

*Civil Rights History Project  
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Interviewee: Mr. Steve McNichols  
Interview Date: March 1, 2013  
Location: Burlingame, California  
Interviewer: Dr. David P. Cline  
Videographer: John Bishop  
Length: 02:17:14

[Conversation can be heard in background]

David Cline: Just for the tape?

Steve McNichols: Whatever you want.

DC: And then we'll start into it.

SM: No problem.

DC: Okay. Thank you. Okay, this is David Cline.

SM: [Clears throat] Except this guy has to go.

DC: Okay. He's a troublemaker.

John Bishop: Actually, maybe we could close the door, because there's a little noise out there. We're on the road again.

[Throughout the interview, there is a consistent low mechanical hum]

DC: Here we go. This is David Cline for the Smithsonian, and the National Museum of African American History and Culture, and the Library of Congress. Today is Friday, March the 1<sup>st</sup>, and I'm in Burlingame, California with Mr. Steve McNichols. Good morning.

SM: Good morning.

DC: Thank you very much for talking with us today.

SM: The pleasure is mine.

DC: Okay. What I'd like to do, Steve, is first just ask you to tell us a little bit about where you were raised and the family that you were raised in.

SM: Yeah, I'd like to dwell for just a moment on my origins, if I may, because it's important. [Clears throat] My maternal grandparents, Yitzhak and Olga Frank, immigrated from Eastern Europe, Riga and Marijampole, to Palestine in 1890. They were part of an immigration movement sponsored by the Rothschilds. In fact, I think he worked for the Rothschilds. And they moved to Palestine, where they founded—they were one of eleven families who founded the city of Tel Aviv, which *instantaneously* gives them more status, gives *me* more status in Israel than I'll ever have anywhere else, you know? And their names are engraved on Founders Mark. I have a picture of my uncle standing in front of Founders Mark.

And my grandfather built the first residential dwelling home in Tel Aviv, [coughs], pardon me, which is on a tour—a lot of the tours that go through Tel Aviv. And my mother was born there. And then, when my mother was five years old, my grandmother was having health problems, so they separated, and she moved to Geneva with my grandparents. And my mother relocated to Geneva, where she became a classically trained violinist and was Joseph Szigeti's prize pupil and toured with him before coming to the United States, which was probably a mistake. I think the whole family should have stayed in Geneva—that's where their heads were

at—but they moved to the United States, along with Andre Kostelanetz and some other people. And that background is very important to me, even though I'm not observant, not an observant Jew. But it's important to me as a person, you know, and something I feel strongly about.

So, I was born in New York in 1939. My mother was this classically trained violinist. Her violin was stolen as soon as she hooked up with my father, no connection, and she stopped playing violin for fourteen years. My father was brought up in a very tough neighborhood in St. Louis. His father was a thug who was murdered when my father was three. And my father was a very tough guy, very smart, actually, intellectually curious, well-read. I think he got a GED.

And I didn't appreciate him enough as a child, because I was supposed to be a genius. And I discovered what the word "precocious" really means. It means that you're way ahead of everybody else up until about age thirteen, and then your peers start passing you. [Laughs] And instead of being, you know, so much more brilliant than they are, you're lucky to stay in the top third. You know what I mean? [Laughter]

I went to—. We lived in a very tough neighborhood in New York, 103<sup>rd</sup> Street and Manhattan Avenue. I was the only white kid in my neighborhood. And—but I went to Dalton, one of the most prestigious private schools in the country on a full scholarship. [0:05:00] So, during the day I would go to school with children of some of the wealthiest people in the country—Averell Harriman's nephew, Marshall Field's niece, and others, many others—and then I would return to the ghetto at night. And it was a kind of a schizoid existence for me, because I was very sensitive and very impressionable, very conscious of the fact that I came from a very poor background and lived in a very poor neighborhood.

DC: What was the racial, ethnic composition of that neighborhood?

SM: I was the only white kid in the neighborhood.

DC: In an African American neighborhood?

SM: Puerto Rican.

DC: Puerto Rican, yeah.

SM: Yeah. And I was lucky, because it still was not as bad as East Harlem. It was bad. My father went to work one day and saw a body lying in the street. But because I lived there [coughs] and grew up there, I'd get along with the other kids, pretty much. We had fights. But other than that, I was accepted, you know? I was Steve, who was kind of the strange kid who lived in the neighborhood.

DC: So, being that you had this—you know, living in a largely Puerto Rican neighborhood, and then going to Dalton, were you thinking about race and difference and class at all at a young age? Do you remember when you started to process this?

SM: It was in the air. You know, I couldn't help but think about it, because I was surrounded by it. But my goal was to get the hell out of there. And my mother was driving me to succeed, so I wouldn't have the same kind of life that she had, you know?

DC: What did your father do for work in those days?

SM: Whatever he could. He had various sort of uninteresting jobs. He worked in a lab animal facility. *But* to his credit, just to show you what kind of a man he was, he started taking electronics courses and taught himself radio and television electronics and then became a trainee for Picker X-Ray. And most of his peers had engineering degrees. And he was the top trainee in his training class and one of their best repairmen. So, he was remarkable, really, in his own way. You know? I couldn't have done that.

So, my folks separated. My mother was very anxious to leave my father, which was really a mistake, and we separated. And remarkably, she supported herself by teaching French to

employees of Time-Life and started making a very good living—the first time we had money in my life. And then, unfortunately, she developed psychiatric symptoms and had a *big* breakdown in the middle of the Time-Life lobby at noon one day. And the whole thing—she was institutionalized, the whole thing fell apart, and I went back to living with my father.

DC: Okay. How old were you at the time?

SM: I was 16. And my father really stepped into the breach, which I'm not sure was necessary that he do, you know, but he really came through like gangbusters, even though we never really got along. You know? But he really saved my neck psychiatrically speaking, you know? And I went into a permanent depression. Every day of my life since about age 15 [coughs] I suffered from suicidal ideation for 50 years until we discovered when I was 65 years old that I actually have a bipolar condition. And once we started treating that, the depression lifted, and I started—I became much more flexible as a person.

JB: What did you do? What was the treatment for bipolar?

SM: Pardon me?

JB: What is the treatment for bipolar?

SM: Lithium. But I didn't get any treatment because I wasn't diagnosed as bipolar.

[0:10:00] So, my whole life was spent seeing psychiatrists who were treating me for depression when they should have been treating me for a bipolar condition.

DC: Right.

SM: Not one of them guessed that it was a bipolar condition. And it was only by accident we discovered it at age 65, when my cardiologist—I returned from Mexico, where I'd been living—sent me for a panel of tests. And one of tests—you know, the lab technician wrote down

that my lithium serum level was virtually nonexistent, as it turns out, which is not really indicative of being bipolar, but triggered an investigation, you know, or review.

DC: Okay. Right. But so, starting in your teens, you're operating under—?

SM: Well, the whole episode of my mother being institutionalized was very—living with my mother for two years while she deteriorated psychiatrically was extremely depressing. You know?

DC: Yeah.

SM: I was extremely isolated. I mean, I had friends, but I was in a world by myself. My mother and I were both seeing a psychiatrist, who was, in my opinion, totally irresponsible and unprofessional. And when he concluded that we both had psychiatric problems, he just ran in the opposite direction, instead of helping us deal with it. I'll never forget him. You know? I'd like to run into him now [laughter] if I had any strength.

DC: [Laughs] Yeah.

SM: It was very sad. On the other hand, to use a cliché, it was a tremendous learning experience. [Cough]

DC: So, that was around age 16. So, the next couple of years of high school—

SM: It was when I turned my 16<sup>th</sup> birthday, March of '55.

DC: So, take me through the next couple of years then.

SM: Well, I was going to Stuyvesant High School. And my father and I gradually kind of separated from each other. I mean, we still lived together, he supported me, but he started spending more and more time with his girlfriend, forty-year-old woman I didn't care for, and I was on my own more and more. And then, I remember I was lying in bed and I was talking with

my father. We had a railroad apartment. He said, “What are you going to do, Steve?” He said, “You’re 18 years old. What are you going to do after you graduate from Stuyvesant?”

And I don’t know where it came from, but—I was trying to become a champion tennis player—I got the idea that I would leave home, go to Los Angeles, play tennis and work for a year, and then go to UCLA. And I laid it out for him, and he said, “That’s it! That’s it! That’s perfect!” [Laughter] And that’s what I did. And I got into a car with somebody else who was driving to Denver, drove to Denver, flew to L.A., arrived at LAX that night, didn’t know anybody, had some money that my father gave me, rented a room at the YMCA, and started to work and support myself, and started my *long* sojourn at UCLA, where I spent about twice as much time as I really needed. You know?

DC: Right. And at one point did—going back to your mother again, at what point did they discover what was going on with your mother?

SM: Well, after seven or eight years, her tumor became so bad that she couldn’t walk without staggering. And that’s when somebody, a nurse or somebody, said, “Say, I think she’s got a physical problem.” And that’s when they discovered it. [Clears throat] And that’s when they operated to remove her tumor, you know? They had done some test or what have you. But it was too late. [0:15:00] Well, they blew the operation, you know? Another doctor I’d like to get my hands on.

DC: Um-hmm. So, she didn’t survive that?

SM: Yeah. They took the tumor out but didn’t replace it with anything, and [clears throat] half an hour after the operation, the walls of her brain collapsed, and she died. So, I had a phone call asking for authority, since I was the next of kin, to do the operation, and then I get another

phone call saying she died. And that was her life. That was the last ten years of her life. Here was this beautiful, cultured, educated woman—never had a chance with the medical establishment.

JB: Let's pause for a second.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

SM: Sure.

DC: Just to work with the machine here.

JB: We're back. I just wanted to [0:15:57].

DC: And so, you were in Los Angeles at that time?

SM: I was in L.A., working and supporting myself and going to UCLA. And every spare moment I had was devoted to the Civil Rights Movement.

DC: So, what were you—first of all, what were you studying at UCLA?

SM: Well, I didn't know what I wanted to do. I was lost, you know. I mean the whole UCLA scene was alien to me. I arrived on campus and there were all these middle-class kids running around. I couldn't really identify with anyone. But, interestingly enough, I plunged into student politics, which is how I got involved in the Civil Rights Movement and started climbing the political ladder at UCLA.

DC: Okay.

SM: Became very active politically, made some pretty heavyweight contact: Howard Berman and Henry Waxman. [I] became part of their machine and became active in the National Student Association, [coughs], went to NSA congresses, and just started climbing the political ladder any way I could.

DC: So, this is what year, about?

SM: Well, I actually entered UCLA in '58.

DC: Okay. So, what was the National Student Association concerned with? What were the sort of major issues, I guess, at that point when you first got involved?

SM: Well, the major issues were international. There was this cold war going on between the International Student Union, which I believe was a Communist front—I know it was a Communist front—and our organization, the International Student Conference, if I don't have them confused. I don't think I do. And our people were being trained by the CIA and going off to conferences all over the world in this cold war to influence other student unions. And there were some pretty hairy episodes. We had half a dozen offices around the world.

The International Student Conference had a secretariat in Europe, and the CIA was spending money and assigning heavyweights to run this network. It was a CIA network. And the head of the network was a guy named Bob Kiley, who had been president of NSA, which set the whole network up. [He] wound up going to work for the CIA and ultimately became Richard Helms' special assistant. So, and there's some interesting stories about that.

DC: But back at UCLA, what were the primary things that you were involved in?

SM: Well, we got caught up in the whole thing.

DC: Okay.

SM: So, we thought we were important because we were part of this—we didn't realize it was a CIA front. You know, we thought we were just students doing this.

DC: Right.

SM: With certain foundations—the Youth and Student Foundation, of all things. Can you imagine? They're running this [0:20:00] network, and you have something called the Youth and Student Foundation? It's absurd! You know, you might as well have said, "Hey! We're over here!" You know?

DC: So, what first drew you to what was going on with civil rights in the United States?

SM: I don't know, but from the moment I heard about the sit-ins, I was attracted. I wanted to go on a sit-in. I wanted to be involved. I was desperate to be a Freedom Rider. It was—you know, to me, it was a chosen thing. I would be lucky if I could be a Freedom Rider. That's how I felt about it.

DC: So, how were you getting news about these things, about the sit-ins?

SM: Well, that's what's so interesting, because the *L.A. Times* and other news outlets weren't really covering the Movement. So, we had it verbally through kind of a pipeline from the East to the West. So, we heard about the sit-ins [coughs] long before anybody else in L.A. knew about them. And I didn't get it. I was from New York. Why were people sitting in? In Kresge's and what have you? To eat lunch? That didn't make sense to me. We can eat lunch wherever we wanted. And then, after awhile, it dawned on me what was really going on here. They couldn't go to a Kresge's or whatever in the South and Midwest and the East; blacks couldn't be served. I was stunned. I was shocked.

And that's when we started to throw ourselves into the Movement and we started having—I didn't really participate in any of those demonstrations. I was very active in the student political party. I was head of a platform, the student political party at UCLA, and we—but students at UCLA started demonstrating outside of Kresge's and other places.

DC: Okay. Just sort of sympathy—

SM: At lunch counters.

DC: Yeah, yeah, demonstrations. Mostly white students, or were there black students among you?

SM: Mostly white. The black students were very apathetic. All they cared about—I hate to say this, but it was true at that time—all they cared about was parties, their social life. They would get together in the same part of the cafeteria every day, socialize with each other, eat lunch, and then split. That’s all they cared about. And we had a hard time getting them involved. We kept trying to get them involved, and it took several years before they even got involved. And then they finally did get involved, which had some real implications. There was a shooting at UCLA.

DC: Yeah.

SM: You know? Which happened after I left.

DC: Okay, you weren’t around for that?

SM: No.

DC: Right. Yeah, things really blew up there later.

SM: Yeah, which shocked me, you know, because I didn’t think UCLA was that militant.

DC: So, can you tell me just a little bit about how the idea of having Freedom Rides leave from Los Angeles emerged and how you all planned that activity? [pause] One second.

SM: [Coughs] Yeah. It’s a funny story. There were two black attorneys in Houston, George Washington, Jr., and Hamah King.

DC: The second one?

SM: Hamah, H-A-M-A-H King. And these guys were real hustlers, although they were also very good attorneys, very good civil rights attorneys. And they were so driven that they were challenging the black establishment, which wanted nothing to do with them. Okay? They even formed their own black club. [0:25:00] I forget the name of it, but it’s in my oral history.

And they got the idea of arranging for a Freedom Ride to come to Houston. And the third member of this trio was a guy named Theodore Hogrobrooks. Hogrobrooks.

DC: Okay. Hogrobrooks.

SM: What a great guy, but he was a crook. He was a fence. He owned five clubs in the Fifth Ward. And it's very funny, because on the one hand, he was extremely bourgeois, but very upset when he discovered we were in the same jail with an infamous young woman who had murdered the man who kept her. He was just blown away by that. And his daughter also was a Freedom Rider and went with us on the Freedom Ride.

So, they got [clears throat] Mr. Hogrobrooks to put up the necessary cash and they called James Farmer. All the Freedom Rides pretty much had gone, although there were still two or three we didn't know about. They said, "Listen, send a Freedom Ride to Houston, and we will take care of the cost, a couple of thousand dollars, and represent them."

DC: Can you just tell us who James Farmer is?

SM: Yeah, James Farmer was the head of CORE, who had founded CORE, and was one of the original Freedom Riders. And Farmer was in New York, and Farmer agreed. So, for some reason, they decided to send this Freedom Ride from L.A. I don't know why. Maybe they had stopped sending Freedom Rides from New York. [Clears throat] And Los Angeles CORE, which was headed up by a great guy— What was his name? I can see his face. It'll come back to me. He started organizing the Freedom Ride.

And that's when I discovered—I was a student at L.A. City College at the time. I had dropped out of UCLA. And I thought, "Oh, my God, that's great! I've got a chance to go on a Freedom Ride. I'm going to be a Freedom Rider." And that's when I volunteered [coughs] for the Houston Freedom Ride. And that's when they started putting it together.

JB: Let's pause.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're on the road again.

DC: Okay. I'll just ask you that question again. So, the director of L.A. CORE was—?

SM: Earl Walters. And he was being challenged by a couple of very ambitious black people, guys, and [clears throat] was doing a great job of sort of holding them off. They kept trying to make him look bad. Henry Hodge and the other one, who later became a state senator. [Coughs] Pardon me. [Coughs]. I can see his face. I can't remember his name. Bill something or other. And they kept trying to undermine him with the group, you know, [phone ringing in background] anything they can do to embarrass him, make him look bad, humiliate him, they'd do. And he hung in there anyway, because it was extremely important for him to stay there and not be driven out of the group. And to this day—I'm trying to remember the name of the guy who became a state senator. It was hysterical.

When they heard about the Freedom Ride to Houston, Henry Hodge and the other guy immediately jumped up and started saying, "We'll go! We'll go to Houston! We'll go on the Freedom Ride to Houston!" Of course, they never showed up. So, it's hysterical. I remember standing on the train [0:30:00] and looking around, and they were nowhere to be seen. So, it was pretty funny.

DC: So, was Earl Walter very involved in getting you all together?

SM: Pardon me?

DC: Was Earl Walter, the CORE office, very involved in getting you together?

SM: Oh, yeah, they sponsored the Freedom Ride. They got the money, they bought the tickets, paid for the tickets, and they trained us.

DC: Can you tell me about what that training was?

SM: It's a good question, because it really didn't help us very much. It was basically a lot of stuff—we spent two days in somebody's home practicing situations, but what was so funny about it—*all focused* on being attacked by a white mob at Union Station. *Nothing* about what to do after you were arrested. So, it was of virtually no help. They kept using me to try to be the white racist attacking them, and I couldn't pull it off. I mean, I couldn't even get upset, you know, because I didn't have anything against my friends. Just funnier than hell!

What was also funny is that Ellen Kleinman—when I showed up the first day at L.A. CORE, was told to show up, I was the second person, I think, to volunteer for that Freedom Ride. And Ellen Kleinman had just gone down to Union Station, bought some tickets, and returned. And I remember telling them, you know, there were two railroad companies that went to Houston, and she didn't know which one to get. So, she just got one of them, and it turned out to be the wrong one because the one she got was for Southern Pacific, and we didn't know it until we actually arrived in Houston, but they had gotten rid of their lunch counter and replaced it with vending machines. So, there was no way we could integrate them, but that's where we were headed. So, we wound up leaving on August 9<sup>th</sup> to go on the Freedom Ride to Houston, Texas.

[Coughs]

DC: Who was in the group, or how many were you?

SM: There were 11 of us. Bob Kaufman was from Brooklyn, and I didn't know this, but apparently he was a prominent member of the Communist Party. And Henry Hodge selected him [coughs] to be in charge of our Freedom Ride and was attacked for doing that by other CORE members.

DC: So, how many men and women, black and white?

SM: [Coughs] I think it was five and six; I'm trying to remember. [Coughs] So, we only had a couple of blacks. We had Charles Berrard, who was a member of the West Coast Student Movement. That's how we all really got involved. We had all been involved in the West Coast Student Movement. And there were several others. We wound up leaving in the afternoon and arrived in the morning a day later in Houston.

DC: And the train trip itself was uneventful or eventful?

SM: Uneventful except for the fact that an FBI agent joined our group in El Paso, and he really looked [0:35:00] like an FBI agent. He was this big, husky, older guy, very well-dressed. And the black porters told us that he was going to join [pause] our group in El Paso.

DC: Yeah.

SM: I'm sitting there, and we pull into El Paso, and I suddenly looked up and here's this guy, coming right into our—we had the whole car practically to ourselves. The porters would set us up so we could have meetings and so on and so forth.

DC: So, you got some support from the train porters?

SM: Oh, tremendous, on the way down there; on the way back, it was different.

DC: Okay.

SM: Because we were very bitter on the way back. And suddenly, I look up, and here's this guy. He was obviously the FBI agent. I remember dropping something because I was so shocked. And he just walked up nearby and sat down at one of the tables. And somebody asked him if he worked for the railroad, and he said he did. But, of course, he was an FBI agent.

Then we showed up in Houston and we discovered when we showed up in Houston there was no lunch counter, nothing to integrate. And George Washington and Hamah King arranged to pick us up and take us to their office, and the local Freedom Riders were the Progressive

Student Association, and that's where we went. And we waited there while they changed our tickets to the other terminal.

DC: Right.

SM: So we would have tickets to the right terminal.

DC: Okay. And were you—did you have tickets on from Houston, or was it just to Houston?

SM: I'm sorry?

DC: Were you supposed to go on from Houston, or—?

SM: No, this is what's so interesting. We were told that—and if I may say so, God blessed me with a rather extraordinary long-term memory. I can't remember where I put my car keys, but I remember things dating back fifty years, no problem. I know what happened. And what happened is we were told that we were going to Houston, and if we were not arrested in Houston—because we were there to integrate the coffee shop, and we were there to challenge the law in Texas—we would then go on to Jackson, Mississippi.

DC: Okay.

SM: But our tickets didn't connect to Jackson, and they weren't supposed to. We were going to Houston. Okay? Now, there are people who believe that we were supposed to go on to Jackson, and Houston was just kind of a, you know, almost an afterthought. That's not right. I mean, after all, Hamah and George organized the whole thing and raised money and were representing us. And you had the Progressive Student Association, not just half a dozen people, but they had supporters in Houston. So, the whole thing—Houston was the target for us *unless* if we had walked up to the coffee shop and we had been admitted [0:40:00] and we had desegregated the coffee shop, *then* we would have gone on to Jackson. Otherwise, the idea was

to get arrested in Houston, challenge—I think there were some local statutes, segregation statutes, Jim Crow statutes, and we were challenging all of that.

DC: Were you getting news from Jackson? Did you know what was going on there with the other—?

SM: No.

DC: No, not really?

SM: No.

DC: So, you were really on your own.

SM: Yeah. Occasionally, Bob would call New York CORE, and we would be told about something, and that was it.

DC: Okay. So, take us—we'll start again from where—

JB: Let's pause.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're rolling.

DC: Okay. Thank you. Let's start with—I guess you took us to the office, Washington's office.

SM: Yeah, and then we were taken to a black restaurant, which was set up in a parking lot. And what it was was a—what's the term I'm thinking of? You know when you go and you get black food?

DC: Soul food?

SM: Soul food, soul food restaurant. First time I ever had soul food! I was *shocked* at how good it tasted. You know, I looked at it and I said, "Hmm, [laughter] it doesn't look—you

know, hmm, what's this?" And it was, you know, whatever it was, and it was delicious, just delicious. And they bought us lunch.

Meanwhile, Bob and I think one of the attorneys were changing our tickets. They came back, picked us up, and that afternoon we went to the Union Station. And we went in, and the Union Center Lunch Counter was run by a guy whose name just slipped my mind—a terrible racist. We formed a line in front of the place while he held the door shut so we couldn't come in. [Coughs] He finally walked away from the door so we could come in, and he could have us arrested.

DC: You had joined up with the Progressive Student Association, so how many were you?

SM: I'm sorry?

DC: You had joined forces at this point with members of the Progressive Student Association?

SM: Yeah, there were 18 of us altogether.

DC: Can you describe the group of 18?

SM: I don't know what to tell you. We were all well-dressed—it was in the day when everybody who participated in demonstrations would wear coats and ties, before the more radical dress wear—and very well-mannered. We just stood in line. Meanwhile, Bob and others kept calling out to the guy who owned the lunch counter—what was his name—asking him to let us in. And he finally walked away and let us in. It took us a moment to realize we could walk in.

And we walked in and sat down at the lunch counter and at some booths. [Coughs] It was very interesting, because we thought everybody would be against us, [coughs] but the people who worked there, the waitresses, were all for us. And they started whispering to us. I remember

we said a couple of sarcastic things: “Bet you don’t want us here.” And they said, “Oh, no! Oh, no, we want you here.”

DC: These are white waitresses?

SM: White waitresses. That really says a lot that the working waitresses, white, wanted us there, [0:45:00] were all for us. They couldn’t say so, because they would lose their jobs. Meanwhile, a crowd assembled, and the police were sent for.

DC: Was the crowd inside or outside of the restaurant?

SM: Right outside, in the parking lot, really, but right in front of the doors. We were told that they wanted us to leave, of course. A couple of guys showed up who threatened us as part of the crowd, but they never followed up on it. I mean, one guy walking back-and-forth outside said, “I’ll take care of them!” Never had the guts to walk in and actually confront us. Of course, you know, we were obeying the—you know, the non—what’s the word I’m groping for?

DC: Nonviolence?

SM: Nonviolent standards. We weren’t necessarily nonviolent, but we were *being* nonviolent.

DC: Can you tell me a little bit more about that? So, you had studied it, but—about the sort of conflict that—did you see that there might be other ways, but this was one way to—?

SM: I’m not sure I understand.

JB: [Talk] about the difference between the philosophical position of nonviolence, how that was—

SM: Yeah. I mean, *our* role was to be nonviolent, and CORE was nonviolent. CORE was *really* nonviolent. I mean, they weren’t faking it. It was important to them. But I wasn’t nonviolent. I mean, I came out of a tough neighborhood in New York. As far as I was concerned,

we could beat the shit out of them if we could. You know? Who cared? But I was so—by that time, I was so—I was almost religious. I was so committed to CORE and the Freedom Ride.

In fact, when we first got on the train and left L.A., we were told to stay away from the bar car, not sing freedom songs, and within about fifteen minutes, we were in the bar car, singing freedom songs. [Laughter] And I was offended by that! I thought that was wrong. You know? But then, I had a drink, a soft drink, and I sort of complained in a very pure way to Bob Kaufman about it, and he said, “I’m having a Scotch.” [Laughs] Two of the guys who were with us had brought some marijuana onboard with them, and two or three of them hung out in the men’s room, smoking marijuana. It was obvious; there was a lot of giggling coming from the men’s room.

So, when we arrived in—when we were actually *sitting*, I started to get scared. And I remember turning to the guy next to me, a local student, and saying, “I am really beginning to get scared. I don’t know if I can do this.” He fortunately tried to calm me down and reinforced me. And then, when we were arrested, one of the local students was the last to be arrested. He stood up and announced to everybody, said, “Make my Coke to go!” Even the guys who had been threatening, white guys, started laughing and thought it was hysterical!

And we were arrested. We were not treated badly. [Coughs] We were taken in these small cars to jail and we were treated well. They drove very carefully, so we didn’t have a lot of bounces. They treated us decently.

DC: Did the police talk to you during that?

SM: Huh?

DC: Did the police [0:50:00] officers talk to you while they were—?

SM: No, they didn't care. Later, a couple of them talked to us, but not much. We were taken to the city jail and then transferred to the county jail, where we started having problems. So, that's how we got arrested.

DC: So, then you were booked in and charged? What were you charged with?

SM: Well, we were booked on both the city and the county charges, but it was really the county jail. We were thrown into these holding cells and we were processed through the booking. And it was very funny because we would be processed as, you know—well, the first thing that happened is they would pull us out. And the white males—we were in the middle cell, holding cell, and they started pulling people from the other cells first. And gradually, as time passed, the number of people in the holding cells really started going down, because the others were being placed in the black tanks, the two black tanks. And then, finally, we were finally pulled in to be booked at about two o'clock in the morning.

DC: Okay. So, just to clarify, they were—so, white men were put in one place and black men in another, and white women and black women—?

SM: That's right.

DC: Yeah, different cells.

SM: Different tanks.

DC: Yeah.

SM: Yeah.

DC: Okay.

SM: Well, they just had one white male tank and one white female tank. But the blacks were put in separate black tanks. And we were taken up to be photographed and booked. And Steve—[pause] I can see his face. I just can't remember his [last] name at the moment. But he

refused to cooperate, okay, which was a mistake. We were told to say, “Yes, sir,” and “No, sir,” by the guy who was processing us, and Steve started talking back to him, which was a mistake. He shouldn’t have done that. And I remember thinking, “Oh, no, for God’s sakes, don’t do that!” But in a very sarcastic voice, he started talking back to the guy who was processing us.

And I don’t know if they were going to beat us up before that. My guess is they were. But that certainly finalized it. And we were then taken upstairs about two o’clock in the morning and put in the white male misdemeanor tank. And I remember the deputy sheriff telling us to tell the prisoners what we were arrested for, and the point of that was to let the prisoners know that we were the Freedom Riders. Like an idiot I walked in and told them I had been arrested for unlawful assembly. And the prisoners said, “You’re one of those fucking nigger-lovers.” And I went, “Uh-oh!” [Laughs] [Coughs]

And we quickly found ourselves surrounded by about a half dozen tough-looking guys. Surrounded us, started putting us down verbally, [0:55:00] and then walked us into the back and told us to lay down, take off our shoes and lay down. And I didn’t feel comfortable doing that, but I didn’t really have a choice. And we took our shoes off and lay down. And once we laid down, they all started shouting at us. And the whole tank was covered with bodies.

DC: How many people were in the tank?

SM: A hundred and seven. And they were on—when I first walked in, all I saw were these—this outline. And they were lying on tables, on benches, on the floor, you know, so I sort of saw this strange outline. I didn’t know what the hell I was looking at.

DC: Because it was dark and—?

SM: Yeah.

DC: Can you describe what it looked and smelled like?

SM: Huh?

DC: Can you describe what it looked and smelled like, walking in there?

SM: Well, I had a hard time adjusting. I couldn't figure out, "What is that?" You know? "What the hell is that?" And after awhile, it dawned on me those were people who were trying to sleep.

And then, we were taken in the back and told to lay down. We lay down, and that's when they started beating us up. And of the people who surrounded us, half a dozen people, there was one in particular who was a real sadist, and he started pounding Steve's ribs, which was very painful. And Steve started screaming, and then, the others started kicking Steve. We were all lying in a row. And then, he jumped up, and I was looking around, and suddenly he came flying through the air at me and landed on me and the guy right next to me, Joe Stephenson. Knelt down and started pounding me.

And I started to panic, and I started to raise up. I was trying to run. And the more I raised up, the harder he hit me. And I realized I couldn't do that. I had to lie down and lay still, which was consistent with my youth in the ghetto, you know, that if you were being beaten up, that's how you—and you didn't have the muscle power [laughs]—[coughs] that's how you handled it. And when I lay still, they only went a few more minutes, and then they stopped beating me up and, you know, started beating up the others—Bob Kaufman and Steve Sanfield. But Steve Sanfield had already been beaten up and was heavily pounded. He got the pilgrim's pounding. And Joe Stephenson, the youngest one of our group, flipped over on his tummy and lay still and was completely overlooked, wasn't beaten at all. So, three of us were worked over, and Joe wasn't.

So, finally, they stopped working us over and the top con [convict] would walk around in a circle and scream at us and threaten to beat us up. And we were just frozen in fear. And froze there for the rest of the night while they walked back and forth, threatening to beat us up.

DC: So, what kind of injuries did you guys have at that point?

SM: Well, I had a herniated disk, but I didn't know it. You know? I had these feelings, but I didn't realize it was a herniated disk. Bob was kicked in the face, banged up against the bars, and opened up a two-inch wound behind his left ear. Steve was kicked in the left eye, [1:00:00] which was very painful, and then he was also beaten up elsewhere. And that was what we experienced.

The dawn slowly came. And we waited for dawn to come, and it *slowly* came. And then, coffee arrived for the prisoners. We were, in effect, we were *slowly* integrated into the group by the prisoners. In other words, they had been told to beat us up. The guards had told them to beat us up. They might have wanted to beat us up anyway, I'm not sure, but it was consistent, you know. Not all of them felt that way; some of them felt that way. And half the prisoners were in locked cells, and the other half were in the dining area, where they had about fifty prisoners, you know, lying there.

And we lay there for a couple of hours. I was so scared I didn't move for a couple of hours. And then, as dawn came, the prisoners who ran the tank slowly started letting other prisoners and us actually stand up and kind of express ourselves a little bit. You know? We were allowed to have some coffee, and then the breakfast showed up. And as dawn came, everybody stood up. The whole tank stood up. And the tank basically came to life, and we were in the middle of a hundred and seven prisoners. You know, I didn't know what the story was. I didn't know if they hated us or what.

Well, as it turned out, not all of the white prisoners were against us. Some of them *said* they actually supported us, although when it came down to it, that wasn't the case—they didn't support us. It was too much to hope for. Then dawn came, we started eating breakfast, which I think was just an oatmeal-type cereal in something to hold the breakfast, and we had a thing of black coffee. And suddenly, they started treating us well. And the guy who actually ran the tank started treating us decently.

DC: This was a prisoner there that ran it?

SM: Yeah.

DC: Yeah.

SM: Yeah. So. [Phone rings] What the hell is that?

[Recording stops and then resumes]

DC: [Did] you actually interact with some of the other prisoners?

SM: Yeah, and we were very nervous about it, naturally, since we'd all been beaten up.

[Clears throat] None of the other prisoners at that moment—a little later they started approaching us individually. But several of them said they agreed with us, they were with us, although as a practical matter, when the tank polarized two days later, they weren't there. You know? They didn't support us. [Clears throat]

You know, what happened—and I remember [clears throat] one of the prisoners walked up to me and offered me his fork, which he had washed off. And I was reluctant to take it, because I thought maybe he was coming onto me. I had no idea. But he was trying to show some sympathy for us [1:05:00], as did several others. So, there *were* prisoners there who were trying to demonstrate some sympathy and supported what we were doing.

DC: Um-hmm. So, what was the philosophy of CORE or of your group, in particular, in terms of going bail or staying in prison if you were arrested?

SM: We were supposed to stay in there until we were tried, which we didn't do, because we were bailed out. We had to be bailed out, because our lives were really threatened later, two days later.

JB: What happened then?

DC: Were you in—were you all in agreement about that, or did you discuss it while you were in there?

SM: No, we agreed to do whatever was necessary. So that was pretty much it.

DC: Okay.

SM: We had to survive in the tank.

DC: Um-hmm. And you were there for three days?

SM: Two days.

DC: Two days. And then, what happened?

SM: About forty-eight hours.

DC: Okay. And then, what happened at the end of that?

SM: Okay. Do you want any of this information about those two days?

DC: Yeah, sure.

JB: Oh, yeah.

SM: Oh, yeah. Well, it was very interesting. First of all, it was a misdemeanor tank. You know, all kinds of prisoners there. You're in [with] people who have never been arrested before. You're in [with] people who are career criminals. The tank was controlled by a small clique, and the head con was known as The Commander. His name was Garland, and he was in Cell Number

One. They had like seven or eight cells. And the first couple of cells were only occupied fifty percent. The members of Cell Number One would sleep in the bottom cell, and put their own personal stuff on the top cells, and the whole damn tank was overcrowded. It didn't matter.

[Clears throat]

The lieutenant commander, Overstreet, roamed the tank, which was—there were two tanks, the whole area was called the tank, and then the dining area, where we slept, was also known as the tank. So, the head of the tank, Overstreet, was commander above the whole thing and was in charge of the dining room, while Garland would walk up and down the hallway between the two areas and spend a lot of time trying to handle his own, you know, [clears throat]—he was just close to wit's end. He was pretty burned out. But that's how he survived, is by running the tank. And he was really the arm of the guards. Whatever they wanted, he did. Whatever he wanted to do, he would get their permission to do first, for the most part, depending on how important it was.

So, we were just kind of surviving, [clears throat] and we slowly got to meet and to know many of the prisoners. Now, the prisoners would come up to us and insist that we were “nigger-lovers” and we were sort of lucky to be alive. And some of those prisoners were very dangerous. There was a guy who was in charge of—what was he in charge of? I'm sorry. Well, there was one guy [1:10:00] who came on the scene later who was the most dangerous guy in the jail. He had been arrested for murder and was in the felony tank. Three guys, other prisoners, decided to jump him, and a buddy slipped him a razor blade, and he used that razor blade to cut their throats, and all three were hospitalized. He wasn't touched. He was real—I don't know how to tell you how dangerous he was. I mean, this guy—nobody would even interact with him without being scared of him. They would assign the oldest, shakiest guard to take him—he was in

solitary confinement six days a week, and the oldest guard would walk him back to solitary confinement and would be shaking like a leaf—but they would assign him because he was no threat to the prisoner. They didn't want the prisoner to kill him.

DC: Why on earth were they putting him in the misdemeanor tank once a week?

SM: Because they felt that if they didn't do that, he'd go crazy. It was to give him a little bit of freedom, you know, some latitude. They wanted him to associate with other prisoners. He would spend the day socializing with them, playing cards with other prisoners, you know. That's how bad he was.

DC: Um-hmm. I imagine it would sort of control the other prisoners, too, to have this very intimidating guy there.

SM: He could if he had wanted to, because Garland wasn't going to challenge him. Garland and Overstreet were scared to death of him. I mean, he would have killed them if he had wanted to. You know? But he didn't care. He didn't care about the tank. He would spend the whole day playing cards with a few other prisoners.

DC: So, this is a long way from Stuyvesant High School and UCLA for you. [Laughs]

SM: Oh, absolutely! Totally different, although it was all-male. You know? And he got into a minor confrontation with Garland. [Clears throat] Garland said something to him, which was directive, and he turned around and challenged Garland, and Garland immediately backed off and apologized. He spent the whole day there, and that evening was taken back to isolation for the week.

There was another guy who was—what was his name again? I'm sorry. But he had been arrested. He had run a small group of prostitutes, two prostitutes, and was beating them up on the side. And he was crazy. He wasn't actually crazy, but he was close to being crazy, and so, he was

very dangerous. But he wasn't going to challenge Garland and Overstreet, you know, although he succeeded them when they left the tank.

And then you had professional criminals who just cooled it. They didn't want to get into an argument with Garland and Overstreet. They just walked around. As long as they weren't pushed around, they wouldn't do anything.

DC: Um-hmm. What was the second night like?

SM: Well, it was funny, because we were told to lay down in the same place, and a couple of the prisoners guarding us approached us to get [1:15:00] some stuff off the line above us. And then, we sat up and said, "Uh-oh." And then, we were assured that, you know, "That's okay. Don't worry about it." And we spent the night, you know—the real sadist walked over, and he wanted to beat us, kick us again. But, by then, Overstreet and I had gotten together. And Overstreet had approached me and said—asked me if I could provide him with some shoes. He was barefoot. I sort of looked down and I said, "Well, I don't know," and so on and so forth. So, we agreed that I might arrange for him to get a pair of shoes. I was shocked that he didn't have any.

And then, when the sadist sort of walked up to us and stood there staring at us and trying to figure out how he was going to beat us up again, I looked up at Overstreet, who was resting on top of one of the tables, and sort of pointed him out to him. Our eyes met, and he realized I felt threatened by this guy. And, since he wanted the shoes, he needed to do something for me, that there would be a quid pro quo. And the quid pro quo was he would protect us, and I would arrange for him to get shoes. He announced that, said, "I don't want anything happening. I don't want to hear anything." You know? "And that will be that." So, we were kind of treated as

independent. We weren't threatened—we were threatened, and then he stopped it that night. And we just went to sleep.

DC: Okay.

SM: And woke up on Day Two.

DC: Okay. So, how did Day Two go?

SM: More of the same. A couple of times when what's-his-name, the guy who was in charge of the tank—what was his name again?

DC: Garland?

JB: Garland.

DC: Garland.

SM: Garland confronted me once because he caught me staring at him and he didn't like that. And then [pause] evening came. And it wasn't until our black attorney, George Washington Jr., who showed up that night—now, of all the tanks, for some reason, he showed up *last* at the white male misdemeanor tank. And it wasn't until he showed up that Overstreet and Garland—well, what happened is we got a copy of an L.A. *Times* article that covered our arrest. And Garland took that article very personally and felt like he was being—the article was identifying him. It identified that we had been beaten up, I think, or that we *said* we had been beaten up.

So, it wasn't until George Washington Jr. showed up after dinner that Garland began to say, you know, identify with George Washington Jr. [1:20:00] And George Washington Jr., when he showed up, put his head up to the peephole, and Bob Kaufman was called upfront. And when Bob Kaufman showed up, he turned and showed the wound behind his left ear. And George said, "What's that? What happened to you?" You know? And Kaufman said, "Later,

later.” And Garland went berserk, because he thought he was being blamed for the beating and would take the fall for the beating, and he didn’t know what that would entail.

So, he went berserk, ran out of the cell, and started running around the tank, screaming out loud that he had beaten the shit out of us and he would beat the shit out of us again if he wanted to. And George, of course, said, “What the hell is going on here?” He wanted to talk to Bob and he called out to the guard. And the guard showed up, and George told the guard to pull Bob out of the tank and put him in the consultation cell outside so he could talk to him, which the guard did. And Garland just—I thought we were dead. I really did.

The whole tank polarized. Steve and I backed up against the bars. Joe Stephenson was exactly opposite. He walked over and sat down about ten feet from where Garland was doing all of this screaming and running around, and cupped his hands, you know, his chin in his hands, and started studying Garland. Steve and I said, “Holy shit! We’re dead. We’re gonna get killed.” And we really thought this was it.

But then, the guard came in and calmed Garland down enough so we weren’t beaten. And the night supervisor came in and started talking to Garland and started to sort of bring him down, which took quite a while, twenty minutes. He convinced Garland that, you know, he should ignore us, not beat us up, and cool it. And Garland finally threw up his hand and went back to his cell [clears throat] to get out of the whole situation, get away from us. And the whole thing, the whole tank had polarized. The guys were threatening to beat us up, and then they were all sort of calmed down by the supervisor until after the whole situation finally calmed down.

And we were sent to lie down. Well, we had a couple of hours in which we walked around, and then Bob was still out for a couple of hours. The prisoners would walk up to us and

say, “Where’s your buddy?” And we didn’t know. And then everybody had to go back to bed. They turned the lights off. Everybody had to lie down. [Coughs]

DC: What were you thinking and feeling at that point?

SM: It looked like we were going to be alright, but you still didn’t know. Didn’t know. And finally, they started pulling us out. They pulled the three of us out of there and took us to a holding cell, an isolation cell. So, we were released. We were removed and taken [1:25:00] to an isolation cell. We bonded out. We had to—you know, they had to get paper for the bond. Then, we were taken to the cell where we were held until we were finally bonded out. And we were held there for a couple of hours and we were told that we could bond out of there. But we still weren’t sure what was really going on.

And then, we got into an argument because Joe Stephenson didn’t want to leave. He felt we could stay there and not worry about being beaten up. Nobody was going to be beaten up; everything had calmed down. Whereas the three of us, the other three, said, “Get us this hell out of here!” You know?

DC: Right.

SM: And I think we were a little more realistic than Joe was. And we then were removed from there, and they started bonding us out. So, they took us downstairs to get our clothes and our money, and we were taken down to the basement where we were bonded out into the main floor of the jail, and then out into the parking lot. And we rejoined Bob downstairs.

DC: Right. What had happened to the other Freedom Riders, who were in the other tanks?

SM: Yeah, the others were still in their tanks. They didn’t know about any of this.

DC: Okay. And you didn’t know what had been happening with them?

SM: No. Although we didn't think they were having the same problem. We didn't think they were being threatened. And so, within a 24-hour period, we were arrested, jailed, held in the tank, and bonded out. And we were taken to Mr. Theobrooks's [Theodore Hogrobrooks's] home at midnight or so, where we had a drink and spent an hour or two talking about the whole experience, telling them, our attorney and Theodore, what had happened, and the whole thing was shared.

JB: Let me pause for a second.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

DC: You're bonded out, but you've got charges against you. So, what happens next?

SM: Yeah, we were charged with unlawful assembly.

DC: Right.

SM: So, we were out for a week. And we spent a week driving around, making speeches, trying to raise some money. And then, CORE decided to get the others out. So, they arranged for everybody to be released. And they were all released and all of the Freedom Riders [coughs] were out on the street in a week, or maybe nine days. I'm not sure which. And we were waiting to be tried. And we had a trial date, which was thirty days after we were arrested.

DC: Okay.

SM: And so, we had three weeks in which to drive around, talk, [coughs] and try to raise funds for the Freedom Rides. And that's what we did for thirty days.

DC: So, how did people react? Were you able to raise money?

SM: Yeah, we did raise some. We did raise some.

DC: Do you remember what the local media coverage was, local or national, of what had happened?

SM: The local media coverage was [1:30:00] pretty limited. We had—the Houston *Post* did an article. We claimed that we had [been] beaten up in jail, but the sheriff claimed that that wasn't true. So, they gave the sheriff as much credit, or more, than they gave us. One TV station came over and interviewed us. I was standing there, my arms crossed, tightly wound. In fact, they focused on my hands, which were like that. And they interviewed us. They said we were beaten up, but they didn't necessarily believe us. And it didn't matter! It didn't matter whether we had been beaten up or not; nobody was going to do anything about it. So, that was it.

DC: Um-hmm. And so, you're awaiting a trial date, or waiting for the trial?

SM: Had a trial date.

DC: Yep.

SM: And we're awaiting trial. And the trial finally came. [Clears throat] And we were tried in what is now the old court building, right across from the jail. We were tried for unlawful assembly. And we had two trials. The first time there was a mistrial. [Clears throat] The mistrial happened because the district attorney was trying to get rid of the phrase "Union Center Coffee Shop," because it suggested interstate responsibility, and if we were covered, were we covered by federal law?

DC: Right.

SM: And so, they dropped "Union *Center*" and just had "Union Coffee Shop." Okay? Some genius. And George Washington had prepared very thorough motions, one of which said there's a conflict here. He's being prosecuted for trespassing against the Union Coffee Shop, when in reality it was the Union *Station* Coffee Shop. They have to be the same. You can't have two completely different entities.

DC: Right.

SM: So, the judge, who was an ultraconservative judge, denied the motion and convened the jury. And the jury was a good jury. We might have won that case; it was a good jury. And then, the judge—it slowly dawned on the judge, our attorney was right—picked up the phone, called another judge, senior judge. This judge had just recently been appointed. He was a right-to-sue judge, a right-to—what was the term I was looking for? Anyway, he put down the phone and he had to dismiss the case. It wouldn't have held up. It would have been reversed on appeal. So, he dismissed the case, [clears throat] glibly apologized to the jury, and they set a new trial date.

Now, that's the bad news. The good news is—this is the difference between Mississippi and Texas—they willingly agreed to set the trial date so we would be all done within thirty days, and we would be able to take the train back home and register for school. Okay? So, instead of really screwing us, saying, “No, we're going to set this for October first,” which would have killed our chances [1:35:00] to go to UCLA, they accommodated us. Mississippi would have never done that, not at all. So, *that's* the difference between Texas and Mississippi. Texas stopped just short of doing some of the things Mississippi was doing, and they cut some slack, and our attorney and Texas was able to work together some.

And there's a reason for that. The reason is that the judges realized that our attorneys were sort of setting a point at which we would be covered, you know, we would be afforded. They had to be sure that the Texas lawyers were not angry. They knew they were only two years away from having to deal with these lawyers, in terms of their own appointments as judges, and so, they didn't really want to offend them. They wanted to accommodate them. And that's what happened. So, both sides accommodated. In fact, one of them pulled one of our attorneys aside and offered him sort of an assignment that would reimburse him.

DC: [Laughs]

SM: They were trying to—you know.

DC: Yeah.

SM: They were smart enough to realize it might not be this way all the time. They saw it coming, whereas Mississippi judges—forget about it. And that was nice. [Coughs]

So, the day came for another trial. And this time the jury was very bad. None of the jurors—we talked to a couple of the jurors after the first trial. And I remember going up to one of them, who worked for a department store, managing a department store, and asked him what he thought. He said he was hoping we would win. Not the second jury; they didn't want to have anything to do with us.

So, it's strange, because if we had won the first trial, on the one hand, it would have been a big win, but on the other hand, we would have had nothing more to litigate. You know?

DC: Right.

SM: We wouldn't have established a precedent. We would win on the facts. And instead, we were tried, the jury stayed out a little while that afternoon, and we were convicted. And we maintained a complete poker face when we were convicted. And as soon as we were convicted—we were out on bail, of course, 500 dollars bail each—as soon as we were convicted, that was it. We were free. Our attorneys were going to post an appellant bond, but we had nothing more to worry about. And we went out for lunch and we were on our way home within a couple of days on a train.

Now the train we left on was different from the train we came in on. We came in on Southern Pacific—I mean, we *finally* came in on Southern Pacific. We came in—I'm sorry, I'm

a little confused. I think we finally came in on Southern Pacific and we left on—I can't remember what. Union Pacific?

DC: Right. I think that's probably right.

SM: And we boarded Union Pacific, and by now, we were bitter, very bitter.

DC: Yeah. [1:40:00]

SM: The girls, a couple of the girls, had gone to Houston to spend a couple of days with black citizens there, who wanted them to sort of take them around. Well, instead, these two guys used the opportunity to make passes at them and tried to force them to have sex with them. And the girls wound up coming back and were very upset and had every reason to be upset. So, between what the girls experienced, our experience from being beaten up and being convicted, when we shouldn't have been convicted—in fact, legally, there was no basis for convicting us; the law protected us—we were kind of a bitter group. And we got on the train, and *this* time, instead of working *with* the porters, we fought the porters. [Coughs] And the porters got angry with us, understandably so.

DC: Angry with you?

SM: Yeah, because we were giving them a hard time. You know?

JB: But why?

SM: We were giving them a hard time, because we felt we hadn't been treated right, and they weren't entitled to any consideration. You know?

DC: Hmm. Even though they were on your side?

SM: Yeah. And remember, we were coming back this time. So, the second day coming back was tense. We didn't get along with the porters. Nothing was built into the relationship that would have made it mutually supportive or communicative. We were going back and we were

pissed off. And the porters were just going back. We didn't have any—whether it was music, or whatever it was—

DC: Yeah. No freedom songs.

SM: Huh?

DC: No freedom songs this time.

SM: No. No, and nothing else. So, we returned to L.A., and got off the train in Union Station, and then we went to a restaurant for lunch. What's the name of that French restaurant we went to? I'm trying to remember the name of it. We all said good-bye to each other and basically went—we were met by family and friends, who cheered us, and then we split up, and the Freedom Ride was over.

And when I entered UCLA a couple of days later, a few days later, a friend of mine grabbed me and said one of the professors there wanted me to do an oral history project, and they sent me over to the UCLA Oral History Project. And that's when I hunkered down, and I finally reached the point where we were taping *so* much—I was saying so much and in so much detail, as you can tell from my printout, that the Oral History Project was coming to me and said, “*Steve! Stop it! Stop talking!*” You know? “*Damn it!*” You know? There was one woman who was typing for weeks at a time.

DC: There's about 400 pages of transcript.

SM: Yeah! And I wouldn't stop. And then, later, a couple of years later, the same people came to me and said, “You know, we're glad you did that. You have a great oral history project.” Most oral history projects weren't that good. They had a lot of bullshit oral history projects.

[1:45:00] And Tom Bradley's oral history project was a joke. [Coughs] So, I did it big-time.

And then, later—first of all, the summer after, at my own expense, I went back to Houston to get more information. And that's when I realized that Hogrobrooks was on the other side of the line, in terms of crime, although he bailed us out.

DC: Right.

SM: He put up a \$35,000 bond.

DC: Wow.

SM: A land bond, to get us out of there. He had us out within a couple of hours. That's when I learned more about the PSA people and their backgrounds.

DC: PSA? Oh, Progressive Student Association.

SM: PYA, Progressive Youth Association—and more about their backgrounds. Learned more about George's background and Hamah's background. George and Hamah by that time had sold out big-time to John Connally, who was running against Ralph Yarborough for the U.S. Senate. I believe it was the U.S. Senate. It might have been governor. I'm not sure which. And Washington and Yarborough had been paid off, so everything they did was pro-Connally and was [1:46:57].

But still, I was digging into that and getting some of that information. I'm trying to get Bob Eckhardt to sue the sheriff, and he wouldn't do it, because at that time there was no law supporting such an action. You know?

DC: Right.

SM: It wasn't until several years later that there was law supporting that kind of lawsuit. [Coughs] Then I returned to UCLA and I came back later. And meanwhile, I was trying to get everything I could get. And [I] interviewed with an assistant U.S. attorney [who] didn't give a shit. And there was a black assistant U.S. attorney who did care, and Ralph Yarborough was a

liberal politician and great guy, who cared but wasn't going to represent us or anybody else. So, that's what happened.

DC: Yeah. So, when you were back at UCLA, trying to resume your studies, I assume, but also did you resume your political activity or your civil rights activity?

SM: Yeah, I went to town! I mean, I didn't care. I was out to exploit my role as a Freedom Rider and being the big-time Freedom Rider, "Mr. Freedom Ride," on that campus. And by then, I had a herniated disk in my back. The pain had not subsided, but some of the aches and pains subsided, leaving me with a very painful disk. And I went to UCLA. I checked into the UCLA Student Health Center for a month.

DC: Yeah.

SM: It was painful. And I was idolized by almost everybody else and exploited. You know?

DC: In what way?

SM: Well [pause] I don't know. Anything involving Freedom Rides, I was the leader.

DC: Did the others experience the same thing?

SM: No. I played it to the hilt. I played it to the hilt. And there was nothing wrong with that in many respects. But [1:50:00] only when I played it to the hilt did I develop additional standing as a Freedom Rider. Additional things, whatever it might be—giving talks, whatever—and was known as a Freedom Rider and had been beaten up in jail from then on.

DC: Right.

SM: Which reinforced my feelings of inadequacy. I started to reinforce myself and contributed to my standing in the Movement. I was the only one on the West Coast who had that experience. So, over a period of time, I was exposed to more and more people and I would do

more and more things. Anybody who came to L.A., whether it was Chuck McDew, or whom it might be, [coughs] would check in with me.

DC: Hmm. Did you maintain close contacts with CORE in L.A.?

SM: As close as I could. Came to New York, and I tried to look up Jim Farmer. I was pretty much ignored, but I remember buying Farmer's book and reading it while I was waiting for him to drop by the office.

DC: [Laughs]

SM: I mean, again, I completely idolized both Farmer and CORE and got to know more and more about them.

DC: So, what happened with the appeal?

SM: Oh! It went to the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals, and they voted to reverse our conviction, which they did. Ironically, one of the black Freedom Riders, who was particularly intelligent and well-educated, discovered a Texas statute that said you could not discriminate against people based on their race in transportation. So, here we had a statute that apparently had been passed as they were desperately trying to bridge a situation with overseas visitors or whatever, and we already had the statute we needed to protect our rights to take the train.

And, yeah. What else?

DC: So, do you want to pause just for a second and talk about when you're back at UCLA and the National Student Association work? Should we talk about that?

SM: Sure.

DC: Okay.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay, we're rolling.

DC: Okay, so we're back, and if you could tell me a little bit about after you've come back from the Freedom Ride and the work that you're doing, especially with the National Student Association.

SM: Yeah, but I was still mostly committed to the Civil Rights Movement. I'm kind of dabbling in the National Student Association, although I did it over a four or five-year period. I was able to do both, because they didn't always overlap. I kept going to National Student congresses, and I was threatening to run for national office. And finally, I had a very bad congress, which I really screwed up and did very badly. And instead of running for national office, I was offered this job of civil rights director, which actually was much better.

And I became civil rights director [1:55:00], moved to Philadelphia for a year, and lived in Philadelphia because NSA's headquarters was located in Philadelphia. Okay? From Day One, I was involved with the Movement. My very first event was a trip to Atlanta for an interagency conference of civil rights organizations and then to Jackson and McComb, Mississippi, for demonstrations.

So, I remember arriving—[coughs] will you hand me—?

DC: This?

SM: No. Yeah, that. Pardon me.

DC: Yeah.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're rolling.

SM: Arrived in Jackson, Mississippi, checked in with SNCC, and drove down to McComb. There had been eleven bombings in 22 days in McComb. This was after Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney were murdered, right after—not right after, actually, it was maybe a

month after. But what happened is that the Civil Rights Movement starting holding—SNCC started holding demonstrations in McComb, which was really the headquarters of the white movement in Mississippi. What was it called?

JB: The Klan?

SM: Huh?

JB: The Ku Klux Klan?

SM: No, it was very similar.

DC: The White Citizens Council, or the White Citizens Organization.

SM: Yeah.

DC: Yeah.

SM: And so, we drove down to McComb—and as I flew into Meridian, Mississippi, from Atlanta, and from Meridian to Jackson, the closer I got to Jackson, the more scared I got. And I really started to get scared, because all I had had was my imagination for more than a year. And probably because I have a bipolar condition, that had really run the gauntlet. I mean, I was having dreams every night for a year, at least, and reliving—I mean, I still have a dream occasionally. So, we arrived in Jackson, rented a car, visited SNCC, and drove down to McComb and checked into I forget what, probably—what's the major motel, Holiday Inn or whatever?

DC: Right.

SM: Then we went to a rally. Okay? By now, I am really scared. Okay? I mean, I'm having a hard time holding myself together. It's a good thing I'm not really panicky. We had the rally, returned to our motel, and at about four o'clock in the morning, we pull out to catch the plane at the airport. As we pull out—we're right across from the police station—a police officer opens the window, puts his hips, leans out the window, and stares at us. That's his way of telling

us, “Don’t come back!” And so, we drove back to the airport and flew back to Atlanta. And that was the story of—that was that trip.

What else?

DC: What kind of civil rights activities was the National Student Association involved in at this point, and how involved?

SM: Well, this is where it gets interesting.

DC: Yeah.

SM: First of all, I have to tell you very candidly, but not very modestly, I was [2:00:00] probably the best staff person on the [2:00:11]. And I started off right away raising money for the Thanksgiving Fast for Freedom, so that the Thanksgiving Fast for Freedom would subsidize the purchase of canned goods and what-have-you to feed people in Mississippi. [Coughs] Interestingly enough, what happened is we raised \$38,000, which was a substantial amount at the time.

DC: Yeah.

SM: But what happened, I was—you see, I was going twenty-four hours a day, psychologically and creatively, driving myself. I felt kind of guilty. I didn’t feel I had handled myself right. I felt like I had exploited the Movement, and I wanted to come back and do right by the Movement.

DC: In what way? From the Freedom Ride, do you mean?

SM: Yeah. Even though I had done right by the Movement, still not as right as I would have liked to. So, I came up with the idea of petitioning the Department of Agriculture to take the \$38,000 and use it to sign up as many counties in Mississippi as you could to the Surplus Food Program that they ran. And on top of that, I came up with the idea—you have to understand

my mind was going 24 hours a day. I mean, these, I think, are very creative decisions on the one hand, but it's tremendously driven on the other hand. And I'll explain some of the consequences of this.

So, I said to Steve Robbins, who was president of NSA, a friend from UCLA, "You know, we ought to go to the Commission on Religion and Race, National Council of Churches, and try to have a relationship with them to do this. They certainly have more going for them than we do." They had programs in Mississippi, you know, and elsewhere in the South. And he agreed. So, I contacted Bob Spike, who was head of the Commission on Religion and Race, and he put me in touch with Art Thomas, who was head of the Delta Ministry.

DC: Yep.

SM: And Art and I, we started organizing this. And by then, I was participating in the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights in Washington and using contacts I made in Washington. Bill Sebron was civil rights director, I think, for the Department of Agriculture, and we started putting this scheme together. At the same time, the guy who was in charge of the Surplus Food Program saw *his* opportunity to expand the program. So, we were in accord. Except I was pissed off, because instead of actually distributing food and having a program, we started knocking off counties. County after county, this guy would enlist in the program.

And he would go to a county and say, "Hey, listen, I've got the National Student Association here and the National Council of Churches, and if you don't join our program,"—it was something like only less than twenty percent of Mississippi's Surplus Food Program was actually enrolled and distributing surplus food—and he said, "we'll just give the money to—we'll let the Commission On Religion and Race, the National Council of Churches [2:05:00],

distribute the food, and you'll have them in your county." Of course, no county wanted them. Right? They didn't want the Commission and the National Council of Churches in their county.

DC: Right.

SM: And so, as time passed that fall, winter, and spring, he started enrolling more and more counties until by springtime every county in Mississippi was enrolled in the Surplus Food Program, and this guy wanted us to shift to Alabama. It was hysterical. But I was pissed off because I actually wanted to see food distributed.

DC: But it wasn't being?

SM: No.

DC: Yeah.

SM: But this guy was actually right, and that was a better alternative. So, that's what happened. On Thanksgiving, with schools and colleges all over the United States fasting, and we were getting the money that would have been used to buy food, that they would have used to buy food, was going to us for this program. And it just worked out beautifully. It was great.

DC: And through the program, what actually happened?

SM: Well, what happened is every county in the state of Mississippi joined the Surplus Food Program in the Department of Agriculture.

DC: Right. And they got—?

SM: Yeah.

DC: And what happened through them?

SM: Food was distributed.

DC: So, it did work.

SM: To everybody in Mississippi. Black people who couldn't get food before were getting food. So, we took the Surplus Food Program, which was like maybe 70 percent enrolled, pushed it into a 100 percent, and blacks all over the state were getting food, surplus food, and living on it. So, that's a tremendous accomplishment.

We also had something called Books for Equal Opportunity, where we raised books. We got students and institutions to donate books to Mississippi, and that was going on. So, those were two major programs that we were—you know, we had caused to happen.

DC: Um-hmm. And then, what was next for you?

SM: We were also deeply involved in the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, and later the Voting Rights Act. I got a White House pen used to [pause] used to sign the Voting Rights Act. I was invited to the ceremony. [Clears throat] So, one of the things that I have at home is the White House pen.

DC: So, what kinds of things did you do to support those acts? And how important do you think those acts were?

SM: Participate in the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, which is the civil rights lobby in Washington. Go once a week to Washington.

DC: Oh, wow, yeah.

SM: And participate and try to goad them into doing more. They got so they hated me, because every time I would show up, I would demand more. It was funny. Everybody else was organized labor. They hated SNCC, hated SNCC. So, when I showed up and basically lined up with SNCC every week, they didn't like me, either.

DC: [Laughs]

SM: But there were a couple of very important people who did. Joe Raab did.

DC: So, once those acts were actually adopted, how did you—did you feel that you had accomplished what you needed to accomplish? Or what did you see—?

SM: We accomplished a lot more. When I reported back to the National Student Association the next summer, the summer of '65, they were flabbergasted. I mean, we accomplished more in one year than NSA had accomplished in its entire history. And the civil rights directors who replaced me, if I may say so, [2:10:00] didn't hold a candle to what I was doing. They didn't get anything like that participation. Nothing! They were basically walking—going through the motions, basically. They weren't doing much.

DC: What made you so driven?

SM: They weren't as driven as I was.

DC: I was going to ask you, what made you so driven, do you think?

SM: [Clears throat] Well, part of it was that when I was located in Philadelphia, I would spend time in New York and with student organizations. The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party was organizing congresspeople to try to get the vote for MFDP and send them to the Mississippi delegation. One of the people I met there was Rita Schwerner, and Rita and I became quite close.

DC: The name again?

SM: Rita Schwerner, Mickey Schwerner's widow, and we became quite close. And she was a real conscience for me, not that I didn't have a conscience, but if anything, she accentuated it. She was more militant than I was. She was great, very strong person, had a mind like a steel trap, and was committed to Mickey and his memory. Had many opportunities to exploit that and never exploited it. She was a piece of work. And she was one of the most important people in the Movement, although most people didn't realize that. People in the Movement understood, people

like Larry Guyot and John Lewis, all of them. When Mickey was killed, John Lewis sent Bob Zellner, white Southerner and experienced civil rights man, to stay with her in Philadelphia. And he did. And he escorted her for a few days, at least. Jim Farmer didn't do that. No, he started making speeches. So, that had a lot to do with it. You know? I was a purist.

JB: I think we should leave.

DC: Yeah, tape this, maybe five more minutes. Five more minutes? I'm sorry that we have to cut it short.

SM: That's alright. I was a purist.

DC: Um-hmm.

SM: That's what happened with MFDP, and I became a member of the MFDP Congressional Strategy Committee. So, it got to the point where once a week, I'd go down to Washington for a strategy meeting, which was extremely educational. I was exposed to the whole MFDP.

When I returned to UCLA in the fall, I arranged with the National Council of Churches to send me to Washington for two weeks so I could investigate exactly what happened. I was able to establish that the White House had intervened behind the scene to oppose the challenge. And nobody knew that, you know, but it was true. A guy in the AFL-CIO kept telling me that. When I was with SNCC and with MFDP, Walter Russo's brother showed up in Washington and took us out to dinner, which was nice. So, I was sort of at these—I happened to be in certain places at certain times.

DC: Yeah, very important times.

SM: Yeah, I was.

DC: Yeah. Well, let me just ask a final question, if I could, which is just—

SM: Sure.

DC: Ask you if there's anything else that you'd like to say, or anything that I should have asked about that I didn't ask about. [2:15:00]

SM: It's a shame that the AFL-CIO, and especially the NAACP, was so anti-SNCC. They hated SNCC, and I mean, hated. I couldn't even talk to anyone in the NAACP about SNCC. I tried to get Clarence Mitchell, who was head of the NAACP office, to attend a meeting in the Secretary of Agriculture's office about food distribution. He wouldn't do it. He invented an excuse. He wouldn't do it. Joe Raab did it. It was terrible. They were paranoid. They were paranoid. They thought the AFL-CIO was largely populated in the Leadership Conference by people who were either the children, relatives, or maybe old associates of AFL-CIO people who were involved in the 1930s or the 1940s and who had fought the Communists. And so, they were convinced—they saw all of these SNCC people, many of whose parents had been Communists in the '30s, and so they just adamantly opposed them, when in reality these guys weren't out to exploit them.

DC: Sure.

SM: You know?

DC: Right.

SM: And so, that's what happened. It's a shame, but it's true.

DC: Yeah. Well, I think we'll stop there, if that's alright with you.

SM: Sure.

DC: And let me just thank you one more time for—

SM: My pleasure.

DC: All of this time that you gave us.

SM: That's alright.

DC: And for the work that you did.

SM: No problem.

DC: So, thank you very much.

SM: My pleasure.

JB: Yeah, thank you. It's been an eye-opener for me, too, all these stories.

SM: Okay.

DC: And it's an honor for us to get to talk to you.

SM: My honor, my pleasure, my privilege.

[Recording ends at 2:17:14]

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Sally C. Council