

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: Mr. Charles McDew
Interview Date: June 4, 2011
Location: Campus of Albany State University, during the "Southwest Georgia Civil Rights Movement 50th Reunion" conference
Interviewer: Joseph Mosnier, Ph.D.
Videographer: John Bishop
Length: 81:53 minutes

Joe Mosnier: ...little opening announcement just to –

John Bishop: It's running.

JM: [Clears throat] Okay, today is Saturday, June 4, 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, and we are here 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. We are in Albany, Georgia, today, uh, in fact on the campus of Albany State University, where these last couple of days has been held the 50th Reunion of the Southwest Georgia Civil Rights Movement.

And we're very lucky this morning to be with Mr. Charles McDew. Mr. McDew, thank you so much for sitting down with us. It's going to be a pleasure to talk with you about this history. Thank you.

Charles McDew: Well, thank you for having me.

JM: I wonder if you could –

CM: I'm happy to be here.

JM: It's a real pleasure for us. Um, I wonder if you could sketch, um, to begin, um, just the basics of your family history, because I know you grew up in Ohio.

CM: I was born in Massillon, Ohio, June 23, 1938. Um, Massillon is a community of about thirty-five, thirty-six thousand people. Um, it's generally known for the production of steel and, uh, football players. They have great high school football teams and have had for years. [Someone coughs] Um, Paul Brown, uh, was from Massillon, Ohio, uh, and the teams that Paul Brown had, uh, were famous and there's long tradition. Uh, my father had played for Paul Brown, um, and the Massillon Tigers. My grandfather had played, uh, in Massillon for the Massillon Tigers.

Um, the pro Football Hall of Fame in Canton [Ohio] is eight miles from Massillon. The big rivalry there is the Massillon-Canton football rivalry that goes back well over a hundred years. Um, so I was born in Massillon.

JM: Did your father work –?

CM: And my father worked for, uh, Republic Steel, um, and the big places in town to work were the steel mills. Republic Steel and Massillon Steel Casting, uh, were big. There's a long history of, um, workers in the steel industry that came from Massillon. I remember, uh, Ben Fairless, the president of the, uh, United Steel Workers [president of United States Steel Corporation] was from Massillon, was from the – uh, uh, General Jacob Coxey and "Coxey's Army," uh, started in Massillon, Ohio. And Coxey, General Coxey, who led the Army of the

Poor, was from Massillon. So, there's this long history of, uh, workers in Massillon, uh, who worked in the steel mills.

JM: Yeah. Did you come up in a house where, um, politics and race were matters of a lot of attention?

CM: Uh, yeah. Yeah, uh, because of all the things I've just told you. I remember my father was very active in the union.

JM: Yeah.

CM: Uh, he grew up – or I grew up playing for Local 1124 of the United Steel Workers. You grew up playing for steel mill-sponsored, union-sponsored teams. Everybody worked – that worked – worked in the steel mills. My grandfather, my uncles, my father, [5:00] uh, all worked in the steel mills, and they were all involved in the union activity. The teams we played for, the things that we sponsored, the parks we played in, uh, the fields we ran down, were generally things that had been produced, uh, by the unions. They built the schools and –

JM: Tell me about those schools. What was schooling like up there?

CM: Well, school – I think the schools were very good. Uh, in fact, my sister, uh, was one of the first black teachers, uh, in the Massillon public schools. My father, uh, was trained, uh, to be a teacher, but when he got out of school, there just weren't many, if any, black teachers in Northern schools. Um, schools were – throughout the country were really segregated before, um, the '54 decision, were highly segregated when it came to hiring.

But I went to – I had never been to a black school until I went south. The schools were highly integrated. You know, you went to, you'd go to class with the kids in your neighborhood, and, uh, so I guess they were neighborhood schools. And so, the grade schools were all in neighborhoods, and then there were three junior high schools, uh, and then one high school. Uh,

so, quite often you'd go to school with the same kids I went to the first grade with. I went through twelve years of schooling and graduated with the same kids I had started from.

JM: What was the approximate proportion [JB coughs] white and black in Massillon in those days, roughly?

CM: Uh, no, I know what it was just about exactly. The, uh, there were – when I was growing up, there were thirty-eight thousand people in Massillon. Uh, and there – roughly thirty-five hundred of that thirty-eight thousand were black. Uh –

JM: Okay, yeah.

CM: So.

JM: Had you been involved in any what we might now call civil rights activism or activity, the local NAACP, any – before you came south?

CM: Yeah. Uh, sort of, yeah, and it was really, once you moved – it was stuff that would take place outside of Massillon generally. I remember one of my aunts' boyfriends was a guy named, uh, Bobby Grier. Bob Grier, uh, played football for University of Pittsburgh, and when Pitt – one year Pitt was National Champion. And they were going to play in the, uh, Orange Bowl, and the people at the Orange Bowl said they would not play against a team with black players.

And, uh, and so Pitt – so, they said that they would play Pitt if Bobby Grier could not play. And I can remember, um, going from Massillon to Pittsburgh, which was about a hundred and twenty miles away from Massillon, uh, as a child really to support Bobby Grier. And my parents said, you know, "He's one of us, and we have to help support him."

Uh, later on, or I guess before that, at the high school, James Lawson, who was a, uh, [10:00] advisor to Dr. King, and I believe was the one who really introduced nonviolence, uh, to

the American people. Uh, I can remember writing letters of support to him when he was in jail for being a conscientious objector, um, and us supporting Jim Lawson, uh, because Jim Lawson was, uh, the minister in my mother's church, in St. James A.M.E. Church. So, I've known James Lawson my entire life and, uh, met him long before he became prominent in the civil rights, uh, struggle.

Uh, had relatives – Horace Gillom, who was the end and punter for the Cleveland Browns, was my uncle, uh, so because of football, one, and where that was going and how that was being – there were a lot of civil rights issues in football about who could play, where they could play, and that sort of thing. It sort of brought the outside world [someone coughs] into Massillon. And, uh, and Massillon was, uh, really a town of worker immigrants. It was a, uh, an immigrant culture. People came from all over the world to work in the steel mills.

JM: You mentioned before we started that one thing that you –

JB: Can we take a little pause?

JM: Okay, we'll take a quick break.

JB: I want to make a –

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're on.

JM: Okay, one last quick thing: It sounds as if – and before we had started the interview you mentioned – there was a lot of ethnic diversity in Massillon in the white community because of all these different immigrant groups. And even as a young person coming up, you had seen that there are fine distinctions between, you know, what others might have just seen as “whites” or “white culture,” you already were recognizing all these close distinctions in ethnicity.

CM: Oh, yeah! Because, as I said, we were – Massillon was very much an expression of the American dream. The people came from different cultures. Uh, the majority of the people who made up Massillon were immigrants and the sons and daughters of immigrants from different cultures, from Greece, from Spain, from Yugoslavia, from Czechoslovakia, and from the American South. And they were – people who came from the American South were just as much immigrants, uh, as the people who came from Czechoslovakia.

JM: Yeah.

CM: They were in a country where, uh, they were in a place where they could enjoy the fruits of citizenship for the first time in their lives. Uh, they could enjoy the fruits of their labors for the first time in their lives. Uh, and, uh, they had been the underbelly of the societies that they came from, and they came looking for a better life, a life of decent jobs, decent schools, and decent health care, uh, for their children, and were experiencing these things for the first time in their lives, too. So, it was very – as I got older, I understood that Massillon, Ohio, was very much, uh, the American dream.

It was, it was, it was, you know, apple pie and all of that, which, in fact, because it was a working community, made up of workers that came from all over the world, I learned about economics in Massillon, things I learned – plus, I grew up listening to General Coxe. He was still alive, [15:00] and when I'd go to the barbershop, General Coxe would be sitting there, and the old men – some old men, like my grandfather, who had been a part of "Coxe's Army" of the poor, who had marched in Washington years before I had, you know, before I ever existed, they had done that. But I learned and got sort of an appreciation of history by listening to these men, who were making history.

Uh, and my own family, too, the first black people to be in the hospitals, and the doctors, like my aunts, uh, and my mother were the first black people hired at the hospital as nurses. And, uh, I remember my aunt said after the Second World War, um, that one of the doctors told her that, uh, now – she was studying nursing, and there were a couple of places for black people in the country to study nursing. And one, uh, was in Chicago, and one was in St. Louis, a place called Homer G. Phillips and the Homer G. Phillips School of Nursing. So, she had gone away there to study, my aunt. And, uh, the doctor told her that, uh, she could now, there was – she could go to nursing school and work and study and get a job there in Massillon. So, she was – my aunts were the first black nurses in the county and, and in the city.

And, as I mentioned before, I learned about economics, because I knew in school that, uh, that ore would be mined in Minnesota in the Mesabi Iron Range. That iron ore would be sent to Massillon to be – the ore would be made into steel. The steel would be sent to Chicago, Chicago and Detroit, mainly, that would be then made into items, which would be sold to buy more ore, to make more steel, and so it was like that. So, I learned that when the men were working in Massillon, if there was full employment, uh, and there was even, uh, overtime, they were making lots more steel that would be stockpiled for Detroit. So, there would be a time when there would be really good times, where the, uh, the production of steel would go up, and then there would be – after that was done, then there would be layoffs. So, that's how I learned about, without knowing what it was called, supply and demand and all of that sort of thing. There were economic theories I learned later in college by seeing the reality of it working when I grew up.

JM: Exactly.

CM: So, I can remember, uh, there'd be times of plenty, and then there'd be times of scarcity. There would be times of, uh, where you could buy – everybody had enough money to

buy whatever they needed, and then there'd be times where you would have to get, uh, handouts from the government in order to survive.

JM: Yeah.

CM: You would have to pick up coal thrown off of or falling off of trains, uh, to heat your home, because there was no money.

JM: Let me ask, if I could – I'm sorry.

CM: Go ahead!

JM: You mentioned college just a moment ago. I'm really interested, and I'm also [20:00] watching the clock, because I know we have only a fixed amount of time here today – um, what's the story of how you went to South Carolina State?

CM: How'd I get to South Carolina State?

JM: Yeah.

CM: Uh, well, remember I started saying that Massillon produced steel and football players. I was one of them – [laughs] not steel, a football player. And, uh, and so, I was preparing – I sort of had it in my mind what I was going to do with my life, uh, long before college. My plan was I would play ball, go to [University of] Michigan, play ball at Michigan, then, uh, go into the pros, uh, marry a good-looking woman, have smart kids, and then make a lot of money, then retire from the pros, retire and then buy a used car lot or liquor store or whatever they did with their money, and, uh, I was set. That was going to be my life. So, I knew – I figured I knew by the time I was in ninth grade what I was going to do, how I was going to live. And that was my plan, uh, for years.

But my father sort of, uh, put a monkey wrench in that, not intentionally, I didn't think. But my father felt that we – "we" being myself, my brothers, my sisters – should all go to a

historically black college or university for at least one year of our matriculation. Um, and so, I was sent – pardon me – to, uh, South Carolina State University in Orangeburg, South Carolina. That's where he had gone to school and that's where he had graduated from school, um, and had taught. But, see, at the time he had taught in, uh, South Carolina, uh, been a, uh, chemistry teacher.

But when I was coming up, when I went to school, they didn't have black teachers in the North at that point. There was a sort of two-edged sword that, uh, you could either go south and you could work, uh, or you could come – you could go south and you could work and you could be a teacher, or you could come north and you could work and you could be a miner or a steel mill worker. You weren't going to be a teacher. Uh, they didn't have black teachers, uh, in most Northern schools until '54, until the Supreme Court decision of *Brown v. Board of Education*.

Um, but he wanted me to go south to see really that there was a professional class of black people who did other things and there were people who did things other than the traditional black models, role models, we saw as athletes or – the professionals were the black athletes or the black funeral directors or the black preacher, and that was sort of it. That topped out what you could be. And so, he wanted me to go south to experience another group of people, group of black people.

JM: When did you arrive in Orangeburg – fall of 1956?

CM: I went to Orangeburg in the fall of 1959.

JM: '59, okay. Had you been south before?

CM: Nope.

JM: Not one time?

CM: Not one time.

JM: Wow. Do you remember your first impressions?

CM: Uh, well, when I first was taken, uh, we drove and [25:00] we drove from Massillon to Orangeburg, South Carolina. And I'd never been south. To go from Massillon to Orangeburg, you take Route 21, which starts in Cleveland. Route 21 starts in Cleveland. It ends in Beaufort, South Carolina, in the ocean. It goes – but if you follow that road, it also goes through Orangeburg. So, to get to South Carolina, you go – get on 21 and ride down to South Carolina. Uh, the first place you go after you leave Ohio, the first – the next state in West Virginia. Uh, in West – Ohio, West Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina – you're there.

It was my first experience that my father told – with segregation. My father pointed out that, you know, you have to do the bathroom and all, because once we leave Ohio and we're in West Virginia, we can't use these facilities. So, what does that mean? Uh, so once we left [Ohio], by the time we got to Bluefield, West Virginia, uh, we were experiencing segregation. There were no places to get food, so – but my father – we had packed, my mother had packed a lunch. [Someone coughs] And, uh, so the further you got away from Massillon, the stranger it was.

And as we went, uh, to, uh, Charleston, South Carolina – uh, Charleston, uh, West Virginia, and then by the time we got to Bluefield – there's a series of black schools along the way – um, Bluefield, West Virginia, and then on down into North Carolina and into South Carolina. Um, and the wondering and the questions weren't – my father really wasn't giving me answers about how – what all this means, how I was – I didn't understand it, didn't give it very much thought, uh, until we got to, uh, South Carolina. And there, it was very nice, because I was in an area – I had never been to a black school before. I had never been south before.

And in Orangeburg, the first day on campus, I recognized that I saw more – uh, you know, I was like sixteen years old, and there were all these girls, all these pretty little black girls. I thought my father was a brilliant man [laughing] to send me down there and let me be [someone coughs] – uh, experience my culture, especially since I can still hear my mother saying, uh, “You like who? That’s your cousin! You can’t like her!” It seemed like I was related to every black girl in Massillon, [laughing] so I – there was a bit of frustration, because there was nobody to date and things like that. Um, but when I got to Orangeburg, I thought I was in heaven. There were thousands, hundreds – I saw more black girls in one day than I had seen in my entire life! And I was related to *none* of them. And that just seemed like life could not be better.

JM: How did you, how did you get drawn into the civil rights question?

CM: Well, how I got drawn into the civil rights, well, like I say, I first got there. I’m a freshman. And I remember, uh, [30:00] it was 1959 when I entered, uh, and there was, of course, there was news on television and everything about the schools being integrated, which had started after the ’54 decision. And so, the pictures of kids walking through mobs to get into school in Little Rock Central High School and all that, you know -- so I first fell in love with one of the children marching through this mob of people.

Um, but so, I wasn’t, you know, like all that keenly – I knew these things were going on, but it wasn’t just preying on my mind, because I was in paradise [laughs] for the first time. But it got to – so, I’m there and I’m studying, and at first it was wonderful, just wonderful. But I hadn’t been off the campus. When I was brought to school, I was brought to school and I stayed there and I was studying and stuff.

But at Thanksgiving of my very first year, [clears throat] I had to – they closed the schools on Thanksgiving, and you had to go somewhere but you couldn't stay on campus. So, I had four roommates, and one of the roommates, um, a guy named Charles [Gasten], uh, took me home for Thanksgiving. And, uh, home for him was Sumter, South Carolina. So, we went to Sumter for Thanksgiving.

And, uh, we went to a party at one point. And after the party, we were driving back to [Gasten]'s home. Uh, and the other young men in the car drank, and I didn't, so I was like the designated driver. And as we were driving home, uh, the cops pulled us over. No big deal since I didn't do anything. Um, so the cop pulls us over and asks for my license and registration stuff. [Sirens sound in background] I gave him that, and we're talking.

And so, and the cop said, uh, "Where you from, boy?" [Laughs] I said, "You've got the license. Can't you read? It's from Ohio." Well, I didn't understand that that wasn't quite the way you addressed, uh, the local constabulary, by saying, "Can't you read?" Uh, I think that must have been it, because he was a tad peeved and hit me, uh, when I – and said – oh, before he hit me, he said, "Didn't they, didn't they ever teach you how to say, 'yes suh' and 'no suh' to white men up there?" I said, "You've got to be kidding. 'Yes sir' and 'no sir' to white men – [laughs] why should I do that?" And he hit me.

Now, this – mind you, this is before the nonviolent civil rights struggle. And I came from a tough steel town in Massillon, and where if somebody put your hand, their hand in your face, you returned the favor in kind. So, when the cop hit me, I hit him. And, uh, before he hit the ground, I was kicking him and stomping him about the head, neck and shoulders. And, you know, [laughs] I was going to beat his, uh, uh, butt.

Uh, so as I was hitting this cop, his roommate – I mean, his fellow officer, uh, his partner, jumped into the fray. So, it's these two cops and me, fighting, and the guys in the car sort of not doing anything except quivering in the background. And, as these cops were beating me, I was saying to them, "I'm going to get you for this," because they weren't helping me, which was unacceptable behavior in my mind.

And the cops beat me bloody, broke my arm, busted my jaw, um, and, uh, that's where it all began, that afternoon, uh, that evening in Sumter, South Carolina. Because after the cops had beat me and jailed me – I was arrested for the first time in my life and charged with disturbing the peace and, uh, disobeying an officer, put in jail. They took me to the hospital and got me patched up, and then I went to get on the train to go back to the school.

And when I went to get on the train, the conductor said, "All right, get on back to the baggage car." Says I, you know, "What is this baggage car nonsense?" And it seems that on every car, on every train in the South – this is in 1959 – there was one car on the train for black people, uh, the car right behind the engines, where the soot and dust would come through. And when that was filled, you'd sit in the baggage car. I said, "No, no, no, sport. Not for my little ten dollars and fifty cents do I ride with suitcases and mangy dogs. I don't do baggage cars. And there are plenty of seats right here, and I'm having one of them," and sat down – and was rearrested for sitting in the white car and violating the laws of segregation.

Got back to the school – and once again, I was back in jail – six hours after I'm out of jail, I'm back in jail. Got back to Orangeburg, and there's a garden, uh, in Orangeburg called Edisto, E-D-I-S-T-O, Edisto Garden, beautiful park, but it was between the train station and the campus. And I was hurting from the beating, so I took a shortcut to get back to the campus and was arrested because it was against the law for black people to be in a public park, except on two

days during the week, or one day during the week, and that wasn't one of the days. So, I'd been arrested for the third time in two days, um, and that sort of started it.

By the time – one, I learned, very quickly, how much was off limits. If something said, “Open to the public,” it meant it was closed to black people, and you would be arrested if you would go there. And, uh, there were all kinds of ridiculous laws I learned about at around that time, like it was against the law to look at a white woman, to look a white woman in her face. It was a form of assault. Uh, so I learned – because, you know, I'd cost my father all this money for medical bills and for jail bonds.

So, by the time I got home for Christmas, um, my father was saying, “That's it! Forget it! You can come home. You're not going make it. You're not going to live to be down there long enough. And, uh, it takes really experienced black people.” And by that time, I was saying, “That's fine.” I didn't want to be there anymore, and, uh, just, “When can I leave?”

Uh, and it happened that we were on semesters, and the semester ended at the end of January, end of February rather. And on February first, 1960, four students from North Carolina A&T College, black students, sat down at a lunch counter in, uh, Greensboro, North Carolina, and that was the first sit-in. Sit-ins took place in other parts of the South, and a group of students came to me and, uh, said, “Chuck, you've heard what's been happening in Greensboro, haven't you?” And I said, “Yes, of course I have.” And they said, “Well, we'd like to do that here.”

My response was, “Well, go ahead and do it. What's that got to do with me?” Uh, and they asked me to be their spokesman, because at that time I had a reputation of being unusual, uh, unusual in that I'd speak to white people – [laughs] I heard somebody say, “Talk to white people just like he talks to you and me, just like they're regular people, and he doesn't respect them for being white, or something. So, this is who we should have to be our spokesman.”

My response was, “No, I don’t want to do that. I don’t want to be your spokesman, because, uh, in another few weeks, I’ll be gone from here. My father will be back down here to pick me up to take me back to Ohio. And after that, I will never come further south than Columbus [Ohio] for the annual Michigan-Ohio State game, and that’s fine with me. [Laughs] I never need to be any further south than that in my life.” And, uh, that’s how it all began.

JM: How did you get from February of 1960 to Raleigh for the SNCC founding conference? [JB coughs]

CM: Well, I became the head of what we called the Orangeburg Movement for Civic Improvement. I became the student leader for the, uh, student protests in, uh, Orangeburg. Uh, and we were having sit-in and we were having wade-ins. We were testing all these things, uh, challenging all these things, and so I started getting arrested.

I remember being arrested in, uh, in, uh, Columbia, as we took a petition to the governor, then-Governor Hollings, Fritz Hollings, uh, to ask that there no longer, that laws against going to public places – libraries, beaches, parks – be struck down. And, uh, when I went to see Governor Hollings, was arrested, because black people were only allowed to be at the capitol, like, between the hours of four and six on Sunday. Uh, so you can’t do any business then, so I went there at ten o’clock on a Monday and was arrested and put in jail.

Well, that was just one of many. There was a – I led a group of students, uh, to deliver a petition in Orangeburg to the city to ask that public places be desegregated. And, uh, about eight hundred of us were arrested. And so, while this was going on, got a letter from, uh, Dr. King at the Southern Christian Leadership Conference that there would be a meeting of students [45:00], um, at, um, Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina, to discuss the student sit-ins.

That took place in April, 1960. I attended that meeting as a representative of the South Carolina State students. And uh, and we were there discussing the Movement with students from all over, uh, the South. Um, during that meeting, uh, Dr. King felt we should all join SCLC. Um, I disagreed, because Dr. King felt if you joined, if you used the practice nonviolence, uh, that you should accept nonviolence as a way of life in your life.

I disagreed with that, because I said, “Yes, I use nonviolence, and we use nonviolence, but it’s –” for me, it was strictly a tactic. And I didn’t believe – and personally, I didn’t believe it would work. It was a tactic that I think had a – I felt had a short life and wouldn’t work. My position was when, uh, when Gandhi, uh, tried nonviolence in South Africa, uh, he was beaten, jailed, and run out of the country. As I said, in the United States, uh, nonviolence won’t work. Because when Gandhi used, in India, the tactic of having people lay down on railroad tracks to protest, I said, “and it worked.”

I said, “But if a group of black people lay down on railroad tracks *here*, in South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Texas, Louisiana, any of these Southern states, a train would run you over and back up to make certain you’re dead. You cannot make a moral appeal in the midst of an amoral society.” And I said that it was not *immoral*. We lived in a society that was *amoral*, and as such, nonviolence was not going to work. And so, I said I couldn’t and the people with me could not join Dr. King. And, uh, “Thank you, [laughs] but no thanks.”

And then, said, “Those, you know, people who said – who agree, who think like I do, we’ll have a meeting down the hall and talk about it.” And that meeting we had down the hall became the first meeting, was the genesis of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Uh, it was at that meeting at Shaw in Raleigh, on the Shaw campus, in April 1960, that we went down the hall and talked about forming a new group.

And at first we were going to call that group the Student Coordinating Committee and we were just going to exchange ideas between campuses. But there were some people in the group [clears throat] who still greatly believed in nonviolence and the viability of nonviolence and the practice of nonviolence, um, and we felt they should be a part of the group. And most of those students were from, uh, Nashville, um, and had been taught by Jim Lawson. And I knew Jim Lawson, and he was an important person to me. And so, we thought that was a good – it was a good thing to include nonviolence in our title. And so, we created this new group and called it the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

JM: [Clears throat] Do you –?

JB: Let's take a quick break.

JM: Okay, take a quick break.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay, we're back.

CM: Now, wait. Wait. I need to – what time is it?

JM: Uh, it's quarter after eleven. [50:00]

CM: All right, I need to tell – I need to –

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're rolling.

JM: I want to ask – you had mentioned, Mr. McDew, about that meeting down the hall in Raleigh, at Shaw –

CM: Um-hmm.

JM: And how the nonviolent – you wanted to bring those nonviolent people in. Many of them are from Nashville, influenced by Jim Lawson. Do you think – I'm just wondering. I don't

know if the answer matters too much, but you had that personal connection through your family to Lawson.

CM: Um-hmm.

JM: And absent that, do you think you might have been quite as receptive to that, to that, to bringing those folks in?

CM: Yeah. Yeah, I do, uh, for several reasons. One, uh, they were very dynamic. They were very smart. They were committed. Um, yeah, even if it didn't –

JM: Okay. Yeah.

CM: They obviously, uh, were just like us. I mean, uh, I had no grand – I didn't know what the – where we were going with this thing. Uh, I just knew how we were going to get there. I just knew that I was not going to, uh, swear that I would be nonviolent all my life. And that was the initial reaction, uh, to why I didn't want to join, uh, Dr. King, Dr. King's organization rather.

JM: Tell me how you got pulled forward, the choices you made coming out of that meeting in the spring of 1960.

CM: Well, uh, okay. Coming out of that meeting, the – two things were about to happen that summer. Uh, the, uh – both the Democratic and Republican parties were having their conventions. And, as I recall, one of them or both of them were in Los Angeles. And we wanted to make, as students, sit-in students, a statement of, uh – to the political parties with the understanding – I didn't know much about politics. None of us did, but we did know some things. And so, we were talking about giving a plank in the convention on civil rights and, uh, and explaining why we were doing what we were doing, and hoped to get both parties to, uh, understand and push for greater civil rights.

Uh, so we then elected somebody – not somebody – we elected Marion Barry as our first chairman to, uh, take our concerns to these groups, uh, in their conventions that summer. Uh, so, and then later, the next fall when we started meeting again, uh, SCLC had, uh, provided money and office space and material for us to get going to set up an organization.

JM: Yeah.

CM: And then, as that organization grew, uh, and our ideas developed and our philosophy developed, uh, I guess there also was the development of a, of a [nb: unintelligible word here] how you'd say it – a movement, an organizational personality of who we were and what we – and how we thought. And, like I say, I would have accepted their, uh, putting nonviolence in the title or not. If they didn't want it in there, fine. My thing was that whatever needs to be done to keep us going [55:00], uh, I would do.

JM: Yeah. You soon after replaced – was it at that fall meeting in Atlanta that you replaced Barry as, uh, Marion Barry, as the formal chair of SNCC?

CM: Um-hmm, yeah.

JM: And did Rock Hill then follow in the fall of '60?

CM: Um-hmm.

JM: Can you just describe the Rock Hill –?

CM: Well, Rock Hill [South Carolina] wasn't – it was important, but – plus it was in my state. I mean, by that time, I started seeing myself as a Carolinian. Uh, a lot of the people were active, and the programs that we were developing were happening very rapidly. Uh, so we were talking, started looking at things like how long can we keep going if they just keep arresting us? We cannot get out. So, we talked about, um, a “jail, no bail” program, uh, and where that was going to be tried out was Rock Hill.

And the people who would try it out, who would do it, were going to be, uh, SNCC [“Snick”] people, because – and SNCC people, we even became SNCC very quickly. And it was – the name was a creation of, I don’t know, somebody, some reporter somewhere, just taking the letters S-N-C-C, the initials for the organization, and then, uh, calling it, “Snick.” Uh, so SNCC’s personality as an organization was going to be sort of structured and determined by what we did.

And so, once we started talking about, well, “jail, no bail,” Rock Hill – uh, there were some wonderful people up there. Uh, I remember it was Reverend [Cecil] Ivory who was very involved in Rock Hill. And the head of the NAACP at the time, a guy named, uh, [Reverend] I. DeQuincey Newman, and Mr. Newman was head of the [South Carolina] NAACP, and they were sort of – they had a strong presence in, uh, in South Carolina. But the Rock Hill program specifically was going to be directed at, uh, trying out the “jail, no bail” ideas that we had developed.

JM: Uh-hmm, um-hmm. Tell me about, um – and I’m just watching the clock a little bit. I know that we could stop at any of these things and spend a full hour on any of these things easily. Um, you made a trip with, um, a couple others of the core [i.e., meaning central, not “CORE”] SNCC folks to Mississippi in ’61. And I’m wondering if you can quickly frame that up and then maybe provide an example of what you really encountered and learned in Mississippi.

CM: Well, by that time, by the time we got to Mississippi, we then had – SNCC had a personality. Uh, and SNCC was SNCC, and we had established our own identity and separateness from those other groups. So, when we went to Mississippi, it wasn’t CORE; it was

SNCC. Uh, the Freedom Rides had taken place, and we were then about to be involved in the voter registration.

And so, we went to McComb in southwest Mississippi, um, basically to register voters. And, uh, [1:00:00] because we had started by that time hammering out, uh, our programs of voter registration and direct action, and that's what we were going to do. We were going to have two programs of mostly – one was going to be direct action, sit-ins, wade-ins, that sort of thing, um, and the other was going to be the registering of voters. Um –

JM: Can you explain why you picked McComb?

CM: Um-hmm. Uh, one, we already some – the – perhaps explain to you also why we did voter registration. In developing this SNCC personality I speak of, we talked about where we came from as people, as black people, and how black people were stopped in doing things, progressive things in their interest and favor, by violence. And we had to understand – uh, agree that no violence was going to stop us. And we had, uh, and we had, uh, determined the voter registration because we wanted to do something that would have a long-term effect in a very short period of time, uh, because, in essence, we had planned the death of the organization in its birthing. When it was created, we said that it's only going to last for a certain period of time, a finite period of time, like five years, and then we were going to move on.

Now, the reason we said five years was, uh, two things. One was the very practical thing that you had to tell your parents something. Most of us were the first in our families to go to college. [Someone coughs] Um, and we were not – as black students, we were just not given the luxury of saying, "I'm going to find myself." "I'm going to find myself, Dad. I have to –" my old man would have knocked me out if I claimed, "I'm quitting school to go find myself."

[Laughs] You had to say, “That’s it. I have to do this. This is what I’m going to do, and I’m going to do it forever. There’s going to be a period that – I’m going to do this for five years.” And, uh, when we said that, when we put a number on it, it was for – in our interest, too, because, once we really got into talking, we knew or we felt we wouldn’t be able to last much longer than five years anyhow. Uh, you’d get burned out or burned up or dead, that you’d be – in five years, you’d be in jail, insane or incarcerated. And so, we got a little time to do this in and a lot to get done.

We chose, uh, looked at the American political structure and the power in the Senate and the House, and concluded the power in this country isn’t really in the presidency. The greater power is in the House of Representatives and the Senate. Uh, and these places got – you got power by longevity, uh, by being the heads of committees, and you got that by being in the House and Senate. So, therefore – and they were all held by white men, white southern men from the Black Belt of the South, from Louisiana [1:05:00] – the most powerful men in government were, uh, in the House and Senate, were from Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Texas, and they all came from these places that had heavy black, uh, populations where black people didn’t vote. And they didn’t vote because of disinterest – they didn’t vote because of fear quite often.

So, we chose the worse places in terms of retaliations against people voting, uh, in these Black Belt counties in Mississippi, Georgia, Alabama, South Carolina, and Georgia, etcetera, and said we would go there. And if we can get people to register in these places, we can get them to register anyplace, uh, in the world – if we can make it work in these places, in this place where I’m sitting right now, in Terrell, in Dougherty County and Terrell County and Baker County in

southwest Georgia, in Mississippi in Amite County and Pike County and Walthall County, in southwest Mississippi.

So, you take southwest Mississippi, Georgia – we take the worst places in, uh, all these Southern states. Uh, we take a place that was heavily black, for example, and you'd find counties with sixty or sixty-five percent black, and nobody was registered – not one soul – and these would also be the places where the Stennises and the Eastlands, uh, came from, and the Byrds and the Talmadges. They all came from these heavily black areas where black people didn't vote. So, it was really a very simple, amazingly simple sort of plan is just get people registered to vote in those areas and you can disrupt the balance of power. [Someone coughs]

So, if you get a place in one of these Black Belt counties where somebody has been there forever, like Stennis, and was a very powerful man, and so, you get Politician A in a seat and you get a new politician running against him, Politician B. And Politician B says, "I'm going to cut the throat of the firstborn black child born in every house." Well, see, my position was, "Fine. Let's vote him in, because the reality is he won't be able to do that. He won't be able to just – he won't have enough time to kill every baby." Never thought of that he wouldn't try, but he just wouldn't have enough time to do it. Get him in, which would mean if you vote for the worst guy in the world, that's cool. You get the guy in power out. And this new guy comes in, a freshman senator, and has no power. Uh, and if you do that in enough places, we can change this country in a, in a short period of time.

But in order to do that, now, these people didn't get, uh, where they are by being dumb. They will recognize the real threat is our voting and they will fight hard and long to see that that doesn't happen. So, the real battle ahead – the battle ahead we talked about is not just to get seats at lunch counters [1:10:00] or to go to beaches and stuff. It's to get and use the vote. Now,

black people in the past have been scared off by violence, uh, when they tried to make – so we have to pledge among ourselves that violence is a part of the game. It isn't going to scare us off. We know it's going to happen, but we have to pledge to each other that when it does happen, whether we're beaten, bombed or killed, we will not turn away from what we say we're going to do.

And I always felt that that was the key, that we accept, we knew that, uh, we let that – we said the United States is the most violent country on the face of the earth, has made true the Biblical prophecy that there would be war and rumors of war all the days of our lives. Said if it isn't shown here, then the late great J.C. [Jesus Christ] didn't know what he was talking about, uh, because they was sure, had he been around, the late great J.C., they would have hung him on a cross, too, um, here, rather, in Georgia or Mississippi. Um, and we had to pledge that we knew there was going to be a blood price that had to be paid and that we were going to pay it. But pay it we would, but change this world, this country, also.

JM: Yeah.

CM: And that's how we got here. That's why this whole, this whole area, Dougherty County and every county around it, was one of the key places that we had to deal with.

JM: Let's pause for just a second.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JM: We're back on after a break and we've got about five minutes, so final points that you want to register.

CM: Well, I think, uh, the key for our future as Americans, as black Americans, is education. I think that, uh, that the more we learn, it better equips us to deal with the changes that need be made. Uh, I was at – a couple of weeks ago, I was at Colby College in Maine. And

Colby has a – I see that, uh – I was speaking to the Posse Group. The Posse Group is, uh, black students, black and Hispanic students, um, who, uh, attend, uh, college at Colby in Maine, and there is a Posse group at Harvard, there's one at Brandeis, at all these top, uh, universities. I think it's one of the great programs that they are funding.

And one of the things I was saying – I was very impressed – I've been doing public with students for, you know, years, and Colby was the first school I had spoken at outside the South in, uh, forty-five years where the audience was all black American students. All of the students were black Americans. Uh, and I was very impressed with that. I mean, I identify with my brothers from Africa, uh, surely, but this was the only school and the only time that I had just kids from America, uh, who were being educated, uh, at some of the finest universities in the country, uh, and taken advantage of that. [1:15:00]

I see that, uh, President Obama, when he won, uh, the Nobel Peace Prize, gave a considerable amount of that money to the Posse Program. Uh, so even though Donald Trump says that, uh, you know, he bought his way [laughing] through Affirmative Action, uh, into, uh, Columbia and Harvard and these other places, uh, I don't care. I think the fact that he gave his money to support the Posse Program was important, and, uh – because I can only see that as growing, and continued, uh, support for the, uh, black universities and colleges in the South, too, ought to be supported.

And so, there's a need for more teachers and certainly for more students, and their education needs to be broadened. I think, like in Mississippi, the Mississippi public schools, uh, you have to take a course and pass a course in civil rights before you finish college. I think that's something that should be a part of every state, uh, in this country, because we need to look at, uh, the education or the mis-education of our children. And, uh, I had to come south to even

find out about our role in black history, in the history of this country. And I think that role was unique, and there are lessons to be learned, uh, and I think that the soul of the nation will be cleansed, strengthened and helped by understanding the philosophy of the personality of SNCC and the civil rights struggle.

And I think, uh, there's – when I go on this campus, I was talking to a kid yesterday who had never heard of us and knew very little about what it took for him to be in school at this place at this time. So, the mis-education of children has to be corrected. And I think a part of that correcting will be that it all – certainly, Martin [Luther King Jr.] was in the battle, but the struggle continues. It is not over, and there are many things that need to be done. And their education, our education, uh, is important in moving the agenda ahead.

Uh, I think the work of, uh, the Children's Defense League – Fund, I'm sorry – the Children's Defense Fund is wonderful in what it's doing and, uh, and should be supported. There should be more support from the private sector to many of these things happening. I think, for example, that, uh, as "President" [Sarah] Palin bops around the country, she should, uh, learn about this part of America also, that America is not just symbols of liberty, and freedom is not free, and that there is a constant sort of struggle to make democracy work. Uh, and the way you spread democracy in the rest of the world is to show the rest of the world and ourselves that it is a viable and good philosophy, uh, that can help people, uh, wherever they come from.

So, [1:20:00] the immigrants that I knew as a child in Massillon, and, and the American dream that people came here to achieve, uh, is still a worthy and viable sort of thing, and the way to keep it moving forward is more and better education. I know that the new, uh, museum that's being put up by the Smithsonian, I think is important, because there is something that, because of the relationship of the African people who were brought here to be civilized and Christianized,

the relationship to our country and the, uh, helping define how our citizenship works, um, is important. And I've learned that every day I'm thankful for waging the struggle here, and, uh, and it needs to be continued and have greater support.

JM: Yeah. Mr. McDew, I tell you, I wish we could spend a couple of days together, but this has been a wonderful couple of hours. So, thank you very much.

CM: Well, thank you.

JB: Can everyone be really quiet for about ten seconds? [Pause] Uh, that's just some room tone, uh, for any noise reduction that needs to be done.

[Recording ends at 1:21:53]

END OF INTERVIEW