

Civil Rights History Project
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Interviewee: Sam Mahone
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Interviewer: Dr. Hasan Kwame Jeffries
Videographer: Petna Katondolo Ndaliko
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[Throughout the interview, sounds of conversation and laughter from a crowd are heard in the background]

Petna Katondolo Ndaliko: One, and action.

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

Sam Mahone: Of course.

HJ: I want to begin simply by asking you: When and where were you born?

SM: I was born in Americus, Georgia, which [is in] Sumter County, Southwest Georgia.

HJ: And what year? What's your date of birth?

SM: 1945.

HJ: 1945?

SM: 1945.

HJ: So, the war is over. [Laughs] And, you know, some people say that World War II ushers in this sort of new era of transformation in democracy. What was Americus like when you were growing up?

SM: I imagine it was like most small Southern rural cities, in that the lines of separation were very, very vivid and very, very stark. As a child growing up, you tended to try to enjoy your childhood, but there were instances where you just knew that things just were not right. And a lot of that came about when you would look at your parents and see how they reacted to certain situations when white people were present. You noticed little subtle things, like you look at your father and your mother and you notice how there's virtually no eye contact when they're talking or speaking with white people. Your father is always looking in a downward manner, you know, as if that eye contact would somehow create a confrontation.

You notice other things, like how your community, for instance—the old saying about “across the railroad tracks” is very true, you know. No sidewalks. The roads were dirt at that time, no pavement anywhere. I grew up with an outdoor toilet. We had an outdoor toilet. We didn't get plumbing until I was a senior in high school.

My mother was a domestic worker. She worked in white people's home. That's what she did as employment. My father was a factory worker. He worked in a basket factory that produced baskets for—that contained fruit, large shipments of fruit.

HJ: What were their names?

SM: My father's name was Burden Mahone, and my mother's name was Lulu Belle. Her maiden name was Walker. I was the seventh of six children—I was the sixth. I have a sister that's younger than myself.

Other things that you'd pick up on, like, for instance, when—you know, you're totally dependent on the whites for their services. For instance, there was always the—there was what we called a policy man, the insurance agent, who would come door-to-door during those days to collect the money for the policies. They would simply come up to your house and not even knock and just simply walk into your house.

HJ: And these are white agents?

SM: These are white agents. That's how much they took liberty and that's how much they were in control, and so—of your everyday existence. You saw these things, and so—but it didn't really manifest itself in terms of you—as a child, you know, you accepted these things. And, of course, anytime you left the house, your parents would always tell you, you know, you knew your place, you know. You knew what you could do and what you couldn't do. And it was out of fear for your life that they did these things. So, you grew up under those circumstances.

But I have to say that, even though you internalize these things, it was something that you didn't really resist. You went along with it. It was only until I became engaged in what was called—there was a group of ministers who had started a voter registration project called the Americus Voters League. This was prior to [05:00] any civil rights organizations coming to Americus. And I probably was in the tenth grade or something like that and began to work in terms of trying to talk to other students about voter registration and those kinds of things.

HJ: So, you were about sixteen?

SM: Yeah, exactly.

HJ: It's about 1960, 1961?

SM: Exactly.

HJ: Okay. And these are students in your high school?

SM: Yeah, exactly.

HJ: And where did you go to school?

SM: I graduated Sumter County High School, Americus, Georgia. I went through the entire school system there and went from schools that had the old potbellied wood stoves until finally getting air conditioned schools, and I finally graduated from school.

HJ: So, you become involved with this voters league?

SM: Yeah.

HJ: And what led you to become involved with them?

SM: I think it was more out of having something to do, I think. In fact, that's what led me to become more of an activist later on. It was in a small town. You had very little outlets, in terms of trying to do things that were outside of the norm. And so, anything that had a semblance of being something different, then I was attracted to that.

HJ: How did your classmates respond to you when you start talking to them about some of the things that you're doing with the voters league?

SM: Well, some of them responded quite positively. And then, those that did took it as a challenge, you know. And there was a very short time between that time and when SNCC activists came into Americus. And so, that further galvanized those people who had been receptive in the first place. And so, it was at that time that we sort of moved from that right into that activism within the Movement, which later became the Americus Movement.

HJ: Did your parents—what did they think about your early involvement, even before SNCC gets there?

SM: My parents were mainly disengaged. I think a lot of it had to do—my father was—he was a working man. He had very little conversation and he just worked. My mom, as a domestic, was more receptive to conversation. She had no particular feelings about it. But there was very little conversation, in terms of what I was doing, in terms of that kind of work and what have you. But they were not against it. They were very supportive in what I did. They were, of course, always fearful, but—especially my father. But my mother was—she had fears also but she was more likely to go along with, you know, the things that I was doing at that time.

HJ: How about your siblings?

SM: By that time, my older siblings were away from home. During this time, it was myself and my younger sister, who was three years younger. And, of course, she had—she was not involved because she got pregnant before she finished school and moved away to Florida and started a family. And so, I was virtually left there on my own. My older brothers had joined the military, were in service. And so, there was very little interaction between me and my other siblings at that time. In fact, many of them didn't know that I was involved in this until years later. I mean, they just didn't pay attention to the things that was happening there at the time.

HJ: So, in this interim period between—you're starting to get your feet wet. You're beginning to become sort of publicly active. And so, are there other things that you are doing as well with the Voters League before you encounter SNCC folk?

SM: No, not at all. Just really going to school and trying to maneuver through that, doing things that kids normally do during that period, you know. I worked outside jobs. I picked cotton before school opened up. I pulled up peanuts. I picked peaches, you know. You name it. I did

field work. And then, also, as a student in school, I got a job working at a clothing store, cleaning up and what have you. So, I did the normal things that kids do during that time. If you can get a job, then that's what I did.

HJ: What was some of—or when did you become engaged with SNCC?

SM: SNCC came into [10:00] Americus in late 1962. Don Harris, John Churchfield, Ralph Allen, I believe, were the first workers that came there. They were dispatched there from here, from Albany, by project director Charles Sherrod. And at the time, they were expanding their work in several counties around throughout the Southwest Georgia area.

Americus was chosen because of the demographics and the dynamics there, in that in most of these rural counties, blacks comprised over fifty percent of the population. Median income was like about maybe twelve hundred dollars a year for blacks, you know. And it was maybe triple that for whites, or four or five times that for whites.

Schools, of course, were second class. I never got a new book at all, throughout twelve years of school. We always had books passed down to us. We knew that, you know how you'd get a book in school and the next class—you'd have all these names written in the books, you know. So, we knew, as students, that we were two or three years behind, in terms of the books that we received. But we had nurturing teachers at that time, who cared for us and who did the best they could with what they had, and so, we cherished that. To this day, we cherish that, because they laid the groundwork for us to do the work that I feel that I began doing later on.

HJ: You're still in high school at the time. What did you think about these Freedom Riders, as so many people called them?

SM: As I said, anything that was new to a kid growing up in a small rural town was exciting, interesting. They came into Americus. They had Northern dialects, you know. They

were from college campuses. They brought books with them, [laughs] books that I had never seen before. They set up what was called the SNCC House, where they moved into these houses, and immediately began to reach out to students and to pastors and ministers, whoever they could, to begin to try and build workers to work on voter registration.

So, the SNCC House became a hangout house for kids, you know. We would go there and we began doing things like printing leaflets and flyers on the old mimeograph machines, the hand-cranked machines. And the fact that they introduced us to black authors—you know, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, you know, Du Bois, all these people that we hadn't heard of—gave us a whole sense of meaning, you know, and being, you know. And as a kid, it really sparked an interest in us and made us want to come back to that house every day after school to see what they had to do, they wanted us to do for them, you know. So, that's literally how it started.

HJ: And where was the Freedom House?

SM: It would be a rental house, an old wood-frame house, shotgun house, that somebody would rent to them, you know, for little or nothing. It may or may not have had running water, you know, but it was just a meeting house. And they slept there, sometimes on the floor, sleeping bags or what have you, you know. And so, I even wound up spending the night there, you know, and just hanging out at the SNCC House. And that's how my activism began. And the more I stayed there, the more my interest increased and the more I recognized the duality of this system that we lived in and that there was a chance to do something about it.

HJ: How did you get involved with the protest at the movie theater?

SM: We spent several months working on voter registration. We would canvas door-to-door throughout the city, and not only in the city, but we went out to the counties also.

HJ: And this is in—

SM: In Americus.

HJ: This is in Americus, but this is '63?

SM: Yes.

HJ: Okay.

SM: We recognized through SNCC—made us recognize that the only way for power, to change the dynamics of the system, was through getting people registered, choosing our own candidates, electing them to office, who would look after our own interests for a change. So, it was during that time we recognized that voting was power. And so, we spent our days and evenings working on voter registration. We would go house-to-house. We would take down names. We would schedule times that we could come back and pick them up to take them down to register. [15:00] We set up Freedom School, because we were talking about people who—some who could not read or write, some who had—well, mostly had never voted.

And so, the Freedom Houses were places where we would organize and teach people how to read and write, or at least pass the exams, the literacy tests at that time. It was a place for organizing, strategy, and what have you, what neighborhoods we would canvas, who would drive the cars to take them down. It was also place where we taught each other self defense techniques, not fighting back, because we had accepted the principle of nonviolence, but basically teaching us how to protect ourselves when we were attacked, if we were attacked: how to curl up in a fetal position if you were beaten and kicked and what have you; we would go through these scenarios of how, if someone spat in your face, how would you react, you know, how would you respond; and just preparing us for what we knew eventually was going to come.

HJ: And that day came.

SM: That day came. We eventually moved from voter registration to beginning to test the laws of public accommodation. And, strangely enough, this didn't come from SNCC workers; this came from the students themselves.

HJ: The young people?

SM: The young people.

HJ: You and your friends?

SM: Yes, who said, "We want to go to these places," you know, that had [16:40] us, you know, had discriminated against us. The Martin Theater was the most visible place downtown. It was a place—and it was supposed—when I say visible, the entrances were so stark, the differences. The black entrance was—you had to walk around the side of the theater down a dark alley about a hundred or a hundred fifty feet, then walk up three flights of stairs, and sit in the balcony to look at the theater.

So, one night, eleven of us decided we were going to go to the front entrance to try and purchase tickets. We stood there for about a half an hour, and they wouldn't sell us tickets, so we just stood there. And then, the police came finally. And they asked us to disperse, and we did not disperse. We were charged with disorderly conduct and failure to obey an officer, and they took us in a paddy wagon, took us off to jail.

The next morning, we went to court, and they released us on probation, which was a ninety-day probation. And, being kids, we didn't realize that if you got arrested again, you couldn't be bailed out. And nobody took the time to explain to us that, because one week later I was arrested again. Four of us from that original group, from the original eleven, were arrested again.

HJ: As a part of another demonstration?

SM: Another demonstration at the same theater. And immediately they singled us out, the four of us who had been previously arrested, and they sent us to prison, the city prison.

HJ: So, you have—you get arrested, you spend the night in—the same thing, you spend the night in jail, or they pull you out immediately?

SM: They put us in jail. The next morning we go back to court.

HJ: Right. Same judge?

SM: Same judge. And they tell us that we have to immediately begin those sentences.

So—

HJ: So, at some point, you realize, “Wait a minute! I’m about to do some time.”

SM: Yeah, exactly.

HJ: What are you thinking?

SM: Well, we still didn’t grasp that we would have to do this time. We just felt, you know, as kids, that somehow we were going to get out of this, because there were two girls. It was two boys and two girls. And so, it happened overnight, just literally, they put us out on the streets. Well, the first thing, they put us in prison garb and took us out to do roadwork, cutting grass and things like that. Well, the local ministers went to City Hall and demanded, which was really something at this time, that they not put the women on the streets, the girls on the streets. So, they did not.

My friend and I, the other guy, we decided to—we just sat down and decided we were not going to work. So, when we did that, they took the two of us down to the county jail, from the city jail to the county jail, [20:00] put us in a hole, which was about a four- by six-foot concrete enclosure, with a little slit at the bottom about four to six inches wide where they would each day put in a piece of bread and a cup of water. Well, we decided we weren’t going to eat

and we went on a hunger strike. So, we were in total darkness for about seven days. We didn't—we fasted for about seven days until we passed out.

HJ: Now, were you in close proximity? Was the other hole—were you together or you were in separate—?

SM: We were in the same hole.

HJ: In the same hole.

SM: The same hole. And so, they took us out of the hole, and we were just literally passed out. They took us to the hospital and filled us with some fluids. And then, we went back to the jail and we went back to work. We went to work two days after that. And the jobs that we did ranged from cutting grass on the side of the streets, picking up garbage on weekends—the worst job was cleaning out the city sewage. They saved that especially for us. None of the other prisoners had to do this, who were in for all kinds of crimes, right? You've seen these sewage treatment plants where they have these long pools. [Sound of phone buzzing] Well, Americus had three of them, I believe it was three. And they would take us there with an armed guard. And there was a dump truck that followed us. And they'd give us two shovels, and it took us all day to shovel out these pools of raw sewage, of sewage at the treatment plants. I believe we did that maybe once a week or twice a week—maybe twice, yeah, twice a week, I believe, something like that. But that was just very specifically for us, because we were “those no-good agitators.” Yeah.

HJ: And this is three months?

SM: Yeah.

HJ: I mean, ninety days you did it?

SM: Yeah, um-hmm.

HJ: What did your parents—I mean, they must be—

SM: Yeah.

HJ: When they received word, I mean, what did they say?

SM: They were—of course, my father was the most visibly upset. My mother was, also, but my father was just angry, I think. You know, I think that, as I said before, he never really—he just feared for my life, you know. And the fact that I had kind of disobeyed him, you know, in that, “You’ve gone and got yourself into trouble, *really* now, you know, this time.” But, you know, they stood by me. You know, they supported me, especially my mom. She would bring things.

And then, working on the street was just different than other people who were just jailed—you know what I mean—the people who were just incarcerated all the time. So, working on the street gave us an opportunity to have people pass us by. They would come by and they would see us working on the street and they would let us know what’s going on in the Movement, you know, they would give us money sometimes to buy, you know, things like that. I started smoking cigarettes, and they would bring me cigarettes and things like that. At that time, unfortunately, you know, I was smoking. But it was a conduit, an outlet, for us to get information, and it was a kind of freedom being on the outside.

We would work all day long, and at the end of the day, they would bring us back to the jail cell and lock us up at night. And at night, we would watch other people who had been arrested during the day being brought in. And to see other people continuing to fight and continuing to demonstrate gave us, really, that’s what got us through, you know. And—yeah.

HJ: How did the—how did the jailers treat you?

SM: The jailers were very racist, very, very cold, very—just no sympathy at all for what we were doing. The sheriff of Sumter County at that time was Sheriff Chappell where the hole

was. That's where they kept us in the hole. He was the one who Martin Luther King referred to as "the meanest man in the world" after King was jailed in this jail in 1961. Had a reputation for just really beating up blacks for little or nothing. And that was really the mood of the police department at that time, just a very [25:00] racist police department and had no tolerance for what we were doing at that time at all.

HJ: And what was that sheriff's name again?

SM: Sheriff Chappell.

HJ: Chappell.

SM: Yeah. He was probably—I'm told he was the biggest bootlegger in the county as well. But you could compare him to Jim Clark in Alabama or—but Fred Chappell was his name, yeah.

HJ: And how about the other inmates, those who weren't in for Movement activism? How did they respond to you?

SM: They responded very positively. They were mostly older guys, you know, who oftentimes praised us for what we were doing and kind of acted as big brothers towards us, you know, protected us if there was someone who wanted to harm us, you know. They were quite receptive to us, and we looked upon them as—and we were always about trying to enlighten them, as well, while we were in there. We figured it was another opportunity, you know, to bring them into the fold, you know, and to talk about the conditions under which they got there in the first place.

HJ: To do some organizing?

SM: Exactly.

HJ: You were organizing in jail.

SM: In jail, yes, exactly. A great place to organize, as a matter of fact!

HJ: [Laughing] You have a captive audience!

SM: You have a captive audience, right.

HJ: Exactly.

SM: Yeah.

HJ: So, you do your time? You survive.

SM: Yes.

HJ: You make it through. Do you remember coming out? Do you remember being released?

SM: I do. And no fanfare. We were just simply released. We did our time and we got out. But that's when I was even more committed to doing this work. I began to—that's when I—I finished high school. And then, immediately after that, I joined SNCC and began to continue working throughout Americus, but I also worked in other counties, surrounding counties, as well. Continued doing voter registration. Continued doing—testing the laws of public accommodation and what have you. I remember the night the Civil Rights Bill was passed. We decided we were going to test it at a local restaurant.

HJ: So, this was July '64.

SM: Exactly, yeah. Myself and John Perdew, who I believe is here, who was one of the Americus Four, SNCC worker; Bob Mants, out of Morehouse, who recently passed away; and four other students—we went down to a place called the Hasty House, restaurant. We sat there and we ordered—we tried to order food, but the waitress never came.

One of us, one of the guys who was with us decided he needed to go to the restroom. And the restroom was outside. You had to go outside and go around to the side of the building. Well,

while we were waiting, no one came to take our order, but about ten minutes passed and we noticed that he hadn't come back from the restroom. So, we finally decide to get up and leave.

And as we get up to leave to go to the car, we're met by a group of whites who had come across the street from a service station with tire irons and baseball bats. And so, they wait until we get into the car, which is a convertible car, and then they just rain down on the car with tire irons and baseball bats and beat us on the top of our heads. And we finally get the car started and we get out of there without the guy who had gone to the restroom.

Well, he shows up about two days later. And he says what happened was that when he went to the restroom, he was attacked and beaten, and he just ran off and never came back. And so, but that was the first evening we decided to test the laws of public accommodation.

HJ: The Americus Four—this happens after—?

SM: The Americus Four was before that. This was '63, yes. [Sound of phone buzzing] There was a demonstration. In fact, again, SNCC had felt that night demonstrations were [30:00] really dangerous and had sort of encouraged us not to do it. But, again, students took the lead. And on this particular night, they marched from the church where we had a mass meeting and was going downtown to demonstrate. And, as it happened, the workers, SNCC workers, were also downtown.

And that night, they unleashed dogs and water hoses on the demonstrators, and people were arrested. And they keyed in on the SNCC workers and—Don Harris, John Perdew, there was a CORE worker, Zev Aelony, and the fourth one was Ralph Allen, also from SNCC—and charged them with a century-old sedition law, which at the time in Georgia carried the death penalty. They stayed in jail, I believe, for about 84 days, 85 days, and finally were released by a three-judge panel.

The significance of that—if the state had prevailed on those charges, it would have stifled Movements all around the country, because it meant that the police had the right to detain, arrest and detain, workers without cause and put them in jail. And so, the legal team was a team that included C. B. King of Albany; Donald Hollowell of Atlanta; Constance Baker Motley was on the team; another lawyer out of Macon, Georgia, I believe, Larry Thompson [Note: Larry Jackson], I believe was his name. And they won that case. So, it was very significant, in that they prevailed, and it provided even more strength for people to move forward in the Movement.

HJ: Well, do you remember hearing about them possibly facing execution?

SM: That possibility was always on people's minds because we knew that they would—the power structure as it was was determined to do all in its power to curtail any Movement activity, and so, that possibility never left us, you know. But we just felt confident that people were not going to let this go, that people were willing to get out into the streets and protest and demand that these people be released. We were helpful in getting a nationwide movement to build groups across the country from college campuses, legal groups across the country to write letters of protest. There was massive fundraising for their benefit. And so, we were encouraged by the outpouring of that support, and we knew that the more support we got, the more that the nation turned its eyes on this particular case, that we would be successful. So, we were confident that they were going to be released at some point.

HJ: And the case winds its way, works its way, all the way up to the Supreme Court.

SM: Exactly.

HJ: Do you remember hearing the—when word came down that the court had upheld the lower court ruling, if I'm not mistaken, that Georgia can't do this?

SM: Exactly, yes, of course! We were all jubilant, and I have photos of—that I've collected since then of the jubilant faces as they were released and upon their release. The interesting thing now is that the courthouse where they were tried is where we now have our display of memorabilia from the Movement from that time. That's where the welcome center is now.

HJ: Wow.

SM: Yeah. It was a federal courthouse at that time, then became a post office, and now it's a welcome center. Yeah, so that's an interesting turnaround.

HJ: Yeah. Well, certainly when people think about Americus, they think about the Americus Four, but they also think about those young girls who were demonstrating in Americus, and they wind up in the Leesburg stockade.

SM: Yeah.

HJ: Could you tell us how that occurred? What happened there?

SM: As more and more people got into the streets and demonstrated, the jails became full. We filled the Americus city jail, so they began looking around the county for alternate locations where they could house people. And [35:00] there were several abandoned prison camps that were made available to them. There were people jailed not only—we filled the jails in Americus, the city jails, the county jails. Then they started taking people out to places like Terrell County, which is Dawson, Georgia. People were jailed there.

The thing about—and then, they took people to Leesburg, Georgia, the Leesburg stockade. Now, what made Leesburg significant was that this was where the juvenile girls were taken, those under sixteen years of age. It was an abandoned prison camp, no bedding, all concrete, no shower facilities, one toilet for some thirty-five to forty young girls.

On one occasion, one of the guards threw a rattlesnake into the holding area, and they began screaming. And one of the guards came and said—you know, he pretended that he didn't know, that there was no snake in there. And then, finally, one of the guards let all the girls out, so they could look for the snake, supposedly. As it turned out, one of the guards went and found the snake and picked it up. And so, we were told later on by some of the girls who were housed there that this guy picked the snake up like he knew, [laughs] like it was his pet, you know.

So, there were times when there were white men who would drive up to the jail. They knew they were housed there. They would try to get the guards—to convince them to let them go inside and have, what they say, “have some fun” with the girls, young girls, and what have you. So, it was a classic case of, really, of the inhumanity that these people were willing to place on young girls, you know. And Leesburg stockade epitomized that so much so that people like *Essence* magazine did a story on it a few years ago, on that episode.

They were called the “stolen girls” because the way they wound up at Leesburg is in the middle of the night the police brought a tractor-trailer truck up to the jail. And one by one they were herded into the back of the tractor-trailer, in the middle of the night, and taken to this place in the dark. They had no idea where they were going. And it was days later, or maybe more than a week later, that their parents knew—they didn't know where they were. Nobody knew where they were.

HJ: Um.

SM: So, that's why the term “stolen girls” was given to them. And so, that's what made the story even more compelling and more significant, that they would do this to young juveniles, you know. And that was the real significance of that particular holding place.

HJ: Were you all looking for them? I mean, did you—you all didn't know where they were either, I would imagine.

SM: Well, I was in custody. I was in jail at the time myself.

HJ: Okay.

SM: But, of course, parents were trying to get information, you know. And eventually they found out where they were, through word of mouth and what have you, you know. But they literally didn't know where they were until later on.

HJ: In addition to the direct action work, the sit-ins and the demonstrations, you're also doing voter registration work.

SM: Right.

HJ: And canvassing and the like. Were there other activities, as well, that you were specifically involved in with SNCC during that time, so '64 and moving into '65?

SM: It's all about organizing. We—there was a time when, for instance, domestic workers were being threatened with firing if any of their children were involved in any Movement activity. Some were fired. And so, we began a—along with some of the workers, the domestic workers—they formed a maids' union.

HJ: And when was this? When was this?

SM: This was in '64, '65. [40:00] And these women got together and decided they wanted to ask for, demand, better wages, those who were still employed. And so, the first maids' union was formed by the mothers of several of the young girls who had been incarcerated. So, we organized things like—I helped to organize things like that.

We also set up a library, because at the time we couldn't use the local library. We organized a national campaign to get schools around the country to donate books to Americus.

At one time, we had over 20,000 books flown into Americus from places around the country. And we set up our own library, what was called the Youth Center, here in Americus, which was before that was called the Colored Hospital, which was a training facility back in the '40s and '50s, which trained black doctors. In fact, at one time, this particular facility trained more black doctors than any place in the country in the '40s and '50s. That building still stands, and it went on the National Historic Registry, I believe, about four or five years ago.

So, we continued to do things like that, to organize maids' unions. We formed a quilting union of women quilters. And these were organized so that people could support themselves in case they were fired or leave their jobs and what have you. And, of course, the crux of this was voter registration. We were always trying to mobilize people to run for office. And along with that, voter registration was key, in terms of getting people registered and getting ready to support those candidates. So, it was ongoing work, but that was really the major focus, in registering people to vote.

HJ: And connected with that, I mean, there's another case that comes out of Americus that has to do with—I mean, at the time, although people are trying to register, you still have segregated lines and—

SM: Yeah.

HJ: And the like. Could you say a little bit about that?

SM: Mary Kate Fishe Bell was the first woman to qualify for the Democratic primary in Sumter County. She ran for office of justice of the peace.

HJ: And what year is this?

SM: This was 1965.

HJ: '65.

SM: On the day of the election, as people were voting, she and three other women—Mamie Campbell, who was the wife of the Americus Movement president, Reverend Campbell; Gloria Wise, who is now deceased; and Lena Turner, who lives in Atlantic City now—they decided to try to vote in the white voting line. When they refused to leave, they were all arrested, put in jail, and that led to a daily deluge of demonstrations, protests, demanding their release. These demonstrations went on every day, and during that time, there were several confrontations with the police. Several people were beaten, thrown in jail.

One day, the white merchants of the city decided to get together and—this was about maybe three or four days after they had been arrested—the merchants got together and decided they were going to bond them out of jail.

HJ: The white merchants?

SM: The white merchants, because they feared more “trouble,” as they called it, more confrontation in the streets. So, faced with that, the women decided that, “We’re not going to accept it.” They wrote a letter, which we have in our—we now have that letter in our records that we’ve been keeping. And it says simply that, “These are the same merchants that stood by as black kids, boys and girls, were beaten and assaulted for simply trying to demonstrate their rights, and now, you’ve come forward to bond us out of jail.” And they cite the hypocrisy of them not speaking out then, but wanting to bond us out simply to keep, you know, keep quiet and what have you. So, they refused a bond. They stayed in jail.

And about a week later, they were released. A fellow just released them, unconditionally, dropped the charges and what have you, and declared that segregated voter lines were no longer being tolerated in Sumter County. [45:00] So, that was significant, a significant victory that really propelled a lot more people who saw power in their numbers. And so, each victory was

one that really unified us and swelled the numbers, in terms of people willing to get out there and protest.

HJ: And you were with the Americus Movement for—up until and through 1966.

SM: Yeah, through 1966. That's correct.

HJ: And then, you head down to Mississippi, to Tougaloo [College].

SM: Head to Mississippi. What happened was that SNCC had started a program of providing scholarship money for kids who wanted to go to school, provided that you come back to your community and do some work, continue doing some work. And so, I jumped at the opportunity. I didn't know anything about Tougaloo. I just knew other SNCC people who worked in Mississippi, you know.

I went to Mississippi, went to Tougaloo, had planned to major in sociology. Got to campus and recognized that Tougaloo was—had been at the forefront of a lot of civil rights activity in Mississippi and at that time had the, to my knowledge, had the only—was the only black institution protesting against the war in Vietnam. And so, I joined that movement and became very involved in activities there in Mississippi. Later on went to places like Greenville, working with sharecroppers and what have you, things like that.

I left there after two years, because most of my time had been spent, actually, as an activist off-campus. It was difficult to really settle in as a student after having gone through what happened in Americus and seeing the conditions that, in a lot of places, simply were not changing. There was more work to be done. Once you become an activist, you don't settle down anymore. You continue it. And, to this day, you want to be in the fight, you know, somehow.

HJ: There was no going back.

SM: No going back. Never going back, yeah.

HJ: And so, after you leave Tougaloo, what do you do after that?

SM: I—while at Tougaloo, I met—there was a lawyer who was from Americus, who had been run out of Americus, a white lawyer, who was forced to flee Americus because he had been sympathetic to the Movement. His name was Warren Fortson. His brother at the time happened to be Ben Fortson, who was Secretary of State in Atlanta. Well, Fortson had—was head of the Americus school board at that time, I believe, and had fought to integrate the library here in Americus.

The thing that really pushed him over the edge with the white community was the fact that he—there were two students who had been arrested, a boy and a girl. One was the first student—one of the first students to integrate the white high school, Robertina Freeman, and her boyfriend. They were out parking one night, as kids do, you know. And so, the policeman pulled up alongside them and decided to charge them with indecent exposure, fornication, what have you, and arrested them. Now, we feel that this was brought on by the fact that she had integrated Americus High and she was due to graduate. And we feel that they put these charges on them to keep her from being the first black to graduate from Americus High.

Well, Fortson was—he took that case on and he defended them in court successfully, but he was never able to live in the city after that. He was hounded by the Ku Klux Klan. His own neighbors turned against him. People he had gone to church with turned against him. He was afraid to sit by his window at night because of threats. So, he and his family moved to Atlanta.

So, fast-forward to '67, '68. I'm at a lecture at Tougaloo, and Fortson happens to be there. And [50:00] I see him, and we speak to each other and we connect. And so, I tell him that I'm going to be leaving Tougaloo pretty soon, going back to Americus. So, he said, "Well, what

are you going to do?" I said, "Well, I don't know." So, he said, "Why don't you go back to Atlanta and see my brother? I'll call my brother and tell him that you're looking for some work."

So, I get back to Atlanta and I go into the Secretary of State's office. And he sends me to the Georgia Department of Archives, which is under the Secretary of State's office. And I go in there and I take a job as an apprentice in paper conservation and restoration. And I learned the craft and I wound up staying there for about fifteen years, well, twelve to fifteen years, actually. But before I left there, I began to study photography and began to take photographs, and I opened up an art gallery while I was still working there.

HJ: And what was the name of that gallery?

SM: Ancestral Arts Gallery. And when I felt comfortable enough, I resigned the job and I left and did the gallery full-time. And I think being in the Movement prepared me for that, because I'd always been intrigued by images, you know. And, of course, being in the Movement, a lot of times it was only images that propelled people, you know, signs that were made, photographs that were taken. And so, I began to do that, as a street photographer, you know, and I gradually moved into images by other artists, as well.

But that was a way of continuing the activism because it allowed me to elevate the work of African American artists who didn't have venues, for the most part, in places like Atlanta, whose work had been diminished by traditional, you know, outlets, galleries and what have you, and marginalized. So, that led me to another form of activism, in terms of trying to protect the arts more positively among the African American community. And it was a place where people could come—it was not just a gallery to buy art, but it was a place where people could come to be informed. We had poetry sessions there. We had public meetings there that had to do with

things, in terms of in the community. So, it was an outlet to continue that activism, but in a different way.

HJ: I want to wrap up in a second by talking about the Americus Movement Remembered. But I want to go back just quickly, just briefly, if we can, and ask you about—you were working—you engaged in antiwar protests.

SM: Um-hmm.

HJ: But then, you were drafted.

SM: Yeah. I was drafted, yes. In fact, I was never—I was drafted in '69. And when I went into the military, I had basic training at Fort Benning, Georgia, which is an hour's drive from my hometown. Whereas most people go on to advanced training when you finish basic, they kept me there at Fort Benning. They never gave me a security clearance, and they said it was because of my arrest record in Americus.

So, instead of sending me to an advanced training, they sent me into what was called a holdover company. And what that means is that it's a company where all you do is duty work: you dig ditches, you cut grass, you clean latrines, bathrooms, and what have you for the officers and what have you. It was a place where—during this time, it was common for people who had gotten arrested, during the Vietnam War, they gave you a choice of either going to prison or going to the war. So, here I was, in this group.

And they literally woke you up every morning at 6:30, and you had duties to do. It would be digging ditches or cutting grass. In fact, one of the duties was to build an archery course for the officers, which we'd literally go into this junglelike wooded area and dig our ways through and cut our ways through to dig up and set up these targets. And it was another form of

punishment, you know. [55:00] I did that for a whole year. And, at the end of the year, someone decided they were going to close the training camp at Fort Benning.

So, they closed down the training camp, the Center. And so, everybody either got shipped to Vietnam or Germany. I got sent to Germany. I still didn't have a security clearance. They gave me an MOS. They gave me a duty, which was clerk-typist, just a name. And so, they sent me to Europe to what was called a Materiel Command, about a five-hour drive from Paris, France. They literally put me in an office behind—a big office, but in the back, with a desk and a chair, and I sat there all day long. I did nothing.

So, what I did with my time was that I picked up a camera. That was when I, you know, first picked up the camera. I used my weekends. I bought a car from a guy who was coming back to the States, paid him a hundred bucks for a car. And I would take off on the weekends, drive to the countryside, drive to Paris, a six-hour drive, five-hour drive. And I spent all my time doing that for the rest of my service time. And in '71, I was released in New Jersey. And I came back and went back to work at the State Archives, yeah.

HJ: And so, you sort of migrated back, to a certain extent, to Americus.

SM: Yeah.

HJ: Because now you're spearheading this effort to keep the Americus Movement alive on the minds and in the memories of people. Could you just say a word about that?

SM: That is correct. That is correct. In 2007, myself and several other veterans of the Americus Movement decided we were going to convene on Americus once again to—because one of the things we recognize as Movement veterans is that a lot of us hadn't passed on these stories to our kids. A lot of them had no idea what some of their parents have been through. A lot of the history had been lost. A lot of these significant things that we talked about, in terms of the

Americus Four and the women who were arrested for trying to vote—all of this was going to be lost if we didn't take up the mantle and try to collect this information and put it out there.

So, we met in Americus in 2007. We met at a place which was our Ground Zero, a place called Barnum's Funeral Home. That was one of the places where we would—a funeral director and his whole family had allowed us to use his place for a meeting place. He was the sole bail bondsman for the Americus Movement. People got arrested; he was the only bondsman who would put bail for us.

We went back and met his daughter, who was one of the—who was also incarcerated at Leesburg, who is now the director of the funeral home there. She allowed us to come there, and we met once again. And we decided that every two years, we're going to have a tribute. And our long range goal was to somehow either build or constitute a museum there to house the materials that we had begun to collect. And we were all about the business of collecting photographs, some of us had kept things from that time, flyers.

We had formed a newsletter among the students at that time and we published the newsletter out of the SNCC House with an old mimeograph machine. It was called "The Voice of Americus and Southwest Georgia." It was a six-page mimeograph, and we assigned people as reporters, you know. We had people going to other counties, you know, reporting on what happened in this county, you know. We have copies of those that we've kept in our archives. And so, that was the long range mission.

The other mission had to do with trying to provide scholarships for kids who were doing things *today* in their communities, service things in their communities. We have started a mentoring program of kids, trying to get adults to mentor kids who we see falling through the cracks, you know. [1:00:00] And that mission has led us on a lot of different paths. We are

connecting with the grandkids of some of the veterans of the Movement, who had no idea that their parents were involved.

The fascinating thing is that each celebration we bring out the photographs and we went through all the newspapers that covered the Americus Movement. The *Americus Times-Recorder* literally did no reporting, because they didn't want the word to get out. But papers like the *Atlanta Journal*, *Columbus Ledger*, *Macon Telegraph*, *Atlanta Daily World*—we combed through their archives and we reproduced the news articles, photographs, and we [1:00:50] kind of crude display because we just blew it up with what we had, Xerox machines. At some point, we want to get these things digitized and make a better presentation. But we have these four by six framed pieces that we display every celebration.

And on one occasion, we had—a young lady walked through the—and she was looking at the photographs. She saw a picture of a woman who was pregnant and she said, “That’s my mother,” okay, “and that’s me in her belly!” [Laughter] You know? So, her mother had not told her what she had done. And she just literally wept at that time, because she had no idea that her mother was one of those foot soldiers during that time.

So, it’s those things like that that propels you even more to know that the work you’re doing is important. So, we’re committed to seeing this project through to fruition. We’re trying to make some connections with the local university there, who are going to help us with our oral history project. And, hopefully, other things will come as a result, also, as well. This happens to be Jimmy Carter’s alma mater, as well, in Americus.

HJ: So, it’s not just about—it *is* about, very much about remembering the Movement, but it’s also about keeping the spirit of the Movement alive.

SM: Exactly, exactly, exactly. We want to—in fact, the whole idea of the scholarship is to nurture a whole new generation of young activists, to get them to see that they stand on the shoulders of some people who have just made some tremendous sacrifices. And we want them to know that this work has to go on, and it will only go on if they take the initiative and take the lead, because the baton has been passed to them. And so, we *expect* them to do it, you know. It's expected of them to do that. And so, that's been our mission. Every two years we do that.

HJ: Sam Mahone, thank you very much.

SM: Thank you. Appreciate it.

[Recording ends at 1:03:21]

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Sally C. Council