

Civil Rights History Project
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Interviewee: The Reverend Charles Sherrod
Interview Date: June 4, 2011
Location: Campus of Albany State University, during the "Southwest Georgia Civil Rights Movement 50th Reunion" conference
Interviewer: Joseph Mosnier, Ph.D.
Videographer: John Bishop
Length: 20:25

John Bishop: Okay, we're rolling.

Joe Mosnier: This is Saturday, the fourth of June, 2011. My name is Joe Mosnier of the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I am with videographer John Bishop, and we are in Albany, Georgia, at the Southwest Georgia Civil Rights Movement 50th Reunion, um, here on the campus of Albany State [University]. And, uh, we're very grateful for the opportunity to sit down with Reverend Charles Sherrod. Reverend Sherrod, thank you very much for making time. This is an interview for the Civil Rights History Project, which is a joint undertaking of the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture.

Reverend Sherrod, um, we mentioned before we started today that we'd focus right in on the work you did when you arrived here to build the Albany Movement.

Charles Sherrod: Yes, I came in about October, 1961, when, uh, just the experiences behind me were the jail-in in Rock Hill, South Carolina, where I spent a month or so there.

[Phone rings] Uh!

JM: We'll take a break, no problem.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're rolling.

JM: Okay, we're back on.

CS: So, we were – I was in southwest Georgia after coming from Rock Hill. I had spent a month or so in jail there on the chain gang, which, uh, brought together a lot of my feelings, uh, about the movement. The Scripture, the eighth chapter of Romans, I carried with me the rest of the way until now in the movement. It had very important meaning to me while in the Rock Hill jail and chain gang, and I brought that with me to Albany. Uh, I'm persuaded that "nothing can separate me from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord," a simple verse, but very meaningful to me. What it meant was that nothing but death could stop me from the mission that I had of developing our people. Uh, and I brought that with me to Albany.

But it took me time to understand how to get an old fellow who says, "Yassuh," "Nawsuh," while looking down straight at the ground, he's talking to a white man or woman in front of him, um, I never understood – or it took me a long time to understand how to touch a man like that. And the indignity that women had when they went into stores to buy a hat, for example, to try on a hat. They could look at other white women trying on hats, but knowing that when they tried on a hat, they had to put a stocking cap over their head and then try on the hat. And they would then pay their money and say, "Yes, ma'am," "No, ma'am," paying their

money. How to break them away from fearing the giant in the county, the sheriff, and to go down to the courthouse was to go down to the courthouse and face the sheriff.

It took us all of a month, because, after getting permission from the elders – you know, it wasn't as if the movement wasn't doing anything, the people weren't doing anything – they had, uh, voter registration drives, uh, trying to get people registered to vote, uh, the Criteria Club in Albany, Georgia, went to the City Commission and asked for paved streets and better lighting in their neighborhoods. They didn't get anything, but there was activity, I'm saying. So, there was leadership, there was some leadership in Albany before I even came. But when Charles Jones and Cordell Reagon and myself got the permission from the adults [5:00] in the community to bring the movement into Albany, Georgia, we felt good.

We talked – first we talked to people who were just natural for us to talk to. At nineteen and twenty and twenty-one years old, we had to be talking to young people, so we talked to the young people first. And we got, uh, small numbers of young people – uh, ten, twenty, thirty, forty young people to come to meetings in the small churches where we were allowed to come. And the first church was a Presbyterian Church in the city. The other churches took a little time to think about it, because the word was that wherever the meetings were going to be held, the churches were going to be burned down to the ground. And that word spread all over the area. And some churches *were* burned down to the ground; they made good their promise.

But how do you get the fear that our people had out of them to stand up to the sheriff, stand up to the police, stand up to the Chief [Laurie] Pritchett? And the answer was our children, because the children had not been persecuted. They had not known any Pharaoh. They weren't afraid of their mama and their daddy [laughs] half of the time.

So, uh, after talking with them, week after week, and talking about nonviolence, because we were going up against, uh, a group of people who could deal with violence. They were looking for violence. If they could promote violence among us, then they could break us. But these young people they could not break, uh, if we confronted them with love. That's what we were talking about, confronting them with peace and confronting – and *expecting* peace from it, and confronting them with love and *expecting* love from it.

And so, although I can't remember a time that we lined up in the church before marching that we didn't find at least one switchblade knife, we had gangs that we recruited to march with us nonviolently and we were successful at that. We had four gangs: the Eastside gang, the Westside gang, uh, Northside gang, all of them. We had four gangs, and we had representation from all four of those gangs among, among the young people. Then we had high school kids, and we had Albany State College kids. And when the time came, they were ready to march. They were ready to – I think our first project was the integration of the bus station, the local bus station. And Charles Jones and I and Cordell tried it out first to see if they really were going to arrest, and we found out that they were going to arrest.

But one of the first things that came out of this was the feeling of strength that the people felt and the showing of strength that the people showed after they arrested their children. Because after that first march we had, when about two hundred and fifty-some people marched with us, we came and we filled two churches. Two churches were right in front of each other, Shiloh Baptist Church and Mount Zion Baptist Church. They were filled, and there were large numbers of people milling around in the streets outside of both churches, as well. [10:00] So, I dare say there were two to three thousand people at, uh, at that particular meeting that we had. And so, the strength that we showed made us all feel good.

That, uh, and so, hundreds of more people went to, uh, demonstrate after we had taken the first groups in, and that was the plan: to keep on until we filled the whole jail system. And they had to take us – we filled the Albany jail, then they took us to the jails in Americus and Sumter County, Terrell County, Baker County, Mitchell County, all the same counties that we would eventually go back to and organize. And, uh, it was just a great joy to find the same old people, bent over, talking with their heads down, were now talking with their heads up, and speaking to white people without fear, and demonstrating, you know, going in the store and taking, trying on a hat, and picketing stores who would not change, uh, in their morals. Uh, it was a great day for Albany, and, uh, the strength that we showed by marching together, but still loving.

JM: Yeah. In face of, um, in face of the hostility and in face of the, the relative savvy of Pritchett in managing to distribute all the prisoners across all these many county jails – this was a very fluid time. You're pioneering new techniques, finding a way forward. You're the first field secretary. You're really trying to find out how to make this work. Um, what was your, what was your mechanism for continuing to make your choices about how to move ahead?

CS: What was my –?

JM: How did you, how did you chart your course? What were your best ways to make your decisions about how to press ahead?

CS: Okay, first of all, I didn't make all the decisions and the SNCC guys didn't make all the decisions.

JM: Of course.

CS: We made decisions together. We had a steering committee, uh, Albany Movement Steering Committee, and most of our strategy came out of the steering committee. But we – our

first effort was to desegregate all public accommodations. And we did that by, uh, picketing – well, first going and talking with the people who owned their businesses, asking would they please, uh, change their policies. Then, when they would not change their policies, then we would picket them.

Or if something happened at a particular store – somebody got hurt or somebody was smacked or change thrown on the ground or something like that – then they, they allowed us to pay more attention to them than others, especially people whose had ninety percent black business and didn't have anybody on the, any black person on the cash register. They also attracted our attention. And so, we went to them and talked with them, "Look, we know that we got, we do more business here than anybody, any group. And, by right, you should, uh, reciprocate and allow us to make some money while you making money."

And if they – one, just one store, was Smith Grocery, I believe it was, we picketed it for two days, and it closed. And I guess other stores, seeing them close, opened their doors and started hiring. But they did it against the wishes of the City Commission. City Commission really wanted to continue the segregation policies. And the business people, feeling the hurt, wanted to change, because they – [15:00] ultimately, they didn't really care about what their policy was. It wasn't anything that put money in their pocket, but rather it was taking money out of their pocket. So, they wanted to stop segregating their customers, but it was a city policy to do so.

Same thing with the bus company. We went and talked to the bus company. The bus company wanted to integrate right away! They were willing to hire some black people and put them on those buses, but the city was against it. So, they weren't eager to continue, uh, driving empty buses around town, and, uh, that's the kind of effectiveness that we had. Uh, when that

girl was thrown off the bus, *bzooom*, nobody rode the buses. We started our own system of transportation. We did what we had to do. And soon, the city began the transportation system owned and operated by the city.

JM: Um, let me ask you about one key event, where maybe the fear was felt as closely as ever, and there were so many times when, when the fear was so close and so extreme, but the night at the church, Bloody Saturday, and, um – can you describe that, that event?

CS: Now, which one are you talking about? Are talking about in Albany or are you talking about in Baker County?

JM: Baker County.

CS: Talking about Baker County. We had many mass meetings in Baker County. And our strategy was, in Baker County came from the Baker County Movement's leadership, all of us together, deciding to make a demonstration, alerting news people around the country that we were going to integrate the voting process. And so, this day was a very pleasant day at the beginning, and we had about a hundred and fifty people in line, in a long line from the church there to the courthouse.

And as we walked toward the courthouse, I could see without looking – my peripheral vision could see a number of white young men with ax handles coming toward our group. Uh, they were at some point behind my vision, but I didn't hear them hitting anybody in back and I didn't hear anybody screaming in the back. So, I knew they were coming after, possibly coming after me. And so, I didn't do anything but continue my walk until I start feeling blows on my head. They knocked me down into the street, and I was bleeding profusely from all over my body, or my head region.

And they beat me down into the ground, and then the only saving grace that I had was an old lady, who had been in our nonviolent workshops where I taught them to throw their bodies across one another to shield the blows if one person was being attacked and share the blows with them. And so, that saved my life. They, uh, they stopped. She screamed out, "Stop! You're going to kill him! You're going to kill him!" And, uh, that's what all I remember. And, uh, they took me to the hospital in Albany.

JM: Last question, because I know we're just up against our time here. This has been quite a weekend of, of, uh, celebration and memory. Do you have any just observation about how the weekend has felt for you?

CS: Well, it's just been great, number one, to see people whom I haven't seen in fifty years, some who I haven't seen in ten years, fifteen years and so forth, two years. And that was one great thing. The other thing is that two good things happened during this one week. We signed contracts and we had an announcement that our radio station – we got a license for a radio station – and we signed a contract for sixteen hundred and sixty-four acres of land. [20:00] Those two projects *and* the celebration is just too much goodness and happiness and blessings to bear! But we thank the Lord for them.

JM: Thank you very much for sitting down with us, Reverend Sherrod. It's been a real privilege and honor. Thank you.

CS: Thank you. Oops.

JM: Let's unhook your microphone.

[Recording ends at 20:25]

END OF INTERVIEW