Civil Rights History Project
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Interviewee:	Mrs. Shirley Miller Sherrod
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Location:	Albany, Georgia
Interviewer:	Joseph Mosnier, Ph.D.
Videographer:	John Bishop
Length:	1:43:44 minutes

John Bishop: And we're rolling.

Joe Mosnier: Okay. Today is Thursday, September 15, 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, to do 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.

And we're delighted today to be with Ms. Shirley Miller Sherrod, um, here in Albany to talk about, um, some civil rights history. Thank you very much for the welcome and allowing us to visit.

Shirley Sherrod: Oh, thank you.

JM: Um, I thought I'd talk – I thought I'd start with just a question about –

JB: Hang on one second.

JM: Oh!

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay, we're on.

JM: We just had a quick break for adjusting microphones. Ms. Sherrod, let me just ask you to talk a little bit about, um, coming up in Baker County and, um, your family, your parents.

SS: Well, I, as you know, grew up in Baker County, Georgia. Um, I grew up in an area where, um, the family, our family, my grandmother's family had located sometime either before or after the Civil War. But, uh, I picked them up in the county in the census report, um, for 1870, and at that time, they were sharecropping. Um, they eventually – and I'm sure that was their purpose – started buying land and they worked together as a family to do that. So, my grandmother had about twelve or thirteen sisters and brothers. And, um, she ended up having, actually, fourteen children. So, the area – she was, her maiden name was Hawkins, and they actually called the area that I grew up in Hawkinstown.

And, uh, as I said, we were farmers. Um, my grandmother and her husband, Julius Miller, um, were given I think it was thirty-one acres by her father. And, uh, they farmed and continued to buy more land, so that by the time they passed on, they were able to give each of their children, um, a minimum of thirty-one acres each. So, you know, growing up around family, um, working on the farm, that was the early life in Hawkinstown.

And, of course, we lived in a county – Baker County had a particularly, uh, bad reputation in the area. Now, we learned later on during the Civil Rights Movement that each sheriff tried to make people [laughs] in the county feel that it was worse somewhere else. But I think Baker County probably stood out even more than the others because of the sheriffs that, uh, that we had in the area. So, during my lifetime it was, uh, L. Warren Johnson, who, uh, was

known as "the Gator." And, um, the Gator had something to say and something to do with everything that happened in, uh, in Baker County. And he had the county so tight, he had a speed trap set up where you just couldn't ride through, uh, without being stopped on the road. And if you were white, you knew you had to pay. Um, if you were black, you had to pay, but you could also lose your life in the process.

So, uh, growing up in that, in a very, very segregated, um, atmosphere was my early life, you know, going to a segregated school. Um, in fact, uh, the building we had when I first started school in the first grade, um, they were Army barracks that, uh, had been placed there facing each other with a porch between them. And, um, during the – I think I went to the Army barracks till fourth grade, and then we had to get out into churches to go to school, because they were finally building, uh, a new building for us in the county. And it was Georgia's answer to "separate but equal" – well, to integration. They were building supposedly "separate but equal," uh, facilities. So, while that was, that work was going on, some of us had to go to school. So, I spent part of my fourth grade [5:00] and fifth grade in one of the, um, Methodist churches there in the county. And finally, in April of '57, we moved into the new building.

JM: Yeah, yeah. Siblings?

SS: Yes. I have four sisters and one brother. And the brother, of course, is the youngest. [Laughs]

JM: [Laughs] And where did you come in the sequence?

SS: I'm the oldest of the group. Um, there were five girls growing up. And, you know, any man, I guess, especially a farmer, wanted a son. And during those years of growing up, um, my father gave all of us boys' nicknames. I was "Bill," you know, [laughs] so he – we'd be

around on the farm working, and he'd, you know – "Bill." And he and my mother would have another child, and it's another girl.

And, um, finally, um, during my senior year of high school, my mother kept getting sick. I didn't know what was wrong. And finally, at school one day, uh, my best friend asked, she said, "How's your mom?" I said, "She doesn't seem to be getting any better." She said, "Girl, your daddy was at the store yesterday giving out cigars. Your mama's going to have a baby!" He had convinced my mother to try one more time, "just one more time," for this son. And, um, of course, he didn't live to see him. He was born two months after he was murdered.

JM: Um, yeah. Um, your family was, um, involved in the church?

SS: Oh, yes. Yes. That – you know, the church doors didn't open unless we were there. [Laughs] So, we were there for everything that happened there in the church. And that church was made up of, of most of those people who lived in Hawkinstown. There were a few who didn't live in that area. The other part of the church was my mother's family, who lived in another part of the county, but it was mostly family.

JM: Um-hmm. Did, um, did the fact that your family owned property, did that distinguish your family in any ways that are important to comment upon in relation, say, to other parts of the black community?

SS: Yes, because there were lots of plantations in Baker County, big plantations. One of them, uh, was Ichauway Plantation owned by, uh, Robert Woodruff of – Woodruff of Coca-Cola. Um, another one was Pineland Plantation, owned by the Mellon family out of Pennsylvania. Um, you could tell the kids who lived on a farm that was owned by the family.

And I need to sneeze, I'm sorry.

JM: No trouble. [Laughs]

SS: [Sneezes] My sinuses have been acting up today.

JM: Bless you.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JM: [uncertain brief comment]

SS: Yeah. [Clears throat]

JM: We're back on.

SS: [Sneezes] Excuse me. [Laughs]

JM: Lots of pieces to this puzzle.

SS: Would you – excuse me, could you look in the refrigerator and see if there's water there? If not, I'll need to get one from the other –

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're back.

JM: Okay.

SS: Okay. So, you could really tell the difference between the kids who lived on land that was owned by the family versus those who lived on the land that's owned by plantation owners or others, especially during, um, harvesting time and even during some planting seasons, because the kids who lived on plantations had to work on the farm. For example, um – we used to hate it – um, there was a time when planting cucumbers, um, um, there was a buying point put up in Baker County, and it gave, um, the landowners an opportunity to have some income at a critical time, which was in May and June, for the farm. So, of course, all of the, you know, all of the landowners were planting lots of, uh, cucumbers. So, you could tell the kids who lived on land owned by the family because every day, every other day, Monday, Wednesday, Friday, at noon, our parents would be there [laughs] to pick us up during cucumber season, because you

had to go home and pick cucumbers. And it was so hard to get the stain off your hand, but, you know, that was the difference.

And, you know, looking back, it was – we hated it – [laughs] but looking back, it was something to really be proud of, because we worked hard, of course, on the farm, and it was a way of also being able to have some of the things that we wanted, like clothes, new clothes for school and all. But, um, [10:00] there was a special feeling even back then from knowing that you were doing something on land that *your* family owned.

JM: Yeah, yeah. Do you remember the approximate racial composition of the county?

SS: Of Baker County? During those days it was about sixty percent black.

JM: Yeah.

SS: Yeah.

JM: Yeah. Um, do you have a – when you think back, are there specific recollections around race relations, say, that might be related to the – you were born in '48, so *Brown* [*Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954] would have been –

SS: '47.

JM: Oh, '47? Excuse me.

SS: Um-hmm.

JM: You would have been a young child, still, at the time of *Brown* in '54, but I'm thinking about Montgomery or – were there moments when that question became something that played more on your mind as a child?

SS: Well, of course, um, um, I can remember – well, going – we had the, we had the worst buses. [Laughs] We had the hand-me-down books from the white school system, so you were – you know, you'd open a textbook and sometimes writing would be in it or pages torn out,

and you knew those things were coming over from, um, from the white school. And there were many times when the buses we were riding in would be so much in need of repair that they would break down. And even, I can remember sometimes very vividly, um, the bus being on fire, the fire under the hood of the bus, and someone hollering, "Fire!" And, you know, people are crawling out the windows and out the back door and the front door. And, um, the older guys, you know, would raise the hood and throw sand under, you know, there on the fire to put it out. Um, that happened many, many, many, many times, uh, as we were in school.

JM: Um-hmm. Um-hmm.

SS: And one thing sticks out in my mind during those days. Uh, the visiting teacher was the wife of the superintendent. And she just, she walked into – I was a junior or a senior in high school. I can't remember. I know I was at least a junior in high school, and she walked into this class that was a French class and just made the, the teacher feel like she was nothing. And just took over the classroom and started writing words on the bus, I mean on the board for us to pronounce, you know, and it was just – I just remember feeling so bad for the teacher, let alone us, but for the teacher the way she just came in and made her feel like she was nothing. And then made us say those words until we said them with that Southern twang that she used. I remember "government" was one of the words that, uh, she put on the board.

And I can remember thinking, you know, even more, because I grew up thinking, "I've got to – I don't intend to live my life in the South." I definitely planned to get away to the North. And, um, I couldn't talk about that to my parents, especially my father. He expected us to get an education – he stressed education – but he didn't expect us to go too far away from where he was. But I remember feeling that day that, that just made me feel even more, "I have to get away from this."

JM: Had you traveled outside the South as a –?

SS: No. During high school, um, with the, um, F – um, what were we called – NHA [New Homemakers of America]. We were not the – the whites were FHA [Future Homemakers of America]. With the NHA, I had traveled to Texas once to, um, a conference, but that's as far away as I had been.

JM: And for the tape, the NHA is the –?

SS: New Homemakers of America. The white girls were Future Homemakers of America.

JM: Yeah, kind of paralleling that same structure on the Future Farmers [of America]?

SS: Um-hmm, yes.

JM: Um, did you have much contact in the – after '61, and into '62, '63, when the Southwest Georgia Project began, and some folks started to do work in communities across southwest Georgia?

SS: You know, the only – well, we were very conscious of what was happening in Albany and, in fact, we – if, if, if we were not to shop here in Albany, we didn't. And I can remember members of the Albany Movement stopping in at our church to, um, talk [15:00] about what was happening and taking up a collection. We supported it in that way. My, we, my sisters and I would always – Daddy would bring us to a black dentist here in town, and here in Albany. And my father and that dentist would always be talking about, um, the Movement. And what I realize now, they were also talking about Baker County and how we could eventually get started there. Um, that didn't happen until after my father's death.

JM: Yeah. Tell me a little bit, if you would, about how each of your parents kind of navigated these years, late '50s, early '60s, you know, managing lives and a family of children in a context like that.

SS: Yeah. My father would talk to us all the time about his years of growing up and how, if a white man was driving down the road, they couldn't go around him. Some of them would just drive really slow sometimes to make them have to go slow along with them. Um, my father would not, he would not allow us to work in the fields owned by blacks – I mean whites – at all. You know how we could finish doing our work, and sometimes people would hire themselves out to do work in the fields of white people. He would not allow us to do that. He didn't want us working for white people, and we didn't.

Um, my father decided at one point that he should be registered to vote. He was paying taxes in the county, and so one day, he and my mother and aunt, one of his sisters-in-law, just decided that they would go and do that. And prior to that, though, I had relatives who had attempted back in the '50s and so forth. Their houses were bombed. Um, I remember Uncle – we called him Uncle Josh. Um, he and a man by the name of Benjamin T. Kunney – we just celebrated his ninety-ninth birthday here a week ago Sunday – um, Mr. Kunney, um, Uncle Josh, a man by the name of Ikie King, and, um, and Carl Broadway led that effort to try to get the right to vote in Baker County. And Uncle Josh's house was bombed. Uh, they bombed, um, Carl Broadway's car. I think they bombed Ikie King's car, and they planted, um, moonshine on Mr. Kunney's, uh, place to try to get him, uh, sent off to prison for life, um, or at least for a long time.

Uh, so, you know, I grew up knowing those efforts were taking place and then my father and mother, um, trying to register to vote. Uh, even when my father made the attempt to get a

home – he decided, uh, the farm was doing well, and he was working to get a loan from Farmers Home Administration to build a home. He, um, he qualified for that. He really, really, *really* wanted to have a home made of bricks. That was his dream, to have a brick home. But, even though he could borrow the money from Farmers Home Administration to build a house, they told him a black man could not borrow the money to build a brick home. It had to be either blocks or wood. And he and my mother chose the smallest blocks that they could find to, uh, to build that house.

JM: Yeah, yeah. Um, did you, did you carry through these years – I mean, did you have any opportunities in these years to have, um, any white peer contact as a child?

SS: None at all.

JM: Yeah, yeah.

SS: None at all.

JM: So, entry to the high school in '65 would be your first –?

SS: I didn't go to school with white kids at all.

JM: I had read that – I'm sorry.

SS: Someone got that wrong. [Laughs]

JM: Yeah, okay.

SS: I graduated from high school in '65.

JM: Yeah.

SS: And it was that summer that my sisters –

JM: I see.

SS: Along with some others in the county, after the Movement had started, that we decided that schools had to be integrated, and they stepped forward.

JM: Yeah. Let me pull you back, then, for a moment, and I know this is an awful and terrible thing, but, um, [20:00] your father was murdered in 1965.

SS: Yes.

JM: Yeah.

SS: Yeah. Um, it was at a time in our lives when he was, my father seemed to be really, really happy. My mother was pregnant, and he told everyone it was the boy. He, in fact, he gave out cigars. That's how my best friend observed it and could tell me that, you know, my mother was pregnant, because he was giving out cigars to everyone saying, "This is it this time! This is the boy!" He was having a new home built and having a room built specifically for the boy in the new home. I was graduating from high school later, you know, at the end of that school term, and he was happy about that, because now the oldest would be going away to college. And things were going well on the farm. Um, he was really, really looking forward to the future.

He had had, um, he and this farmer, Cal Hall, had actually done a few things together with goats. Um, and, um, I was told that in '63, some of Cal Hall's cows had gotten into our pasture. And when they came to round them up, there was one they couldn't, they just couldn't get him out, so he left him there. Um, I do know that my father was talking to people in SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] about the Civil Rights Movement coming into Baker County. I don't know whether that was, had something to do with what happened later or not.

But, um, on the morning of March fourteenth, which was a Sunday, um, I was driving the car. We were on our way to church and met Cal Hall on the road. And so, I stopped. He stopped. Um, my father was in the passenger seat, so he leaned over. Cal Hall said he wanted to

come and get the cow. My father told him, "If you come back tomorrow, then I'll get some additional help and, uh, meet you around at the pasture." So, we went on to church.

And that's exactly what happened the next day. My father took the man he had, uh, working on the farm with him. My mother's brother went there. And then, Cal Hall, who's white, brought a black man who worked with him. But, instead of his cow, he was trying to claim several, five or six, cows in the pasture. And, according to the others there, my father told him, "No, those –" you know, they argued back and forth about the cows. And my father finally said, "I don't have to continue arguing with you about it. We'll just go to court." And they – according to them, he was walking to his truck and, um, you know, he turned around to say something, and that's when he was shot.

Um, the grand jury – my father didn't die immediately. He lingered for ten days before he died. So, he died on March twenty-fifth of, um, 1965. The grand jury, the all-white grand jury, in Baker County refused to indict him [Cal Hall] for murder. So, he was never punished. Now, we later tried to sue him and, um – it's so interesting. I was reading, um, some notes. Um, one of the white students we had working with us that summer in Baker County kept a diary and just found it and published this book this year. So, he had a firsthand accounting of what happened in that courtroom when, um, during the trial, the civil trial we had against him.

Um, C.B. King, who was the only – he was our attorney throughout the Movement, uh, here in Baker County – would question potential jurors and ask them "if you know of any black people who tell the truth." And they had never heard that "nigras" – they'd say things about "nigras" not telling the truth. And, um, and so, each time C.B. would ask that the judge strike that potential juror, and the judge would seat them. And it happened in every case. Uh, and C.B.

would drill them, um, but, you know, they were all seated. And, of course, the verdict that we assumed they would come in with was what they came in with.

JM: Right, right. Um, I guess you were seventeen.

SS: I was seventeen years old.

JM: Yeah.

SS: Yes, so we – the Movement started in Baker County that June. [25:00] And, you know, we had our Bloody Saturday and we confronted the Gator [Sheriff L. Warren Johnson] over and over. We were also testing, trying to register to vote. The first time I went to the courthouse to try to register – there were three of us, and Charles Sherrod was with us – and, um, the Gator just pushed us, just pushed us down, pushing us back out of the courthouse. I couldn't register to vote. In fact, I didn't register to vote until later that fall. This was after the Voting Rights Act had been passed.

JM: Um-hmm. Um-hmm, yeah. And you went, that fall, I guess, to Fort Valley State.

SS: Right.

JM: Yeah, yeah. How did you, um, how did you manage the transition away from family, especially in a context as difficult as that one?

SS: That was so, so hard. And, see, after my father was murdered, I didn't know whether I could go to college at all, you know. He was our means of support. We didn't have money. Um, and that's how I ended up at Fort Valley. One of my uncles, um, who he really – he lived in Calhoun, which is in an adjoining county – really stuck with us and stayed with us some. And he, um, decided I should go to Fort Valley and helped to get the paperwork done so that I could go to school there. I didn't know whether I could go to college after that, but – so, it

was really, really, really tough leaving, um, my mother and my sisters here while I was at Fort Valley.

Um, I hadn't been there but two weeks, I think, when I received the call that, um, a bunch of white men had come and, um, burned a cross in front of the, in front of the house. It made it even more difficult. You know, the good thing is that we were so organized during that time – because the Movement had, you know, from June, and this was September – that, um, once one of my sisters got on the phone and called a few of the black men, the word got to the others, and they just came and completely surrounded these white guys, with, uh, with guns and everything. And, um, some of the younger black men who were involved really wanted to take a couple of them out that night, but the older guys, you know, advised them against it and advised them to just allow them to leave. You probably would have been reading about that one [laughs] had that happened.

JM: Yeah. Was, um –?

JB: Joe, I'm going to pause.

JM: We're going to take a little –

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're back.

JM: Um, I wonder how, um, how you began to try to add up or confronting a world, you know, with those kinds of dimensions when you're a seventeen- or eighteen-year-old, and, um, the Movement is trying to find a foothold in Baker County and, um – you know, what you can recall about your sense of your prospects in your life and what might, what choices you might make to try to move forward in your life at that point?

SS: Well, on the night of my father's death, um – see, I had not shared with my family that I really didn't intend to live in the South. I knew that they would have been against that. Um, so I was secretly planning that in my, in *my* own head, knowing that I didn't intend to live life here, you know. Um, but on the night of his death, um, as our house filled with people who were coming for support, um, I just felt, as the oldest, I had to do something. I just *had* to do something, um, as a result of what happened.

So, I actually went in, away from everyone, into one of the rooms. And I can remember that night, um, it looked like the moon was full, because I was sitting there, looking out the window, praying to God asking for an answer. I just had to do something. And suddenly, it just came into my head that you can, you can give up your dream of living in the North. You can stay in the South and devote your life to working for change. And I can remember once that came to me, I just felt such a calmness.

Now, I didn't know how I would go about doing it. And we were not active in the Civil Rights Movement at that time, because the Movement had not started in Baker County. But, um, just coming to that conclusion made me feel like I could go on because I had a game plan, um, [30:00] and it didn't become clear to me how I could do that, how I could carry out that commitment, until I was in my first mass meeting. And it was during my first mass meeting, when I saw people who had *every right* to be afraid – people who were living on Ichauway Plantation, Pineland Plantation, and on the farms, other farms, owned by white people in the area – not being afraid, you know. The strength we gathered from each other being in those meetings and planning and deciding to fight together, once I saw that, I knew that this was a way I could fight back.

JM: Who were some of the early, um, Movement folks in the county you met early on?

SS: Well, of course, Charles Sherrod. Um, back then, he had people like Ed Anderson, um, Bobby Jones, um, there were a whole list of whites, white students, who came, um, who were there that summer, um, Reverend [Isaac] Wells. Um, I can't think of some of the others who were with him during that summer.

JM: Yeah.

SS: Isaac Anderson, yes.

JM: Yeah. What were some of the first things that you did in stepping forward to find some place for yourself in that Movement?

SS: Well, of course, the marching, attempting to register to vote. Uh, we had decided – um, we were going, we had a trip coming up to Washington. Um, we worked on it for several weeks, because we, uh, were to testify before some members of Congress and march – we were going to march at the Justice Department about the injustices in Baker County. So, we were secretly – we were having mass meetings and then working on the plans for getting a group of people to Washington, raising money. Um, I'll never forget the, the Sunday night that we met at the church in a mass meeting, and then that caravan that included five carloads of people were leaving from that meeting.

Um, that meeting was held at Thankful Baptist Church in Baker County, my, the church that I grew up in, located on Highway 91. So, the normal route for us would have been to leave the church that night, go through Newton [Georgia] and keep coming north through Albany to go north to, um, to Washington, DC. But we knew the Gator would be waiting on us, uh, from where we were at the church, somewhere between there and the Baker County line. So, we assumed that he would be waiting somewhere north of Newton, between Newton and the Baker

County line, coming to Albany. So, we drove in a caravan, um, to Newton, but we went east into Mitchell County, and then we went north, coming on this way.

And, um, driving through the night – my little aunt, Aunt Josie [Miller], she was probably five feet, if that tall, but just a firebrand. She was driving one of the cars. We were going through North Carolina, and, um, she had some kids in her car who needed to use the bathroom, and so, she ended up stopping [laughs] on the side of the road. And in her attempt to catch the group, uh, she was driving a little fast and was stopped, uh, by a state trooper. So, he's shining the lights and asking her where was she going.

And she told him she didn't realize she was driving that fast, but she said she was trying to take these kids up there "to see the White House," you know. "They had never been," and [laughs] so, she gave him that story. [Laughter] It's so funny. Oh, my goodness, I'm so sorry. [note: she bumps her microphone]

JM: It's no problem.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're back.

SS: Okay. So, Aunt Josie [Miller], you know, she's just telling this cop how she's trying to get these kids up there to see the White House, you know, and, uh, he just let her go. [Laughs] She was the same one who, when, uh, during, um, Bloody Saturday in Albany, when they were beating [Reverend Charles] Sherrod so bad, she threw her body across him and said, you know, and told them to stop before they kill him, you know.

JM: Um-hmm, um-hmm. Did you, um, protest then outside the Justice Department?

SS: Yes. And we, we testified. I saw a little clip, a little news [35:00] article from that. Well, one of the things, uh, the Gator – they said he was saying back here if he had known we

would never have made it, you know. So, we were able to pull that off without the word getting to him. And, um, I can remember [Representative John] Conyers was in Congress, and he said that we needed protection going back to Baker County, you know.

JM: Yeah, yeah. Do you have a sense of, um – did that effort, did efforts like that, in that moment, did they feel, um, as if they might actually generate some response? Did you have a sense that the national government might respond in that context with any –?

SS: It was so hard to know just – we always called. You know, if we – when I went to try to register to vote and couldn't, you go back and you call the Justice Department. But you knew that many of them who were from this, I mean, who were working for the Justice Department were from this area, and they were not going to do but so much. When we took my sisters up to try to get them enrolled in school, the Gator was there to stop us. So what do you do? You go back and you call the Justice Department. Um, and in some cases, they would do what they were expected to do. You could never totally count on that, but, um, in some cases they would.

Now, the result of that, that, what we were doing that summer, actually led to getting an injunction against the Gator, you know. He – that's what finally, um, stopped some of what he was doing. He couldn't just openly do it. I think at one point they reported in the [*Atlanta Journal and*] *Constitution* his speed trap was generating about a hundred and fifty thousand a year, just for him, on the road, you know. So, a lot of that stuff had to, had to stop. Before that, it looked like he could do any and every thing he wanted to do and would always get by with it.

JM: Yeah. You would be at Albany State – excuse me, at Fort Valley State for two years.

SS: Two years.

JM: And then, come back this way. Did – what was the extent to which you were able to kind of maintain a close contact with your family?

SS: Well, I was here every weekend. [Laughs]

JM: Oh, yeah, okay, okay.

SS: Coming back, you know, and writing and, uh, you know.

JM: Yeah. So, you stayed very much kind of within the –

SS: Yes.

JM: Yeah. And what motivated the choice to enroll at Albany State in '67?

SS: Well, I was too far away from the work, I felt, and, uh, wanted to be back here.

JM: Yeah.

SS: So, that's why I decided to change, you know, come back.

JM: Yeah. Tell me about some of that activity, '65 to '67, as you're trying to move forward and –

SS: Um, well, see – I'm sorry.

JM: And I was going to say, too, a couple of different things are happening at different levels. Obviously, there's all the work that Reverend Sherrod and others are trying to push forward here.

SS: Um-hmm.

JM: There are also in this span of time, SNCC is changing a lot and kind of, out of Atlanta, there's a shift there.

SS: Right.

JM: So, yeah.

SS: Right. Well, you know, of course, we had lots of white people here, working with us in southwest Georgia. And, um, it was during the time when, uh, after the – from '65 to '66, well, of course, John Lewis was the director of SNCC. And then, Stokely was taking over, and Stokely was saying, "All whites had to leave," you know, "The Black Power movement has started." We didn't agree with that. So, it was during that period of time that we decided that the whites who were working with us didn't have to [laughs] leave.

Uh, and we eventually had to have that break with, uh, with SNCC. Um, that's how we ended up incorporating the work here. SNCC's work here in southwest Georgia was referred to as the Southwest Georgia Project. So, we just simply started our own organization to be able to continue to keep the whites who were here working with us and to continue to work here as Southwest Georgia Project.

JM: Sure. Could you, um – can you paint the essential picture of Reverend Sherrod, as you saw him, doing all this work in those years?

SS: I tell you, he seemed to be fearless. He had been beaten and threatened so many times, but he was so focused on, on, on change for this area. And I guess that's what I saw in him, and I definitely wanted change in the area. [40:00] I had made a commitment to stay in the house – in the South, rather – to work for change. Um, the work was dangerous, you know, quite dangerous at times.

In fact, um, we actually got married a little over a year after I met him. And, um, it was the summer of '67, I believe. We had a place here in Albany, had lots of students that summer, both black and white, here working. Um, we were, we were printing a newsletter, um, one Saturday morning when all but one person had left to go out. I was not feeling well that morning, um. We had this young child who hung around us a lot. He came every morning. Uh,

his name was Grady Christian. Uh, he stuttered, but he – it was just like he was our child, so to speak. He stayed there with me.

Um, and I'll never forget that morning. I heard these people come up. I knew they were white from the way their voices sounded. But we had white people with us all the time, so it wasn't, you know, it didn't disturb me at all. They were asking for him, and Grady was stuttering, trying to tell them. So, he eventually – they asked him, rather, to come go with them to look for him. They left and came back.

And, um, I was in the bedroom; that was the only space we could call ours in that house. And, um, I'd heard them go in the back of the house where the office was and then came into, burst into the room where I was. I was screaming at them to get out, and they – one kept approaching me, but just stopped. And then they left. Grady walked out with them, and he came back in the house, went to the back, and came and said, "Shirley, the house is on fire." They had actually set the house on fire when, when, uh, when they came into the place.

Now, we – the fire department came and the police came, of course, and there was no attempt to, to even look into it. Um, we were able to, my husband and I were able to get a few of our things out. We had to go to Baker County to stay at my mother's house that night. And, um, the, on the way to Baker County, we were about maybe six miles out of town, if that far, when we had a flat tire. Um, it was really dark. So, we're sitting on the side of the road. My husband is trying to think about what he's got to do to change this tire. He would do that even now. [Laughs] You know, changing a tire just wasn't his thing.

So, he's sitting there. And then, this truck drove up and pulled in right behind us. And they, you – we could hear them, a couple of white guys. They appeared to have been drinking some. And I'm thinking, "They didn't get us today. This is it." And um, but they didn't

recognize him, and they ended up – *they* ended up changing the tire. And we went on to, uh, to Baker County.

It was during – the incident that happened then made my husband finally realize that we couldn't all be together like that. And finally, after over a year of marriage, or about a year of marriage, we finally moved into an apartment that, where there were just the two of us [laughs] living together.

JM: Yeah, yeah. How was your, uh – I mean, to the extent that you want to talk about this, how was your mother weathering all these years, having lost her husband and then knowing that her daughter and, you know, her daughter's husband and all were in the context of such ongoing risk and –?

SS: Yeah, she was always afraid for us. But she was, she, she became a very, very strong person throughout all of this. And, in fact, that's why, when eleven years after my father's death, when she told us she was going to run for office, I was shocked! You know, we had, we didn't have – we had never had a black person elected to office before. And the only one that I can remember – well, we did run a few people for board of education. Mr. T. Kunney, the man who just became ninety-nine the other Sunday, ran against the Gator. You know, so we had made some attempts before. But when my mother decided she would run for office, I couldn't believe it, you know. But she did and she jumped wholeheartedly into it, and, of course, we were there, uh, helping as well.

And it was also the year that the Gator decided he would retire, and his son [45:00], "Scroot" [Warren Johnson], would become the new sheriff. So, they were campaigning for Scroot, and we were out there for my mother. And, um, on election night, um, we were all

gathered in Newton at the courthouse, um, watching the people sit at the table, um, counting the ballots.

And the Gator – you know, we're standing there in the foyer of the courthouse, and the Gator came from a back room and walked past us. And he just spoke. And then, he realized he had just spoken to Charles Sherrod. So, he came back and he said, "I take that back. I didn't know who you were." So, he and my husband are standing there, staring directly into each other's eyes.

Now, the Gator is – he was, um, he was so, you know, sure of himself and that he could do whatever he wanted to do, he – it would have been nothing for him to just pull his gun, and he did have a gun on him, and just shoot Charles Sherrod right there, with everyone standing there. So there I was about to have a heart attack. We had our two kids there. And they're staring at each other. And someone apparently, I guess, went out and told his son what was happening. And so, the son ran back in and grabbed his father's hand.

I've got to sneeze again. I'm sorry.

JM: No trouble.

SS: [Sneezes]

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay, we're back on. [Coughs]

SS: Wow. This is the first day this has happened in a while.

JM: Yeah.

SS: [Sneezes] Anyway, the son came in and grabbed his father's arm and pulled him, saying, "Come on, Daddy. Just leave that alone." Well, his son, Scroot, was – I mean, the Gator

was upset, because Sherrod had been telling people, "Don't elect another Johnson to office." My mother was elected, and, of course, Scroot was, too.

I've got to do this.

JM: That's okay.

SS: [Sneezes]

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're back again.

JM: Let me –

SS: So –

JM: Please.

SS: I was just going to say my mother became the first black elected official.

JM: Yeah.

SS: Yeah.

JM: Um, when Reverend Sherrod took his doctorate at Union Theological in '67 –

SS: His master's.

JM: Excuse me, his master's at Union Theological in '67 –

SS: '66.

JM: Oh! [Laughter] Usually I try to be so careful about these things. I'm not doing so well today. I apologize. Um, up in New York – was there any point where you traveled up there?

SS: Uh, no, not while he was – he was in school at Union, and I was in school at Fort Valley.

JM: Yeah, okay. Because I was thinking about that in relation to a question I want to ask, which is: When I think back on all this history and about your early sense of yourself that you would build a life outside the South, obviously you've made a commitment to all the work that you're doing here, but in the face of all of this kind of pressure, this relentless pressure over the years, did you ever think, you know, "Enough! We'll go somewhere else?"

SS: There was a time when, um – this was around '88 to '90, when, um, when, this was after the loss of the land at New Communities [Land Trust]. Um, my husband seemed to be having such a hard time, uh, getting beyond that. Um, I was having – our kids were – our daughter had gone to college in '85. Things were really, really, really tough.

And, um, one of my friends, uh, worked at, uh – she was the director of the Presbyterian Hunger Fund. And, um, she decided maybe he should, uh, work for the Presbyterian Church as a minister. He, um, I think, was a Presbyterian by that time. And, uh, so it would have meant moving to, uh, Louisville, Kentucky. And I thought, "This is certainly –" maybe, you know, it wasn't – the work I was doing here, working with the Federation [of Southern Cooperatives], Kentucky was one of the states that the Federation of Southern Cooperatives, um, worked in, and so, I knew that I could continue. It wouldn't have been right here in southwest Georgia, but I would have been able to continue that work, uh, with the Federation, just would be doing it from, uh, Kentucky. So, [laughs] [50:00] I can remember one night that, uh, Mary Ellen Lord and I were on – she was on the phone, and we had him on the phone and we're just begging him to do it.

And he said, "No," he had work to do in here this area and refused to leave. [Laughs] And I just couldn't understand when things were so hard. No one would hire him to work in this

area because of his civil rights history. Um, but, um, he kept saying he had work to do here and, uh, refused to leave.

JM: Yeah. Let me have you talk about the, um, the ways in which you moved into very, um, ambitious new modes of engagement and activism in the late '60s, and one of them, of course, is New Communities.

SS: Right. Well, see, we – when you're out there, and we were in all of these counties, um, working. And sometimes people would enroll their kids in a white school and get kicked off the land owned by whites, or did something else and they got kicked off. And so, the whole issue was, you know, we didn't have an answer for that. And, uh, the whole idea of trying to build a community actually surfaced. And, uh, seven people went to Israel to study the kibbutz and came back with a sort of different model to, for us to consider. And we ended up, um, creating an organization that we called New Communities, Incorporated, and we were being very ambitious. We didn't intend to just get bogged down with one piece of land. We intended to actually go about the country, buying land and turning it over to, uh, local community development corporations.

But we got bogged down with the first piece, which was a six thousand acre plot north of here, uh, in Lee County. I – you know, [laughs] I guess I was so naïve at the time I just really didn't think there would be a lot of opposition to people trying to do something to help themselves. So, you know, I'm sure others probably anticipated that. I didn't. So, it was really, really tough to, to, to actually have to experience the things that were done to us, uh, during that time. Um, unbelievable, looking back –

JM: Yeah.

SS: But, uh, it would seem that – well, you can look at the climate today and see some of the same thing. You're trying to help yourself. You would think there wouldn't be so much opposition to that. But it was such a threat to people at the time.

JM: Yeah.

SS: And I realize that now.

JM: Yeah.

SS: Um, but we, we just jumped into it wholeheartedly, uh.

JM: Can you say a little bit more about that vision? You've suggested it, but –

SS: Yeah. We had big plans. Um, in fact, we were able to get a planning grant from the Office of Economic Opportunity in Washington to plan this community. And that was such a – I mean, I can remember feeling so good, so free, you know, as we went through that process. Uh, they called them charettes [architectural design meetings], where people who actually were going to participate in this new community helped to determine what that community should be like.

So, we had all of these sessions talking about, uh, housing, you know, and where the villages would be located. And we had experts working with us to make that determination about where villages would be located, um, what kind of, um, educational system we wanted – I mean, we could dream – what kind of health system, uh, where industry would be located. We had a railroad going through with a spur onto it. What kind of farming we would do, how we would do that farming, treating people the way they should be treated – so we had a farm committee to deal with the farm, an education committee to deal with education, a health committee to deal with health issues, and so forth.

And, um, for example, with the farm committee, we knew that you needed someone – when you're out there working, you need someone who's the last word out there, so a manager. But the actions of that manager could always be brought into question at the farm committee meeting. And all of the people working on the farm, plus three members of the board and the farm manager were the ones who were members [55:00] of that, uh, farm committee. So, the farm committee met every Monday night, you know, because it was the most active.

After we didn't get the funding, after the funding from OEO was blocked by the governor for the state of Georgia, you know, it really threw us into a situation where we were faced with foreclosure. And once we worked through that and were really rolling, we were – we couldn't build the houses, we couldn't implement the other plans, but we *could* hold onto the land by farming. And that's what we did. So, the farm became the major, uh, activity.

For the farming, we were doing some very innovative things back then. The way we treated people who worked on the plantation was just totally different. Um, I can remember we called it the Big House. [Laughter] Looking at that house now, it was just a brick house. But, you know, people would naturally think my husband and I would move into the Big House. That's not the way we operated. We – uh, the farmer, he was actually a mechanic, the person who had the biggest family should move into the house. They moved in there, but the wife thought it was too much house [laughs], and they moved out into one of the other houses.

But it was never a thing where Sherrod and I, my husband and I, would be the ones to move into something like that. That's not the message we were trying to send out. We were not trying to recreate something that modeled what was already there. We were actually trying to build something that was new and *different* and *equal*, you know, and so it meant so much to us

to have that place, that land, uh, that was owned not by me, not by him, but by us. You know, it was a land trust.

JM: Yeah, yeah. What was the mechanism of initial financing?

SS: Um, actually, Slater King, who was C.B. King's brother, had lots of connections and was able to, through those connections, put together one year financing, because we had been assured by OEO that we would get the funding from the government and could really move on toward building this dream. But, um, when [laughs], when [Governor] Lester Maddox, um, vetoed the money from the federal government, and we therefore didn't have that, that's why we faced foreclosure. Um, for a couple of years, Prudential Insurance Company held the first mortgage. And, um, but we were, through lots of different creative things, able to put together the, the – you know, better financing, so that we were more secure with the land.

JM: Yeah. You mentioned that some folks visited Israel to kind of look at the kibbutz model as –

SS: Um-hmm.

JM: Um, can you talk about some of the other – and you have a little bit. Were there any other models in the United States at that time that you could turn to as inspiration?

SS: It was basically – it wasn't the kibbutz, but the moshavim method and – you know, because with the kibbutz, the children had to be away from the family, and that wouldn't work here with us. It was more of a communal thing. That wouldn't have worked here. Um, we had lots of people. We had, um, folks who were part of National Sharecroppers Fund, uh, Bob Swann, out of, um, the Northeast. You know, some of these people brought things that they were familiar with as we were developing, um, what it is we were trying to create here.

JM: Part of my question, I guess, points out how innovative this was and how ambitious it was.

SS: Oh, I tell people now we were way ahead of our time. You know, the things we were – the land trust. You don't own the land. You get a renewable lease. And so, that's one way white people in the area were trying to divide us by telling people who were involved, "You won't own anything there. You know, your house won't be yours," they, just a lot of things they were – as we were trying to educate people, they were trying to put things in place to get them to see that, uh-uh, it's not going to work. But, you know, we just kept moving on and we were – like I said, we were doing things that were innovative.

We were – back in those days, uh, one of my uncles who – my father's brothers and all, those who went on to college, studied in the field of agriculture, and so they were either extension agents or vocational ag teachers. And one who had been an extension agent actually came [1:00:00] to work with us. And he was so – I mean, even today, he's almost ninety years old, and we talk, and he's always putting together – he's trying to tell me, "Shirley," because we have this new place now for New Communities, and he's talking about pomegranates and, you know, making pomegranate juice and making pomegranate jelly and all this stuff, you know.

So, he, back during those days he was doing innovative things, so we had muscadine grapes when no one else – this was in the '70s – no one was planting muscadine grapes in this area. Um, the things we did with vegetables, the thing we did even with the hogs – we had, um, I think it was about a seventy-five brood sow operation, but instead of just taking those hogs to the market to sell them, we actually took them in to be slaughtered and then brought them back to the farm, because we had a farmers market there on US Highway 19, and we would cut out the hams and the shoulders and the bacon and all that. We were known for cured meats during that

time. [Sneezes] Excuse me. Um, we were known for sugar cane syrup, because we had a sugar cane mill set up right there by the highway. We, uh, had an old-fashioned smokehouse built right there by the highway, so people could come in and have that experience and get, uh, cured meats, you know. So, the things we were doing, uh, were totally not being done.

JM: Let's pause just one sec.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Yep, we're back.

JM: Okay, thank you.

SS: [Coughs]

JM: Oh.

SS: Excuse me.

JM: Take a little break, yeah, no problem.

SS: [Sneezes]

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay, we're back.

JM: Um, Mrs. Sherrod, I want to ask, too, about – you obviously would move in a very, um, intensive and purposeful way into a career in building this model and this vision and working in these kinds of ways. So, I'm really interested to have you talk about your choice to, um, study, work, and begin so much – the Federation of Southern Cooperatives, um, local, all the, later all the work on the Rural Development Leadership Network – yeah, you've had such a career in that.

SS: Well, you know, working out at New Communities, you could see the things – you know, we couldn't, we didn't have money. [Laughs] So, you've got to learn everything you can

learn while you're also working. So, uh, even though I had young children, spent most of my time out there, I would leave work – I realized accounting was something that was a great need for us. Uh, at times, we didn't have money to pay for the services, so I actually would leave work out there, run to Albany State for classes at night. Um, I took enough classes, business classes, to have a second degree in business. I didn't pursue it that way, uh, because I had decided I would get a master's in business administration, an MBA, and, um, Valdosta State was just starting a program and actually made it possible for students over here to attend classes at Albany State for that. So, I was, I was working and on that track, also, to learn everything I could learn, um, you know, to be helpful to what we were doing.

I was also organizing daycare centers, so I organized the first one in Baker and [laughs] I was actually putting one together, and it did operate for several years, at New Communities, right up until the end. Um, I was organizing farmers, because I realized one of the needs was to have someone, uh, serving on the ASCS [Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service] committee, so pulling farmers together, or, um, developing secret campaigns. You know, we – I'll never forget we had one, a meeting up there at the daycare center at New Communities, um, about twenty or thirty farmers, and told them, you know, "We need to select one person to run, nobody else. Then we need to get a copy of all of the eligible voters," and we actually – we took that list and divided it up so that *everyone* was contacted.

And then, I remember on the day of the election, [laughs] I couldn't stand it. We just had to stop by. There was a black girl working in the office, and she came out to the vehicle, and I said, "What is it looking like?" And she said, "Well, a lot of their ballots are coming in and not signed on the back and so forth." We actually elected the first black person to that committee.

So, there were just so many things you had to do while you [1:05:00] were still working to get at many of the problems that we were facing. So, you need to learn everything you can learn, [laughs] you need to work hard as you can work, and, uh, it was when I became involved with the Rural Development Leadership Network, um, we were facing foreclosure at New Communities.

Um, we ended up going – we were not borrowing money from the government to farm. But after the first drought, I think it was around '76, we, um, we didn't go even that first year of drought to try to borrow money. But after the second year, we had to go and try to borrow money to farm. And, uh, my husband, my uncle, and one other person went over. And the county supervisor said, "You'll get a loan here over my dead body."

So, that [laughs] put us in a three-year fight just to try to borrow emergency money for the farm. And with the size farm we were operating, three years was just too long to go, because we kept experiencing drought. Um, so, [sighs] it was – we had nowhere else to turn, but when you – my mother used to always say that her father would not borrow money from Farmers Home Administration because he felt it was just a way to take black farmers' land. And I thought about that so many times as we were dealing with them.

And, [sighs] even though you're borrowing – you have assets worth four and a half million, maybe you're borrowing two or three hundred thousand, but they're tying up all of your available assets. And that's how they got us. They tied up all of the available assets, and when – and then, once they had the web around us, they were ready to go in for the kill. That's basically what happened.

And, um, so, [laughs] you know, where do I go from here? What do I do from here? As I knew the end was near, I had actually applied to the Rural Development Leadership Network to

work on my master's, um, after losing the farm. And the thing that really, really pushed me to go on and do it, the land was supposed to be sold at the courthouse steps in June of '85. Um, the Rural Development Leadership Network's, uh, Institute was being held from May fifteenth to June fifteenth at UC-Davis [University of California at Davis], which meant I would not be here. It meant I had to miss my daughter's high school graduation, but it also meant I wouldn't be here when the land was sold.

And, um, so I was accepted into the program and went there and had to have a sponsor, so [laughs] I had to talk the Federation of Southern Cooperatives into sponsoring me in the program. And, um, of course, the land didn't sell in June, and I came back from the Institute and went up to Atlanta and talked to the Federation about possibly coming onto their staff. And they reluctantly [laughs] decided to do it. Um, so I started working with them in July of '85. The land was sold in September of '85.

Now, when that land was sold, the new owner gave us a very short time to get our things away from the land. And then, they dug holes and pushed all of our buildings over. And that farmers market that had the, um, old-fashioned smokehouse and the sugar cane mill and all of that stuff there by the road, they, and wherever the houses were – we had a few houses on the place where people were staying – they just dug holes and pushed them over into it.

JM: Um.

SS: So, it was a particularly tough – you know, you've got to figure out how to live from here, uh, daughter in college already, um, starting the master's program, starting with the Federation. The Federation didn't have a real presence in this area of the state, so I didn't have an office. I had been hired and had to develop a program for work in this area with the Federation, and I just got busy doing that.

In the meantime, we were also, the Slater King Center, a rehabilitation program, we were getting that going. So, again, [1:10:00] just – you couldn't, you couldn't stop. You just had to keep going at things that needed help. So, where I didn't have New Communities anymore, I poured all of that into trying to develop programs for other black farmers, uh, in this area.

JM: Yeah, yeah. Obviously, we'll just note here for the record that, um, that, um, the *Pigford* suit [*Pigford v. Glickman*] will later draw this arc out in a long, long span, um, and return a legal victory around the question of the experience of New Communities. Um, we maybe won't, since that's a more contemporary thing, have time for a long discussion of that today, but – very complicated litigation over many years – but I do want to ask you to reflect a little bit about the outcome of that case in the context of loss, the passage of lots of time, which can't be recovered, and then, a legal answer to a problem.

SS: Yeah, as I worked with the Federation, still working on the issue of land loss, so many farmers were losing their land. Farmers were being foreclosed by Farmers Home, trying to develop strategy for dealing with that, trying to help farmers, uh, put together good business plans, trying to, trying to deal with Farmers Home Administration employees on their behalf, you know. And sometimes even those situations were dangerous. I remember one farmer called me. He had received a letter, uh, with a time for an appointment to be at the office in Blakely, Georgia, and asked – he called and asked if I would come and go with him.

So, um, I went down there. It was Marvell Smith and his wife. We met there at the office, and when we were called in to, um, to talk with the county supervisor [laughs], he sat there and just – oh, my goodness. See, one of the things I had to do was learn the regulations better than the folks in those offices, so I knew the regulations and anyone who worked with me had to learn regulations. So, we're in there, and this guy is, um, he's just talking on, *nonstop*,

just on and on. He's telling the farmer that he would be foreclosing on the farm first, and then the home, because they had separate loans. His wife started crying, you know. And I'm wondering when was this man going to ever stop, so, and it looked like he wasn't.

So, I just stopped him, because he wasn't citing current regulation. He couldn't do what he was telling them he could do in the way he was telling them he was going to do it. So, I finally stopped him and said, "Will you put that in writing?" So, he pushed back from the desk and started looking at the floor and he eventually turned his chair all the way around, looking at the floor, and then looked at me and said, "I ain't putting nothing in writing." So, we just started arguing, you know, and arguing. I don't know what finally stopped us, but we did.

And then, he told, uh, Marvell Smith that, you know, patting him on the back – Mr. Smith had a sinus problem, so he coughed a lot – and so, he's telling him, "You need to do something about that," you know, and, um, "But you'll receive the notice in less than six weeks." Um, and he did, but we fought him so and fought him so that the Credit Act of '87 came, and so, this guy finally saw that these farmers had a better way of trying to deal with their debt so that they could save the farm. He ended up leaving the agency. But, I tell you, I was in, I was on his case, filing complaints and doing everything up until the time he finally left, you know.

JM: Yeah.

SS: But, um, so looking at the loss, you know, experiencing the loss ourselves at New Communities, and then working with other farmers, and then with the Federation working with so many more, not just here in southwest Georgia, but across the South, we kept realizing we had to do something about the land loss that was taking place. And so, we would work with, get with the other organizations and talk about it and, uh, kept saying that, you know, we were going to have to file a lawsuit.

So, finally, um, we were in a meeting in Atlanta, the Federation, Land Loss Prevention Project out of North Carolina, um, Farmers Legal Action Group out of Minnesota, uh, and we decided, "Okay, the time has come." So, uh, we decided that Land Loss Prevention and FLAG [Farmers Legal Action Group], uh, would be [1:15:00] the two, um, organizations. Both are nonprofit law firms. Um, so we – they sent in a request to try to get information on complaints from USDA, and the answer they got back was, "We don't have any."

So, we – the first lawsuit was filed just to get that, uh, the information. And the judge – there was a hearing, and the judge sat those folks from Farmers Home down, and he threatened to put them in jail if they didn't furnish the information. So, they ended up sending, I think, about twenty-five boxes to Land Loss Prevention and about thirty to the other law firm. And then, we decided to start with six test cases. And, um, that's when this slick lawyer out of, um, Texas, [James] Myart, came along and went to those six farmers and got them to sign a retainer with him, which basically took those cases away from the two law firms we had and changed everything. Um, those cases were eventually won, but he was eventually disbarred, based on what he did in those cases.

And then, after this had taken place, then the *Pigford* case [*Pigford v. Glickman*] surfaced. And, um, and uh, so then, this whole thing about whether we take *Pigford* all the way to court, or whether we look at settling with the government. And the issue around whether to settle or not was based on the fact that most of those farmers knew they had been discriminated against, but didn't – many of them wouldn't have had all of the documentation necessary, so we had this big fight then about whether to settle or not. And some of the farm groups were in favor of settling and some were not. And eventually decided to settle the *Pigford* case, and, um, in that settlement, there were two classes of farmers. Um, Class A claimants, uh, wouldn't have to have

a lot of proof to prove that they were discriminated against and they, if they were successful, they would receive fifty thousand [$50,000] plus they were supposed – they told us that they would get all their debt written off. That didn't happen in the end. Um, and then, Class B were farmers who had more documentation of the discrimination and therefore would get their one day in court to, uh, prove their case.

JM: Yeah.

SS: So, because – and see, none of the farmers were trying to get rich. The whole idea of maybe getting their debt written off was more appealing to them than anything else. Now, what happened, they told them, you know, you don't have much to prove with the Class A, so maybe they were discriminated against trying to get an operating loan or a farm ownership loan or even a housing loan and – but they used only one instance of discrimination because it wasn't supposed to be that difficult. And what the government later said, "We'll only write off the debt for the type of discrimination you received." Well, they could have cited many of them, but they only used one. And so, in the end, the government got them on that.

And they were supposed to, if they were successful, they were supposed to get fifty thousand [$50,000]. They would get twelve thousand, five hundred [$12,500] paid to the Internal Revenue Service as, um, taxes on the fifty [$50,000], but in the end, the government taxed the whole sixty-two, five [$62,500]. You know, so lots of things just went wrong with that.

Um, because they were not trying to get rich on this, out of twenty – roughly twenty-two thousand claimants – because one problem was that the word didn't get out to everyone. There was no announcement, you know, it was – so that's why so many of them didn't hear about it in time. You only had six months to file a claim. So, during that six-month period, there were

roughly close to twenty-two thousand who filed a claim. And because A was so simple, most of them – I think only a hundred and eighty-something filed a Class B claim.

JM: Yeah.

SS: In *Pigford*.

JM: Yeah.

SS: And that's *Pigford I*, as we refer to it, as we refer to it today.

JM: Yeah.

SS: So, at New Communities, um, I was so busy helping farmers, not just here in southwest Georgia. I went out as far out as Texas with the Federation, trying to explain to farmers. But it was driving from – I was driving [laughs] from Alabama [1:20:00] one night, where I had been over there working, and just thinking about the day, and I was – I'll never forget it. I was over there near Eufala, Alabama, when it suddenly dawned on me: We were farming in 1981 at New Communities! It meant we could file a claim in *Pigford*! It had – three months had gone by, and it had not occurred to me one time until then. I couldn't wait to get home – didn't have a cell phone or anything – I couldn't wait to get home to tell my husband that we could file a claim. I just burst into the house, telling him, "We can file a claim in *Pigford*!"

You know, so we had problems, because when we had to move our stuff from the farm, we placed them in different places here in Albany. We had had a flood in '94 and lost some of that. And, um – but anyway, this was 1999. Uh, we were able to get into that courthouse out there in Lee County to start – see, we didn't look – we left and didn't look into what happened.

Oh, my goodness! When we finally were working on the claim, we saw exactly what happened. They were letting big plantations out there borrow money that they were denying us. We had no idea, just no idea. There were things – they should have offered us servicing options.

They didn't do it. Uh, we saw then the bad things that they did to us. They were documented there in the courthouse.

Um, the man who bought the property at auction – we know it was worth at least four and a half million [$4,500,000], because we had been offered that. We just didn't want to give it up by some hunters who wanted the place. He paid – uh, he got it for a million dollars. And they turned around and let him borrow nine hundred and fifty thousand [$950,000] three weeks later – you know, just the injustices. We just had no idea. We were made to feel bad as failures – you know, we were made to feel that we failed, and it was all of our fault. But there was all of the documentation once we started looking into it.

So, we filed the claim, um, before the six-month deadline for New Communities, and that put us in a *ten-year* battle. It was ten years. Um, we filed the claim. We had our day in court, I think, in 2002. The hearing officer was the wife of the chief adjudicator for *Pigford*. The lawyer for the Justice Department seemed so incompetent. In fact, that morning when we, when we were, we went to the room where our hearing was being held. When the court reporter walked in the room and started setting up, she looked at my husband and I and said, "Who's the lawyer for the Justice Department for you all?" And we said, "A woman by the name of Margaret O'Shea." And she just looked at us and said, "Oh, you are lucky, lucky, lucky." We had no idea what she was talking about, didn't ask her to explain.

The hearing – when that hearing officer – I mean, when that, um, lawyer came in and started, she was making so many mistakes. But the strange thing is the person from Farmers Home was telling the truth. And so, she saw her case going down the drain. She called for a break, took him out of there. When he came back, he was lying. So, he – he and I had done some stuff working together – he was working from the agency and I was working for the

Federation, helping farmers, and, uh, he couldn't even look at me. He couldn't look me in the eye after that, never did, because she threatened him, and he came back in there, just lying through his teeth.

So, anyway, we left. Because she did such a poor job that day, the attorney – she even threatened the court reporter that day, and telling, you know, and said, told her, "I pay your salary!" She was trying to make her do whatever she was – I can't remember. So, anyway, um, when we left, we knew we had won the case. If you'd been sitting in the room, you'd say, "They won that one."

We were shocked to no end when we – that was in July, and in October we received a letter from the hearing officer saying she ruled against us. We couldn't believe it. Now, remember, she's the wife of the chief adjudicator, so our lawyer decided pillow talk got us, that they couldn't pay out that kind of money at the beginning of *Pigford,* you know.

So, then we had to appeal to the monitor's office. Uh, and the monitor – the judge set up this process so that farmers could appeal to the monitor. [1:25:00] The monitor couldn't receive any new information, but had to look at everything to see if there were any mistakes that would cause a miscarriage of justice. Excuse me. The monitor was a friend of mine. She had to recuse herself. [Laughs] So, she had to find someone else who could handle our case and she eventually did that. And that person took four years, looking through everything. But then, he finally came out with a document that was about fifty or sixty pages thick, um, pointing out all of the mistakes that had been made that would cause a miscarriage of justice.

And the way the process went, he would send that to the chief adjudicator. And until our case, we learned, once the chief adjudicator received that information, he would just pay the, the claimants. But in our case, he wrote us a letter. This was – by now it was 2006. He wrote us a

letter, saying it was an extensive case and it would take him some time to review it. We didn't hear anything from him from October – I think that letter was dated October 10, 2006 – not one word from him until July of 2009, when, um, when our lawyer [attorney Rose Sanders] called the night of July 8, 2009. And I answered the phone, and she said, "Shirley, have you heard?" I said, "No." She said, "We won!"

You know, so, [laughs] by now – you know, this is ten years later. So, I said, "Really?" And I was just this calm, you know, because I'm not expecting much. She said, uh, "You want to guess how much?" And I said, "Rose, is it at least ten – is it at least a million dollars?" And she said, "It's twelve [$12,000,000]." You know, just totally unbelievable, you know. We didn't get the paperwork until a few days later when she faxed it to us. But when you read it, when you read his decision – I cry every time I read it now, because, point by point, he looked at the research from the monitor's office and, just point by point, he seemed to get it, you know.

JM: Yeah. What have those, um, what have those resources allowed you to do as you look ahead?

SS: Well, [sighs] we knew we would buy more land. The dream continued. And, um, we started – once we got over the shock of it, you know, we did, uh – people who lost their positions when we lost the land, we made sure they got a little of the money. But we knew that we intended to buy land.

JM: Yeah.

SS: And, um, we started looking. And the lawyers locally that we had, I'll never forget, one of them said, "Let me take you out here to look at this plantation." And I'm thinking, "Plantation?" [Laughs] You know? So, we went out and looked at this place, um, a few miles out of town that had been set up basically for hunting. Um, and, um, it had several cabins on it

that could sleep maybe about thirty-five people and had other things set up, but it was all geared for hunters. And so, we were seriously considering that place when someone else said, "We've got this other place we really want you all to see."

So, one Sunday morning, we went out there and we got on this, um, this Jeep that's set for hunters, you know, you've got some sitting down here and these different levels. And so, we were riding over this place. And one of the things on this place was this antebellum home, uh, had been built in 1851 and had been totally restored by the previous owner. The previous owner had, um, made lots of money from developing a system to pay for gas at the pump. So, he had lots of money and he poured it into that place, because he was putting together his dream place. So, just in that antebellum home alone, we've heard that he put about three million [$3,000,000] just into it. [JB coughs] But there are cabins. There's a lake. There's a farming area. Um, it comes right up to [1:30:00] – the property line comes right up to the city limit of Albany.

And I remember feeling, "Antebellum home – why would we want that?" You know, that was – I was just totally against it. And then, my husband and others were totally into it. And so, looking at the other place, we could get workshops and things going out there right away and house people, versus this place. So, I said, "Let's just get someone from the outside to come in and help us decide which place."

So, that person came in and did the little study on both places and came back with his recommendation, totally not the one I was [laughs], I was pushing. I was hurt. Because I just – that whole antebellum thing was just, I just had an issue with it. I didn't know the history of the place at that time. But he gave us all the reasons why it was a better buy. It had been put on the market at twenty-one million. Um, when we went out to look at it, they had dropped the price to six point nine [$6,900,000]. The eighty-five acre lake has cabins down by the lake. He's run

electricity all over the place, wells, you know, irrigation, uh, and, of course, that house that he put three million dollars into restoring.

So, the person we brought in to help us try to settle on which one, he said, uh – I think someone – it was on the market for six, nine [$6,900,000]. Someone suggested maybe we ought to offer them five [$5,000,000]. He said, "I would offer less than that. You can get this place for less than that." And they didn't include equipment in it. So, then we started really negotiating. We got tough then and, um, finally settled at four and a half million [$4,500,000] with the equipment.

And so, that place is called Cypress Pond Plantation. Uh, we found that it was owned by probably the richest person, the original owner, the richest, the wealthiest slave owner in Georgia. He actually owned three places where he held slaves, so he owned about a thousand slaves altogether, and he kept slaves out there at Cypress Pond. He died, though, when – just as he was completing that antebellum home. And, um, he willed it to his son, um, who died about eight years later. And so, there's a – they auctioned things out there. There were a hundred and fifty slaves there at the time. We were told, too, that, uh, Jefferson Davis actually – before Paul Tarver died, the son – Jefferson Davis stayed there as they were planning, um, the secession or Civil War activities or whatever. So, it has a history.

JM: Wow.

SS: It definitely has a history.

JM: Yeah, there's all levels of interesting irony in that, aren't there?

SS: Yes.

JM: Yeah. Let's pause for just one sec.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay.

JM: Mrs. Sherrod, let me ask for some reflections from you to kind of bring us to a close here today about, um, how much – all this work that you've done, and that positions you as an interesting observer of transitions in race and gender in, uh, in the South, um, across quite a number of years now – and your perspectives on which things you do see substantial change, which places where you don't, and some of your evaluations as to why.

SS: Um-hmm. Well, the work that I did with black farmers led white farmers to see some success, um, in trying to deal with the government, and that's why, um – [laughs] that's why that whole issue of the Spooners [Roger and Eloise Spooner, white farming family of Iron City, Georgia] coming to me back in the latter part of the '80s for help with saving their farm surfaced. What people didn't know: The Spooners were the first white family that I helped, but I helped many, many more white farmers. I can remember a Farmers Home Administration, um, employee, county supervisor, saying – I was helping a farmer in one county, "Why are you helping him? He has an airplane and a Cadillac." You know?

Um, so the point was I, I, I, you know, going way back, I, I, I didn't just limit my work to – after the Spooners, when I, when I went through issues of [1:35:00], of having to deal with what happened to my father and actually helping a white farmer save land. Looking at all of the land loss issues we've had as black people, and then actually helping a white farmer to save his farm, and realizing in that process that the issue was more about poor, being poor, and not about race. And that's why I – for the last twenty-five years now, I have tried to point that out as much as I could through the years to try to get people here in this area to see that if we can work together, we can do more to bring change in this area than we can trying to work against each other. Um, so that's what I've tried to do through the years.

As a woman working [laughs] in this field, it's been interesting, *very* interesting. [Laughs] I can remember, even in my hometown, when I – the first cooperative that I worked to organize here in this area was actually in Baker County, dealing with a group of farmers there [laughs] who wanted to grow feeder pigs. And I kept telling them, "If you're going to grow these feeder pigs, you have to accept training." And they kept trying to get me to understand that they knew how to raise hogs. And I'm saying, "You have to accept training." And then, I decided, "Okay, I've got to go through this with them."

So, the Heifer Project [Heifer International] gave us, uh, hogs. We had to go up to Harris County [Georgia] to pick them up. And then I let those farmers decide who – there were fifteen sows and three boars, so they decided that three farmers would get the first start, five sows and a boar. I let them decide who would get them. I knew what needed to happen but I had to go through this with them, because they did not understand that they had to be trained.

So, as luck would have it, the day after the hogs got here, the guy from the Heifer Project came to go to these farms. So, we went to the first farm. Conditions were really, really bad. We went to the second farm. Conditions were really, really bad. The third farmer had bragged in the meetings that he was growing his hogs on concrete, and I almost told that guy from the Heifer Project that we're about to go to the best farm. Now, I'm so glad the Lord kept my mouth closed.

Because when we got to that farm and I saw the conditions there, it's like, "Oh, my goodness!" Um, [laughs] the farmer took us – he showed us where he had the hogs he had just received, lots of glass and stuff out there in the pasture. And then, there was some water out there. He said, "You know where that water is coming from?" We said, "No, where?" "From my kitchen sink!" I'm like, "Oh, no! He didn't say that!"

And then he said, "You want to see my hogs, my other hogs?" And, of course, the guy from the Heifer Project wanted to see them. So, he took us to where these hogs were growing on concrete. The concrete had broken up, you know, and so, it's a wonder they didn't get cut. And so, he had water, uh, streaming down in sprinklers from the top. It was going out of that little pen, and other hogs were out there wallowing in that. And then, he said, "I've got some other hogs up here," and they were under a trailer, a peanut trailer under a shed. And so, he kept calling the hogs. They didn't come. He planted some food out. They didn't move. He went and kicked them, and they were [laughs], they were crippled. I said, "Oh!"

So, the guy for the Heifer Project said, "There are some serious problems here." I said, "Let me tell you what they are." I wanted him to know I knew better. So, I said, "What I will do is get some training started right away." So, after he left, I called Extension, and they gave me the runaround. It was the University of Georgia Extension. So, um, so I said, "That's okay," and the very next meeting I started the training myself. So, when I started talking to the farmers about when to castrate and clipping eye teeth, and they're, "Oh, you know how to farm!" I didn't ever have a problem again after that.

And so, through the years, many, many farmers – I've had farmers who wouldn't buy a tractor unless they came and talked to me about it. Because I did business plans, and when I got staff here, you know, helping me, I made sure they knew how to do business plans, and then we would go with them to those local offices. So, they knew their lifeline to [1:40:00] money was through us, because we knew the regulations, we knew we could do the business plans and actually help them to, um, to get the finances and other things that they needed, to, uh –. So, I didn't – it was an interesting situation to be in with these male farmers and, uh, and being a female, uh, leading that effort.

And many of my efforts [laughs] – I was talking to someone who was here from USDA [US Department of Agriculture] in June, and I took that person down to see the commercial kitchen that we started in that, when – I think I told you we moved into that new school building in April of '57. When the school system built a new school, I encouraged the community to work together. I wanted that building to still be standing. And, uh, so we created a nonprofit, which was only the second one in Baker County. And, uh, in that building today is a commercial kitchen and a worker-owned sewing co-op, an after-school program, Head Start, just a bunch of stuff happening in that building now.

So, I took this person down there to see it and I said, "I will take you up to the pecan operation." And I told about how Ben & Jerry's [Ben Cohen and Jerry Greenfield, founders of Ben & Jerry's ice cream brand] wanted to help with the problem of black land loss and told Ralph Paige at a Farm Aid concert, "We'll buy a product from your farmers to go in the ice cream." And we settled on pecans and how I organized farmers to do that and in the process ran into racism, because we needed to, to uh, contract with a company to do the processing of the pecans. And everywhere we went, they said, "Tell you what we'll do. We'll buy the pecans from black farmers and we'll sell them to Ben & Jerry's, and they can say they have pecans from black farmers in their ice cream." So, Ben & Jerry's had to get, um, their own supplier to do the processing for us. They paid premium price, plus – they paid market price plus a premium price. I got farmers to save half of the premium price toward getting their own facility. And then, so that, they acquired that in '97, and it's still operating. Women are operating it now.

So, I was telling this guy that, and he said – you know, and we were riding along in my car. He said, "I have heard that story many, many times, but I heard that Ralph Paige was the person who did that." You know, [laughs] so a lot of my work got – you know, I'm just, I'm out

here working, trying to bring change, not really trying to get the credit for what I do. And in many cases, because I was working in organizations, um, where the leadership was a male, that work became known as theirs.

JM: Yeah. Any young women farmers?

SS: We're trying so hard now to, um, to, actually – there are a few. But that work that you see going on down there, and some of the work in this room, uh, is geared toward bringing some women back into agriculture.

JM: Yeah. I would love it if we could just keep talking all the rest of the day and beyond, but I know we need to wrap up. So, this has really been a great honor and a privilege. Thank you, Mrs. Sherrod. I really appreciate your sharing all this with us.

SS: Thank you.

JM: Thank you.

SS: Okay.

[Recording ends at 1:43:44]

END OF INTERVIEW