled. And America – I never liked the "Star Spangled Banner." I always thought it was a poor choice for – "bombs bursting in air" and so forth. But that day, when they played it after I gave the benediction, it sounded better than it had ever sounded before. And nothing had changed, but the – the "Star Spangled Banner" was the same, but the country had changed. And I was overwhelmed and I cried. I hate to say I did, but I did, a grown man. As cold as it was, it's a wonder my tears weren't icicles. It was cold that day. But the "Star Spangled Banner" sounded good that day as it played when they inaugurated the forty-fourth President of the United States.

JM: Reverend Lowery, we're just so grateful for this chance. Thank you so much for coming over to the church today and sitting down with us.

JL: You may send contributions to Post Office Box – what's the Institute's post office box?

Cheryl Lowery-Osborne: [inaudible]

JL: 10897 – what is it? What is it, Cheryl?

CL: 92801.

JL: Huh?

CL: 92801.

JL: Yeah, Post Office Box 92801, Joseph Lowery Institute! We'll be glad to receive a [laughs] contribution from the Smithsonian and from all of its affluent staff and representatives who fly around the country with cameras, taking statements.

JM: I think those would be funds well spent. Thank you, Reverend Lowery. It's a real pleasure.

JL: I'm glad to have been here. I'm sorry I was late.

JM: No, thank you so much.

JL: It slipped – I don't know what it – it slipped me.

JM: Thank you so much.

JL: It slipped me. [To Cheryl] You going – you all are still here? I won't have to call your mother.

CL: Yeah, come on. We'll take you.

JL: You can take me back, okay. They brought me over.

[Recording ends at 1:02:49]

END OF INTERVIEW