

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, 2013

Interviewee: Johnnie Ruth Browner McCullar
Interview Date: March 9, 2013
Location: Campus of Albany State University, Albany, Georgia
Interviewer: Dr. Hasan Kwame Jeffries
Videographer: Petna Katondolo Ndaliko
Length: 01:02:17

[Sounds of conversation are occasionally heard in the background throughout interview]

Petna Katondolo Ndaliko: Three, two, one, and action.

Hasan Kwame Jeffries: Today is Saturday, March 9th, 2013. My name is Dr. Hasan Kwame Jeffries of the Ohio State University and the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I'm with videographer Petna Ndaliko in Albany, Georgia, on the campus of Albany State University to conduct an interview for the Civil Rights History Project, which is a joint undertaking of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture and the Library of Congress. We are here with Mrs. Johnnie Ruth Browner McCullar. Thank you so much for being here and sharing your story with us.

Johnnie Ruth Browner McCullar: Okay.

HJ: I would like to begin just by asking you: When and where were you born?

JM: I was born in Terrell County, Sasser, Georgia.

HJ: And what year? What was your birth date?

JM: February 4th, 1940.

HJ: 1940.

PN: Sorry. Can I cut a little bit?

HJ: Okay.

PN: I didn't pay attention to she's wearing glasses.

HJ: Okay.

PN: So, yeah, that means the light is reflecting in her eyes. So, let me just adjust this light, so that we don't have that.

HJ: Okay.

PN: Yeah.

HJ: He's going to adjust the light for your glasses. Maybe it'll be a little easier on your eyes.

JM: Okay.

PN: Yeah.

HJ: Okay. Do we need to back up?

PN: Yeah.

HJ: Do you want to start over?

PN: Please.

HJ: Okay.

Petna Ndaliko: Three, two, one, and action.

Hasan Kwame Jeffries: Today is Saturday, March 9th, 2013. My name is Dr. Hasan Kwame Jeffries of the Ohio State University and the Southern Oral History Program at the

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I'm with videographer Petna Ndaliko in Albany, Georgia, on the campus of Albany State University to conduct an interview for the Civil Rights History Project, which is a joint undertaking of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture and the Library of Congress. We are here with Johnnie Ruth Browner McCullar. Thank you so much for being here with us to share your story.

Johnnie Ruth Browner McCullar: Good to be here.

HJ: I would like to begin just by asking you where you were born.

JM: I was born in Terrell County, Sasser, Georgia.

HJ: And you were born February 4th, 1940?

JM: 1940.

HJ: And your parents—what were their names?

JM: Clifford Browner and Johnnie Lou Browner.

HJ: And they, too, were from the area. They were from Southwest Georgia.

JM: Yes.

HJ: How far back did your family have roots in Sasser?

JM: My father's parents moved here from Webster County, which is a few miles from Terrell County. The lines sort of meet. My mother, I don't quite know. I understand from her that her family originated from some parts of Alabama. When I don't know.

HJ: What was your mother like in her youth while you were growing up?

JM: Kind of quiet, always working. She was always looking for something to do, canning or sewing or making quilts, always something to make sure the family had what they needed.

HJ: And how about your father?

JM: He was a hard worker. He was a—first, he was a farmer. We moved off the farm in the '50s. I don't remember exactly what year. He worked for a while at the Marine base, and from there to the fertilizer plant. I can't remember the name—Swift! That's the name of it.

HJ: Down here in Albany?

JM: In Albany, Georgia, yes. He retired from there after about twenty-eight years.

HJ: Do you remember life on the farm?

JM: I didn't like it.

HJ: [Laughing] What was it about life on the farm that you didn't like?

JM: Well, I was afraid of all the animals. I didn't like the heat, didn't like the mosquitoes, didn't like the gnats, all that other stuff. It was just—and I was afraid of snakes, [0:05:00] *very* afraid of snakes. Wasn't too happy about that.

HJ: Now, where was the farm located?

JM: Oh, goodness. Down Florida Shore, back in the area near—it's a place called Doublegate, back in that area, off of Old Dawson Road.

HJ: Doublegate? Okay. Doublegate?

JM: Yes.

HJ: Off of Old Dawson Road. And when your family left the farm, where did they move?

JM: To Sasser, which is in the city limits of Sasser, where now the old homehouse is.

HJ: You liked Sasser more?

JM: Yes.

HJ: What was it about Sasser that was more appealing to you?

JM: Not a whole lot of snakes.

HJ: [Laughing] Because it wasn't a farm.

JM: [Laughing] No farm.

HJ: What was life like for you, because by then you were twelve or thirteen?

JM: Thirteen, yes.

HJ: How did life change for you when you moved to Sasser?

JM: I can't say that it was better, because we always had a good life. We had what we needed. We was always full. We had the clothing that we needed, because my mother was a good seamstress. So, she sewed, she made our clothing. I can't say it was any better when we moved there than when we were on the farm. It's just that I didn't have to do the farm work.

HJ: What were some of your responsibilities while you were on that farm?

JM: Oh, feed the chickens or milk the cow, which I was afraid of. Sometimes I had to pick cotton; wasn't very good at that. So, I really—really, to be perfectly honest with you, I didn't do too much on the farm. But what—the little bit I did do, I wasn't too happy about.

HJ: When you were working—that didn't—we had talked to your brother a little earlier, Cliff, and he was saying that he didn't have to and didn't recall whether or not his siblings had to, you all, worked instead of going to school.

JM: We would work when we weren't in school.

HJ: Okay.

JM: When it was time to go to school, we went to school.

HJ: How long was the school year?

JM: School was always out in April. It usually would start in October.

HJ: And so, in that in-between time—spring, summer, and into early fall—you'd be helping out on the farm?

JM: Yeah, what I could do, yes.

HJ: Do you remember the elementary school that you had gone to?

JM: One-room school. The name of it was Piney Grove.

HJ: Piney Grove?

JM: Yes.

HJ: Do you remember the name of your teacher?

JM: My first teacher's name was Fannie Wakefield, I believe.

HJ: And what was it like going to that one-room school, Piney Grove?

JM: It was fun. Seven grades in one building. One teacher.

HJ: About how many students are we talking about?

JM: Maybe about forty or less.

HJ: And this is—you stayed in Piney Grove for how many years?

JM: I think I was fifth or sixth grade when we left.

HJ: And then you head to where?

JM: To Sasser, to Dunbar.

HJ: Okay, to Dunbar. And that's the middle school?

JM: That was the elementary school. It went from first grade through ninth grade.

HJ: And was that experience different than going to Piney Grove?

JM: Yes, because it was only one grade to a classroom.

HJ: And then, from there, you head to high school?

JM: High school.

HJ: And what high school did you attend?

JM: Carver High School.

HJ: And where was Carver?

JM: In Dawson.

HJ: Dawson?

JM: Yes.

HJ: What was Carver like?

JM: Well, it was an experience being in high school. I met a lot of other people that I didn't know. It was cold most of the time, with one heater in the classroom. You'd sit in the classroom with your heavy coats on in order to stay warm. There was no lunchroom, so you had to carry your lunch. If you had a lunch, you had to take your lunch from home.

Well, it—[sighs] it wasn't what it should have been. We didn't have the equipment that we needed. [0:10:00] There were two classes, and there was a divider between the two classrooms. So, when we had—and it was used for an auditorium. Whenever we had some type of program, they had to remove the partition from between the two classrooms. And you could hear what was going on in the other classroom, so it was kind of—sometimes it would be kind of noisy.

HJ: And so, this is the mid-1950s?

JM: Yes.

HJ: 1954?

JM: 1950—end of '55, '56.

HJ: Is when you started?

JM: When I started tenth grade.

HJ: Tenth grade. Now, you know, the famous *Brown* ruling, saying that segregation in education is unconstitutional, had been passed two years earlier. Was there any talk about desegregating schools at that time while you were in school?

JM: No, because at that time, black people seemed to have been afraid to really discuss stuff like that. If my memory serves me right, there was a certain amount of information that you could get from government. They were—the black teachers, I think, were told what to teach. So, you know, we didn't know too much about government and things of that nature.

HJ: How about at home? Were there any conversations or discussions of this sort?

JM: My parents didn't know too much about segregation or, you know, about in the schools. But they knew that we didn't have what we needed in order to be properly educated. The books were—pages were torn out. We were getting them from the white school. When they got new books, they would pass the old ones down to us. There would be writings all over the books and pages—part of the pages were torn out. Sometimes we would have one spelling book to a class. The teacher would have to put the words on the board, and you would have to write them off, because we didn't have enough books.

HJ: Did you ever talk to your mother or father about the way things were?

JM: I don't recall doing that.

HJ: How about friends, classmates?

JM: We complained about having to take so many minutes out of the classroom and evening classes to clean up the buildings, because we had no janitorial services.

HJ: And so, that responsibility fell on you all, as students?

JM: Fell on the students, yes.

HJ: Wow.

JM: And all the dust. They would put down the dust compound, but it was still dusty.

HJ: So, you spend your four years in high school and you graduate in 1959?

JM: Yes.

HJ: And what do you do after graduation?

JM: My older sister was in nursing school, so I had to sit out a year until she graduated.

HJ: Okay. And do you remember the name of the school? Do you remember where she was going?

JM: The school was in Bibb County in Macon, Georgia, but I can't remember the name of it right now.

HJ: And so, you had to stay out just because of the cost?

JM: Yes.

HJ: And so, what did you do during that year?

JM: Babysat.

HJ: In the neighborhood, or for your siblings?

JM: Oh, I had an aunt who lived across the street, and sometimes she would bring her smaller kids over, and I would keep them. I basically just kept house while my mother worked.

HJ: And your mother—what did she do?

JM: She worked—she did housekeeping work sometimes, and then she worked at the white school. She was a cook.

HJ: And this is in Sasser?

JM: Yes.

HJ: And so, then your sister finishes her program?

JM: Yes.

HJ: So, now it's your turn?

JM: Yes.

HJ: To go to school. And you choose to go to Albany State.

JM: Yes.

HJ: Why did you choose Albany State?

JM: When I was growing up, I was kind of a sickly child, and my parents didn't want me to get too far away from them. So.

HJ: So, they had a little bit of a say in that, as well?

JM: Yes.

HJ: But they wanted you to go to college?

JM: Yes.

HJ: What was their thinking behind that? Did they ever share with you why?

JM: They wanted me to be a teacher. That wasn't what I wanted. I wanted to go to nursing school like my sister. But I had to do what they wanted me to do. [0:15:00]

HJ: Was that ever a discussion, or was that just known?

JM: That was known. This is what you will do.

HJ: Now, why did they want you to be a teacher?

JM: I had an instructor who was always telling me that's what I needed to do. So, she told them that, so they took it from that.

HJ: So, when you enroll at Albany State, 1960, it's with the intention of becoming a teacher.

JM: A teacher.

HJ: And so, what do you—do you choose a major?

JM: I, for some reason, decided I wanted to do science, but I don't know why I did that. I wasn't that good in science. I just really wasn't sure exactly what I was going to do, really.

HJ: Um-hmm. And did you stay—you stayed on campus?

JM: Yes.

HJ: What was that like when you arrived, 1960, no longer living at home?

JM: A lot of people.

HJ: Yeah.

JM: But I enjoyed living on campus. I did. The only problem was the food.

HJ: Not good?

JM: The food was no good. I ended up getting hepatitis from the food. The food was bad.

HJ: Wow. Was this something that students complained about?

JM: Oh, yes.

HJ: The administration—did it choose to do anything?

JM: No. It didn't seem to matter. The food wasn't good. It was prepared badly. The—
well, I won't go into that.

HJ: So, what was—from the student perspective, did you feel that the administration at Albany State was supportive of the students? What was your opinion of the administration or the school as a whole?

JM: As far as academics were concerned, yes. But it seemed like when it came to the food, I guess they just let the dietician—took care of all of that.

HJ: Yeah.

JM: But the food was not good. And I wouldn't eat it, and so I ended up becoming ill.

HJ: Did you stay here or did you have to go home?

JM: I ended up having to leave because I had problems with my stomach.

HJ: Right.

JM: So, I had to leave.

HJ: Now, did you—but you wound up coming back?

JM: No.

HJ: No, that was it?

JM: That was it.

HJ: Oh, wow. And so, that was 1962?

JM: 1962.

HJ: Now, by then, you had—had you already become involved with civil rights activities?

JM: There was a march downtown—and I don't want to get into something I can't remember the full details, but it had to do with a young lady named Bertha Gober, and her name is the only one that comes to mind at this point. But we marched. We had a march downtown, and I was involved in it.

HJ: Now, she was—was she the homecoming queen?

JM: She was a student here.

HJ: She was a student here at Albany State.

JM: She was a student here at Albany State.

HJ: And had she been expelled? Do you recall?

JM: I can't remember now. That was a long time ago.

HJ: But you remember that that was sort of the first time—

JM: The first time, yes, I participated in a march.

HJ: And what was that experience like? Do you remember just the experience of being in a march?

JM: Kind of scary, because I didn't know what was going to happen when we got downtown.

HJ: Now, did you march from campus?

JM: From campus.

HJ: Okay. How did you hear about it?

JM: Different people talking about it, and they were going around and recruiting people for the march. And for some reason, I got involved. I don't know why. I just did.

HJ: And so, during the march, you say you're nervous?

JM: Oh, yes!

HJ: You're not really sure what's going to happen?

JM: Don't know what's going to happen downtown.

HJ: You're fearful of the police?

JM: And didn't know what my parents were going to say when they found out that I had been—participated in the march.

HJ: So, you survive that day?

JM: Yes.

HJ: No violence, no arrest?

JM: No.

HJ: You get back to the dorm. What do you think?

JM: Well, I got away with that! But when my parents found out about it, they didn't get mad, [0:20:00] because by then, things had started to—in Terrell County—sort of, not openly, but people were having meetings. And so, after then, then things—after I stopped, then things just started opening up, and I got involved.

HJ: So, after the march, you're back at the dorm. Word reaches your parents from the parents of other students—do you even know?

JM: Other parents of people coming from Dawson and Sasser to school here.

HJ: And did they—was there ever even a conversation about it, about your participation at the time?

JM: The head cook at the school where my mother worked mentioned it to her and said, "I know your daughter has better sense than to get involved in something like that." And she told her, said, "Well, she did."

HJ: And this was a white woman?

JM: Yeah. Said, "She did." So, that was the end of that.

HJ: And did that head cook ever say anything else to her at that time?

JM: I don't know if she mentioned it again.

HJ: And so, after that march, you participate, your parents—hey, that's okay.

JM: That's alright.

HJ: You're still at Albany State, because you haven't gotten sick yet. Do you get involved in other activities, other marches and demonstrations, at all?

JM: No, that was the only one.

HJ: Why was that?

JM: I don't know. I just never got involved again.

HJ: Here at the school?

JM: At school, yeah.

HJ: So, the spring of '62—

JM: I left.

HJ: You get sick.

JM: Yeah.

HJ: You head back home. At that time—and you're just recuperating at the house?

JM: Yes.

HJ: Had you thought about—were you thinking that you were going to return to school?

JM: I thought about it. And then, I got really and truly involved in the Movement, and that just went.

HJ: It took on a life of its own. So, you're back home, you're recuperating, and things are starting to happen in Terrell. Now, how do you get involved in what's happening back home?

JM: Because when I got home, my parents were already involved.

HJ: And what were they doing? You say they were already involved.

JM: Going to meetings. They were having meetings at one of the churches in Dawson. I believe either it was Zion Hill or Sardis Baptist Church, and they moved from there to Mount Olive.

HJ: Okay. The meetings have moved from there to Mount Olive.

JM: To Mount Olive.

HJ: And Mount Olive was your family church, was the family home?

JM: Yes.

HJ: Were you starting to attend meetings as well?

JM: Yes.

HJ: And the Terrell County—the Terrell Movement, the organization, when does that get started?

JM: When I got back home in '62—I believe they started getting it together in 1960.

HJ: Okay.

JM: They started to get—I didn't know anything about it, but it had started in 1960.

HJ: And so, how did you get involved with it, because at a certain point, you become secretary, correct?

JM: After I left school, that's when I got—really started getting involved. My parents were going to the meetings, so I started going with them. And the president of that Movement's name was—the man's name was Lucius Holloway. And I don't know how I got drawn in to [laughs] becoming the secretary, but I did. So, there was no office to elect me. I just somehow got involved.

HJ: [Laughs] Now, did you—did you and your parents, while you were going to those mass meetings—were they talking to you? Were they talking among themselves?

JM: We talked. We talked about it. Whatever went on in the meetings, we discussed it when we got home. We talked about it and things that we needed to get done, in the school systems and in the community. We wanted to become registered voters, so we went a couple of times, trying to get registered, and the registrar would leave the office.

HJ: And where was the registrar's office at the time?

JM: In the courthouse, in the basement of the courthouse.

HJ: The county courthouse?

JM: And he would stand across at the post office and watch us. When we did catch him in his office, when he did let us become registered voters, we had [0:25:00] to read a scripture from the Bible before we could fill out the form.

HJ: And when did you finally get a chance to even fill out the form?

JM: I don't remember exactly the time and the date of that, but we did become registered voters. My mother lost her job at the white school because of it.

HJ: For having registered?

JM: For becoming a registered voter—they *fired* her.

HJ: Now, did that happen because she had actually successfully registered?

JM: Yes.

HJ: So, even before—I mean, so obviously they were keeping track. They were keeping dibs on what she was doing.

JM: Yes.

HJ: Not happy with her attending these mass meetings and her and her husband—was she feeling pressure at the job before she was fired?

JM: They didn't pressure her to a point where, you know, she would just want to leave, but they just out and out told her she had to go.

HJ: Umm. Nothing you could do about that at that point.

JM: They just told her she had to go. So, she went to Albany and she started doing housework. And they called the lady that she was working for and tried to get the lady to fire her. And she told them, "I don't have anything to do with what she did in Terrell County. All I need her to do is to do what I ask her to do, and I pay her."

HJ: So, she refused. Do you remember who that woman was—her name, by any chance?

JM: [Inaudible]

HJ: When your mom—do you remember your mother coming home, saying that she had been fired from Sasser?

JM: Umm, kind of—it's kind of dim. But, you know, it—we talked about it periodically and—the day she got fired, I wouldn't have known. I don't remember that day.

HJ: But you would talk about the fact that she had been?

JM: Yes.

HJ: How did she feel about it?

JM: [Pause] Well, how would anybody feel when they have gotten fired? Not necessarily angry, but sort of disappointed in the way that it was done. You know, "I have a right to become a registered voter. This is my God-given right. So, why should you take it away from me?" But that's what happened.

HJ: Was there any—did that change at all the way your family was involved in the Movement?

JM: No. It made it even stronger.

HJ: As secretary of the Terrell Movement, what were some of the things that you did?

JM: I would take notes as to what was being said. Different people would come in and talk about the things that they had experienced on their jobs, or the people from SNCC would come and they would talk, like Charles Sherrod or Donald Stewart or Prathia—

HJ: Prathia Hall?

JM: Hall, Ralph Allen. And sometimes we would have reporters there.

HJ: So, this was all at the mass meetings?

JM: Yes. And then, from time to time, the police would pay us a visit. The sheriff and his deputies would come and they would put their feet on the seats and just talk, be ugly, really ugly. "We're sick of all this mess," they would say. "Our black people are doing fine. They're happy

with things the way they are. And the outsiders are coming in and stirring up our black people,” and stuff like that.

HJ: So, they would physically show up at a mass meeting?

JM: Yes!

HJ: Now, when were the mass meetings held?

JM: At Mount Olive.

HJ: At Mount Olive. And they were—was this Wednesdays or Sundays—?

JM: I think the meeting, I believe, if I’m not mistaken, was on a Wednesday night, I believe. Each county sort of had their own night that they had their meetings.

HJ: Okay.

JM: And the different counties would support each other. We would—like on Wednesday night, if our, Terrell County, was on Wednesday night, we would go to Lee County if theirs was on Tuesday night, back and forth.

HJ: About how many people would be at the mass meeting? [0:30:00]

JM: Maybe thirty or forty sometime, maybe less. It just depended.

HJ: And when the sheriff would show up, how would that—how would people respond?

JM: We would keep doing whatever we were doing. If we were singing, we would continue to sing. If one of the SNCC workers was up talking or speaking, they would just continue to speak. Sometimes, they would interrupt.

HJ: Do you remember meeting SNCC workers for the first time?

JM: I’m trying to remember the first one I met. I believe it was Charles Sherrod, I believe, if I’m not mistaken.

HJ: What did you think of him—not the first time, but just as a whole?

JM: I thought he was a very unique person. He had a very sweet and calming personality, never raised his voice, always—to me—very sure of himself. And I think he's still that same way.

HJ: How often were they in the county?

JM: Often, very often. They were very visible. They were always around. Somebody—if it wasn't Sherrod, it was some of the other SNCC workers—somebody was always around.

HJ: Now, were there any SNCC workers staying in the county, or were they mostly—?

JM: There was a lady, her name was Carolyn Daniels, and they would stay at her house. If I'm not mistaken, Lucius Holloway would have some boarding at his house. Nobody ever stayed with us, but my mother would make cakes and things like that for them, try to help to feed them.

HJ: Yeah, yeah. The voter registration activity—so, yourself and your parents had gone down to attempt to register to vote. Did you do canvassing activities as well?

JM: Yes. Myself and some of the students from the high school—Gladys Clark, who is now deceased, and her sister, Annie Dean Clark—we would canvas the areas in Dawson in the evenings after school, going from door to door. The people would run in the house when they would see us coming. "Here come the Freedom Riders!" That's what they called us. And they would go in the house and close their door. They were afraid to talk to us.

HJ: And, you know, those who didn't quite run, or even those who did, but those who you caught up with—what would you say?

JM: We would talk to them about becoming registered voters and try to encourage them to come to the meetings so they could hear and see what was going on. But they were afraid of

losing their jobs or being made to move out of the homes that they were living in, because they would be renting. And they would just tell us, "I'm afraid I'll get fired or I'll have to move."

HJ: And that's the reason why they didn't want to be seen—?

JM: They didn't want to be seen talking to us.

HJ: Yeah. How long would you—how many hours would you spend out canvassing, on average, any given day?

JM: Usually the kids would get out about three, three-thirty, and we would walk sometimes until it would start to get dark, and then we would sometimes hitchhike, just try to find a way home.

HJ: Were you ever worried about your safety while you were out there?

JM: Oh, yes! We would have been crazy not to.

HJ: What were you concerned about?

JM: The white folk were not happy about what we were doing, and there were threats. So, we had to be careful.

HJ: And being careful meant what?

JM: You watch your butt!

HJ: Yeah.

JM: Any car come by, you move out of the road. So, you didn't want to get hit. And at some point, sometime they would swing out at you. So, you had to be careful.

HJ: The cars?

JM: The cars would swing out at you. [Pause]

HJ: You would canvas—never canvas by yourself?

JM: No.

HJ: So, you would always pair up?

JM: You always had—there was always either two or three, [0:35:00] always together.

You'd never go out by yourself.

HJ: And the students, they were younger than you?

JM: Yes.

HJ: So, they're looking up to you.

JM: I don't know about that. They were always bigger than me. [Laughter] I was the smallest something in the group, so I don't know if they were looking up to me or not. But I was always the smallest something in the group, so I don't know about them looking up to me. But we all had the same goal as to help black people get what they were supposed to have, what had been taken away from us. That was our goal: to become decent citizens, first-class citizens.

HJ: What were some of the other activities that the Terrell County Movement was doing that you were involved in?

JM: Well, occasionally, Reverend Wells—we would do some sit-ins sometimes.

HJ: And who was this?

JM: Reverend Wells. His name was Samuel Wells. I think he passed on.

HJ: And you would do some sit-ins?

JM: Some sit-ins.

HJ: Where?

JM: We would just go into a restaurant. There was a restaurant in Dawson. I can't think of the name of it. And he would tell us what we were supposed to do before we went in. He said we would just go and just sit at the counter or just sit down. He said, "And if they say something,

we'll just leave." And that's what we would do. He said, "I don't want anybody to get in trouble or anybody to get hit or anything." So, he was sort of our protector.

HJ: And you did that?

JM: We would do that. Whatever he told us to do, that's what we did, or else he wasn't going to tell us anything that was going to get anybody hurt.

HJ: What was it like going into some of these places?

JM: A little scary! Always a little scary, because you never knew what was going to happen.

HJ: Did anything ever happen?

JM: Well, you would get talked ugly to, so, yeah, and called names.

HJ: By the patrons?

JM: People, yeah—by the owners.

HJ: By the owners.

JM: By the owners or whoever, whatever white person that was working there. You know, "We don't serve you here." So, we would just get up and leave. We wouldn't argue with them. We would just get up and leave.

HJ: Did you ever have any run-ins with the police?

JM: Never any run-in with the police except at the church.

HJ: When they would show up—

JM: When they would show up.

HJ: At the mass meetings?

JM: Yes.

HJ: So, we have the mass meetings, you're doing voter registration work, you're doing these sit-ins. Other activities? Were there other things that you were doing as well?

JM: We had a—after the church—

HJ: After the what?

JM: After the church was burned—

HJ: Oh, yes! Mount Olive?

JM: Yes.

HJ: The series of churches?

JM: Yes.

HJ: Okay.

JM: We had—they started a school, an adult school, and they were teaching some of the adults that could not read and write how to write their names, their alphabets, things of that nature. And we would—I would go there. I wasn't a teacher, but I would attend those classes.

HJ: So, it was like adult literacy schools?

JM: Yes.

HJ: And who were the people who were coming in?

JM: Some of the people—Adell Sears, Terow Bell, Miss Catherine Mallory. They're all now deceased. And it would be kind of fun. They enjoyed it. You know, if—when they would learn to say their alphabets and they could do them all the way through, it would be so funny to them. They were just like—they were just rejoicing that they had, you know, that they had learned to do this! And all of their lives, they hadn't been able to do it!

HJ: Now, were they encouraged to register to vote as well?

JM: They'd become registered voters.

HJ: And so, that was part of it?

JM: That was part of it.

HJ: Part of the organizing.

JM: We taught—we also taught them how to vote, what to do when they would go into the voting polls.

HJ: Now, would you carry some of the people down to the county courthouse?

JM: Usually I was one of the poll watchers.

HJ: Okay.

JM: During the elections, I was one of the poll watchers.

HJ: And what elections were these? When were these held?

JM: The local elections or the national elections.

HJ: Okay. [0:40:00]

JM: I would be a poll watcher and I would help people who could not read and write. You had to sign a form, saying that you had to help these people. You had to sign the form, and then I would help them, call the names out to them and let them choose the one that they wanted to vote for.

HJ: So, this was even 1964?

JM: Yeah, during the '60s.

HJ: During the '60s. So, you're standing in—you're a poll watcher, meaning that you're in a poll—

JM: And then, we're watching, really, basically what's going on, you know, if anybody tried to keep people from voting, basically.

HJ: Did you ever have to intervene on behalf of somebody?

JM: Not really, because the federal government was in. You know, the federal people were here.

HJ: Um-hmm. I want to go back to late summer of '62. You had been involved with the Terrell County Movement, and mass meetings were being held at Mount Olive, the family church. And then, in August, the church is burned.

JM: Yes.

HJ: Could you tell me about that?

JM: It was like a death, that someone you loved had died. Sad to think that people would be so mean that they would burn a church. It didn't stop anything. It just made us more determined. How could you burn the house of God because people would want to register to vote? That's what happened.

HJ: What were some of the discussions afterward?

JM: Well, people wondering who did it and why they did it. It was done in the middle of the night, so nobody knew. And I don't know if the Justice Department ever found out who did.

HJ: Was there any speculation about who may have done it?

JM: They just said, "The white folks did it." So, who did, I don't know.

HJ: Where did the mass meetings go afterward?

JM: If I'm not mistaken, we went to the Methodist church. It was a small church in Sasser. They became afraid that they were going to burn their church, so they stopped us from doing that.

So, by this time, they had started a foundation to rebuild Mount Olive. We would put chairs there, and so they told us we could not do that. So, then they brought in a big tent and they put it in the back. And we held our Sunday services and our meetings in that tent.

HJ: Behind the foundation?

JM: The foundation.

HJ: And your brother was working, was helping to rebuild that.

JM: Yes.

HJ: Do you remember how your father reacted?

JM: Tears. And he said some words that wasn't Christian. [Laughs]

HJ: [Laughs] How about your mother?

JM: Sad. Everybody—it was just—it was a sad day. As I said, it was just like a death, because that church had always been there. It had always been a part of that little city and Terrell County.

HJ: You mentioned that when you were canvassing, that you had to be careful.

JM: Yeah.

HJ: And now that the church has been burned, your family, people—your mother loses her job. Were you ever—was the family ever—feel like they were in danger?

JM: Yes, because the word was out that anyone who participated in the meetings, and they owned their own home, they was going to burn the homes. So, we would take turns sitting up at night and watching.

HJ: To make sure nobody suspicious, cars—were you looking for vehicles?

JM: Anyone trying to set a fire, [0:45:00] or any strange cars pulling in the yard, and whatever.

HJ: And if you saw somebody, what was the plan?

JM: Get everybody up and out of the house.

HJ: Escape before anything could happen?

JM: Before anything could happen.

HJ: Now, you had family members outside, I mean, in the community?

JM: Yes.

HJ: Relatives?

JM: Yes.

HJ: Were they also active?

JM: I had one uncle, my father's brother, he was also active.

HJ: But some of the others weren't?

JM: Didn't have too many family members around.

HJ: Around in the Movement?

JM: Around in that area.

HJ: In that area, okay. How about some of your friends when you had become involved?

Did they also become involved when you had moved back home?

JM: My classmates? No.

HJ: Why was that?

JM: I have no idea.

HJ: Did they treat you any differently?

JM: No.

HJ: They just let you do your thing?

JM: [Laughs] I guess so. The most of my classmates when I came back—you know how little small towns, there are no jobs. So, you go away to school; you don't come back.

HJ: Um-hmm. So, a lot of them had—

JM: They was gone.

HJ: They were gone.

JM: Yes.

HJ: So, after the tragedy at Mount Olive, what does the Movement do then?

JM: There were people from the Justice Department that came down. We had—well, the GBIs came first.

HJ: The Georgia Bureau of Investigation.

JM: Yes, *not*—in my opinion, not to try and find out who did what, but basically, I think, just to cover themselves. But when the Justice Department came down, a lot of things started happening. They were taking statements from different people, and they took that back to Washington with them. The little book that I had that I kept notes in, they took it back. I never got it back.

HJ: So, wait. And what's this little book? What is that?

JM: It was a little book that I just would scribble little notes in. I was afraid to write—

HJ: About the Movement?

JM: I was afraid to write down certain stuff, because I didn't know who was going to get their hands on it.

HJ: Yeah.

JM: So, I would just scribble certain little stuff down in it.

HJ: Was this sort of a notebook you—as you were taking notes from the meetings and stuff like that?

JM: Yes.

HJ: So, the Justice Department, the investigators, they interviewed you?

JM: Yes.

HJ: What was that like?

JM: [Pause] Like this one.

HJ: [Laughs] And you just shared—?

JM: [Laughs] We talked.

HJ: Yeah. Did you think they were going to do anything?

JM: I kind of felt like they would. After then, people in Sasser had took over to Americus to federal court.

HJ: As part of a court case, or what were they doing?

JM: Many things that had happened in the area: the shooting at the SNCC workers—the little police officer that we had was shooting at the SNCC workers—a whole lot other stuff. And with the burning of the churches in that area, they had to go to federal court.

HJ: And the shooting at the SNCC workers—as they were canvassing?

JM: Yes.

HJ: Okay. Was that something that was common?

JM: No, I don't know. I think the little police officer let somebody put something in his head that wasn't right, [laughs] and he believed it. So.

HJ: So, he was taking his act—he was doing what he thought he was supposed to do?

JM: Um-hmm.

HJ: Terrell County—some people called it “Terrible Terrell.”

JM: “Terrible Terrell.” It was.

HJ: You think that was an appropriate—? [0:50:00]

JM: Oh, yeah.

HJ: Why terrible? Why terrible?

JM: Because it was. It was just—[pause] I never run into, really, when I was growing up, a whole lot of prejudice from the people, because our parents protected us from that. We never worked in white folks' houses or went places of that nature. We were always protected from that. So, some of the stuff that some people experienced, we never did. My worst experience was when I started working with the Movement.

HJ: Worst experience with white folk?

JM: Yeah, when I started working with the Movement. Other than that, when I was a child, I didn't know. I knew that things they had was better than what I had, especially with the school. We had to walk to school, and they rode the school bus. They had better books. So, that was really basically all. And certain places that they could go that I couldn't go, but then, they had the places for the blacks. So, in a way, I felt like that was the way, kindly the way it was supposed to be. I still had some place to go. I may not have been able to go where they went, but we still had places to go.

HJ: So, did—when you joined—when you're active in the Movement, and now you're encountering and experiencing these white folk in this sort of different way, did that change what you thought about them?

JM: I'm seeing now what I've been missing. You know, you couldn't go into a restaurant and sit down and eat. If you went to get a hamburger, you had to get it through a hole in the wall, because you couldn't go inside. So, it kind of opened my eyes into what was really going on.

HJ: And how—that revelation, that opening your eyes, what did you make of it all?

JM: It made me determined to try to make things better for everybody, not just black people, but for everybody, because you can't help one unless you help the other. There were

poor white people living in that area was, I would say, just as poor as I was, or poorer. So, you can't help one race of people unless you help the other race.

HJ: As the Movement continued, so into '63 and '64, did the kinds of things that you were doing change?

JM: Kind of slowed down a bit. When people started becoming registered voters, things kind of—the canvassing kind of slowed down a bit. Most of it was done when people were running for election. We started canvassing the area, trying to support this person or support that person, get people out to the polls, make sure that nobody kept them from voting.

And it just—somewhere in there, [pause] I stopped. I went home to take care of my sister's baby. She had a child and she was working. She needed somebody to keep her, so my parents brought me home. So, that's what I was doing. Then, later on, I got married and I moved away.

HJ: And when did—when was this? When did you get—?

JM: 1967.

HJ: And then, where do you move to?

JM: Topeka, Kansas.

HJ: Topeka, Kansas? I mean, so you moved far, I mean, and this is your first time, really, away from home.

JM: That far away from home, yes.

HJ: That far away from home. Was that—how was that experience, sort of leaving Terrell behind?

JM: A wonderful experience.

HJ: Wonderful?

JM: I had a chance to travel, to see some things, you know, to see other places. It was fun.

HJ: Did you stay in Kansas for long?

JM: I came back to Atlanta.

HJ: To Atlanta.

JM: Yeah. I lived there for a while, about four years. [0:55:00] Then, I came back to Albany and went to work at Phoebe.

HJ: At the medical—at the hospital?

JM: Yes.

HJ: And what were you doing at the hospital?

JM: Working as a CNA, certified nursing assistant.

HJ: How had the area changed, if at all, when you came back?

JM: Some places I didn't recognize. The "black" and "white" signs were down. You know, the black water fountains and white water fountains, the signs were down. It was kind of strange, you know. It had changed a lot. And you could go into any restaurant you wanted to, sit down and eat. You could go to a movie, and you didn't have to sit in the balcony, and sit down on the lower level and have people throw things down on you. So, it was a whole lot different.

HJ: Were you glad to be back?

JM: Yes.

HJ: Did you stay—did you live in Albany, or were you living—?

JM: With my parents. I moved back in with my parents.

HJ: Okay. And how had—was Terrell different?

JM: It was different. The schools were integrated. It was a whole lot better. It was a whole lot better. Everybody was riding the school buses to schools, and nobody walking to school anymore. So, it was a whole lot better.

HJ: Did you ever resume sort of Movement-type activities?

JM: Yes. I started working with the NAACP. I became a deputy registrar in 1979. I think I did that until 1996, whatever year the voting started to—where you could register to vote anyplace, like the library, that's when I basically sort of—I would do four hours on Saturday morning.

HJ: Registering people to vote?

JM: Yes.

HJ: So, the Movement kind of stayed with you?

JM: Yes.

HJ: Why do you think that was the case?

JM: I guess that people thought I was dependable.

HJ: So, people would—

JM: They would always call me. You know, the people who were in charge of whatever was going on would always call me. So.

HJ: Was the NAACP very strong?

JM: It was.

HJ: Is this the Terrell County NAACP?

JM: Yes.

HJ: Okay.

JM: It's not as strong now as it used to be.

HJ: Was that the main Movement organization, if you will, the main center of sort of Movement activity, in the '80s and '90s?

JM: Yeah, I believe so.

HJ: Do you recall who the branch president was?

JM: J. L. Barnes.

HJ: J. L. Barnes?

JM: He was murdered.

HJ: He was murdered?

JM: In 1994.

HJ: Did it have anything to do with his activism?

JM: I believe so.

HJ: So, the danger for speaking out, for being active, it didn't just go away in the '60s?

JM: No. [Pause]

HJ: So, that's one of the things that didn't change, would you say—this idea that, you know, there were people who were opposed to change?

JM: I—you know, I don't know how to put this, but things are better on the surface. They look good, but there's a lot that still needs to be worked on. You know how stuff is under the cover? And you see the smiles and the handshakes and—but everything is not coming up roses, and I don't think it ever will be. So, what you have to do is just—you do the best you can to make life for you and your family and other people around you [1:00:00] as comfortable as possible. You do what you can.

I don't think we, as black people, are going to ever be where God intended for us to be, because there are people who are working every day to keep it from happening. We have a black

president, and they're blocking him at every move he makes. So, if *he* can't make things better, they won't let him, what do you think about me? They're not going to listen to me either, but I *try*.

HJ: We've covered a lot, but I know there's so much more that we could possibly talk about. Is there anything that you want to add that perhaps we didn't talk about, or you want to say a little more about?

JM: Just to ask our people to become more active in voting, registering to vote, and voting after you register. Support your elected officials in whatever they're doing, because it's for your benefit. We put them in office, and then, we're hands-off. They need to be held accountable. And if we don't do it, who's going to?

HJ: That's valuable advice. Mrs. McCullar, thank you so much.

JM: Thank you.

HJ: That was wonderful. I didn't know I was grilling you.

[Recording ends at 1:02:17]

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Sally C. Council