

An oral history from Steven Wise of the VSCRC, 2015

Oral histories taken for the VSCRC 50th Reunion Oral History Project in Blackstone, VA. Professors Brian Daugherty and Ryan Smith interview former members of the VSCRC to obtain information about their work with the organization in the 1960s, in addition to their work with Civil Rights in general. Virginia Student Civil Rights Committee Oral History collection.
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(Unedited)

[Steve Wise] Probably, but I'm getting involved with the oral history project at Georgia State University. I was one of the people who worked on the Great Speckled Bird newspaper and they have digitize the entire paper.

Ryan [Smith] Excellent.

[Steve Wise] And now they want to start doing oral histories of all the people who worked on it. There's over 400 staff members. I don't think we're gonna get them all.

Ryan [Smith] You'd need an expert-

[Steve Wise] Yeah so, so, so several of us are working with some of the historians at Georgia State on setting this thing up and getting it rolling. It's just in the beginning stages right now.

Ryan [Smith] Great.

[Steve Wise] But the guy who is- runs the oral history center there- Cliff Kuhn- was also a member of the paper's staff. So, there's that connection.

Ryan [Smith] Okay, good. Well, we got some boilerplate stuff to get out of the way at the start. So I'm going to just announce that I'm Ryan Smith. I'm a faculty member at Virginia Commonwealth University. And I've got Brian Daugherty with me as well, is also at Virginia Commonwealth University. And we're going to interview Stephen Wise.

[Steve Wise] Steve.

Ryan [Smith] Steve Wise, a former member of the Virginia Students Civil Rights Committee or the VSCRC. And we're talking today on Saturday, June 20th, 2015 at the 50th anniversary of the VSCRC here in Blackstone, Virginia. And so Steve, do you agree to be interviewed and recorded?

[SW] Yes.

[RS] Thank you very much. Can you tell us your, your full name?

[SW] My full name is John Wilson Stevenson Wise, Junior. Its a mouthful.

[RS] So was that the same name that-

[SW] It's my great-grandfather's name and so my father had it, and so I had it or they just never took a name out, so it's all four names.

[RS] Oh yeah, but was Steve Wise the name that the VSCRC folks knew you as?

[SW] Everybody has known me as Steve Wise, so I kept that up. But my legal signature, you know I just put: JW Stevenson.

[RS] But when and where were you born?

[SW] I was born in Raleigh, North Carolina. Dad was overseas and so mom was living with her folks in Raleigh.

[RS] Which year?

[SW] That I was born, in 43. And we lived there 'til the end of the war. When he came back then when he went back to uh, where he grew up in Newport News.

[RS] He was in the military?

[SW] It was overseas fighting in World War II. So he was in the Transportation Corps, doing logistical work for the Army,

[RS] For the Army. Did your mother work?

[SW] She did. She was working before they got married. She- when she graduated from Chapel Hill, I guess through family connections, she got a job working with a Senator, whose name I don't remember. From North Carolina. So she'd worked in Washington and Dad was station there at one point in '42. This is before being sent overseas. And so they met, then six months later they got married.

laughs] I mean it was pretty fast.

[RS] And then he shipped out and you came along.

[SW] Yeah. So I came along what, a year after they got. They got married in Georgetown. Her uncle was presiding, he was head his church, so alright.

[RS] So did you have any brothers or sisters?

[SW] I have two brothers who are both dead now and two sisters. So there were five of us growing up and mom, you know, she has full-time taking care of five kids.

[RS] Where were you in that pecking order?

[SW] I'm the oldest.

[RS] The oldest, yeah. Before we get into the VSCRC stuff were you, growing up, involved with any kind of social activism or community work?

[SW] Not really. I mean, there wasn't any such thing. I remember the first sit-ins beginning when I was, uh I guess I was a junior in high school. And I remember being interested in it. My father had always preached about how segregation was un-Christian and whatever, so. That was sort of a Wise family saying. I mean, the Wise's after the Civil War all went into the Republican Party. And so there was a lot of indoctrination, so to speak, was in that, which is very unusual for kind of a southern white boy to grow up with that kind of thing. But, you know, I didn't grow up hearing "nigger" or racial jokes or anything like that.

[RS] Tell me where you grew up at?

[SW] Newport News.

[RS] Newport News. And you mentioned your father's religious background.

[SW] Well, he was on the vestry of the church.

[RS] Which church? Or, which denomination?

[SW] The Episcopal church. And at one point he was in um, at St. Paul's where his father had been on the vestry and later when we moved up to Hilton Village then there was a church right next door, St. Andrew's. So that's the one that I grew up in.

[RS] I study religious history. And so I'm curious about religious angle here. So I interrupted you, before that you were telling us about-

[SW] Well, you know the family. I mean, just both sides had been heavily involved in the

Episcopal church for a long time. Both my great grandfathers- not well, on my momma's side both my great grandfather's were bishops. There's a long history in the Episcopal Church. And my mother had grown up, my grandfather was a doctor, but was part of the Episcopal church's mission to China. So my, my mother and her six siblings all grew up in Shanghai.

[RB] Quite active. Very active, right?

[SW] Right.

[RS] And so you mentioned how your father had thought that segregation was un-Christian. So even before your involvement in civil rights, you mentioned that your family was more open to change than most other white families at the time? Yeah, that's kind of weird because when Henry Wise was governor, he led Virginia out of The Union, after hanging John Brown. And then at the end of the war, but he had never gotten along with the South Side slave owners who ran the state. And so he decided to go in the Republican Party. Virtually all the other Wise's went into the Republican Party. And I saw an exhibit at Valentine museum, this is couple decades ago. And this was like one of the first things, the Valentine Museum and done that was sort of progressive. And so there was things about slavery and segregation and reconstruction, whatever there. There was a picture of my cousin, John Sargent Wise, who had been the head of the Republican Party here. And had sued, in conjunction with a lawyer- a black lawyer in Richmond, to overturn the 1902 constitution which set up segregation as a legal system. And the thing that really struck me was: he's a dead ringer for my father's older brother. I mean, just exactly exactly the same in the photograph they had of him in there. It's the first time I'd ever seen a photograph of him. I mean, I knew the name but...

[RS] Very interesting. Tell us a little bit more about your education. You went to high school?

[SW] I went to Newport News' public schools and then went to Georgia Tech to be an engineer. And I got dissatisfied with that, transferred across town to Emory where I graduated in history. And I guess my senior year. I mean, I've done some- a little bit of civil rights work or just kind of go to a sympathetic meetings and whatever, but not really doing anything. But a classmate, Gene Guerrero had been involved in the Mississippi Freedom Summer and then setting up an organization called Southern Students Organizing Committee [SOCC], which was trying to link up white students who were pro civil rights into an organization and encourage more people to do that. And so I had known Gene since I'd transferred to Emory in '62, and I don't know how close but I mean we were constantly in touch. He wasn't very good at writing stuff, so he would always write up stuff and then I would edit it and make, you know, the English better.

[RS] So- so I'm trying to place that in time?

[SW] This is '62 to '65. And SOCC started in '64 right after Mississippi Freedom Summer. And basically it grew out of the white folks project. That was part of Mississippi Freedom Summer. And I was not involved in that, but I knew about it. I was scared to death that people were gonna get shot and killed in Mississippi, which actually happened. And I spent the summer and on the Lower East Side of Manhattan working in Episcopal Church program for, with mainly black and Puerto Rican kids.

[RS] How did you get up there?

[SW] The campus priest had a connection with the people who ran that and the guys who were running it there were actually very active in court. And when the Bedford Stuyvesant riots

happened in the summer '64 when I was up there. They were heavily involved in trying to do some community work with that and whatever. They didn't get all of us who were there working with the church, who were working with the kids program involved in that. But of course we knew about it. I mean, they talked about a lot.

[RS] And had you been involved with civil rights at all in Atlanta? While you were at Emory?

[SW] I contributed money to SNCC

Student Nonviolence Coordination Committee] but I didn't really do, you know I wasn't really active and doing sit-ins or anything like that. But I knew some of the people who were. Sort of on the fringes of that. But I guess when the Berkeley Student stuff happened. And this is an outgrowth of the Mississippi summer as well, because they were setting up tables to raise money for civil rights and whatever, and at Berkeley. And then when that whole free speech movement happened, I got really interested in that. And Steve Weisman, who was a graduate student at Berkeley, came around doing campus traveling in the spring, talking about what had happened, whatever. And he met with a group of us, a group of us at Emory. And he was just, I mean, I was fascinated by that. Several of us began getting a little bit more active and doing kind of student rights, reforms, and whatever. Also against some of the institutionalized anti-Semitism that existed at Emory, at Emory. So we were interested in that, and I had met besides Gene, and I began to meet other people who were involved in SSOC some doing campus traveling. So when I went to graduate school in the fall of '65 up in Charlottesville I met Hamlet, who was SSOC's main campus Traveler. He put me in touch with the whole group of people who had started VSCRC and the Students of Social Action, which later became a joint SSOC-SDS chapter.

[RS] And who were some of those individuals?

[SW] I saw one of 'em here today, Howard Romaine, his wife, Anne Romaine who's now dead. Who else was there? Bill Leary, who for some reason is not here today. Roger Hickie who is here, Tom Gardner. Most of them were undergraduates. So there were a few of us in graduate school. It was a very kind of an interesting time, at UVA. There was a guy, Javier Solana, who had just been kicked out of Spain. They had been in jail under the Franco Regime and they let him leave the country. So he had a physics scholarship at UVA and spent two years there. Later, it turns out to be one of the leaders of Spain and then NATO. You know, but I just knew him as a very interesting graduate student. His uncle had been one of the leaders of the regime that Franco had overthrown in the thirties. So...

[RS] And, uh, you were a graduate student in history then at the time?

[SW] Right, I was working with Paul Gaston.

[RS] Okay. That's what I was getting at, can you tell us-

[SW] I was working- and I was working in Southern history then. Later I changed my whole interest in focus in history.

[RS] So it's the fall of 1965,

[SW] Right.

[RS] When you first-

[SW] And that's when I first and I, first. The first time, I mean, I've met some of the people there who were- but we went down to Victoria, where Nan was based and and I met her for the first time. We hadn't known each other, but we graduated at the same time, she from Mary

Washington, and me from Emory. That's the first time I met her, it was around Thanksgiving. Or maybe it was before. I don't really remember, but sometime in the fall. So you know, that sort of planted the seed for my work in the coming summer. Which is what I did.

[RS] The summer of '66?

[SW] In the summer of '66 I worked in Dinwiddie County.

[RS] And you were probably stationed with a local family then?

[SW] The family I stayed with was Willie Gye Edwards and his wife, Ursula, and they had a, oh, well it wasn't Ursula's, they had one little kid who was like, six or seven years old. And then they had, Mr. Edwards had Alfred Edwards. I think, I think Alfred was his name, I'm not sure. Anyway, he was a student at Virginia Union, I think. Anyway. So he was still an undergraduate but, you know, a year or two, possibly three years, younger than me. But yeah, basically. And that kind of freaked him out a little 'cause we shared a bedroom and whatever. And he was like, "This is the first time I'm sleeping with white people!" Which was kinda funny.

[RS] Was the family nervous about you being there or about-

[SW] No. You know, Mr. Edwards was a teacher at the, at the black high school. He was also the head of the NAACP. And basically it was, in some ways, he viewed me as kind of giving him a certain amount of prestige, whatever. His daddy had a saw mill and various other kinds of businesses. So the Edwards clan, so to speak. I mean, there were a bunch of 'em, who ran various little stores and whatever. I mean, they were kind of like the elite in Dinwiddie County. But he introduced me to them. I mean, all the people who worked within the NAACP and people who "would be good to do this" and "not so good to do that," you know, everything he said turn out to be true. So

[RS] It sounds like

[SW] He was- He was a- he had also relationships with the, you know, the white politicians there which was all, you know, they wouldn't come in house. But they'd talk out in his driveway. But they'd drive over to his house, but I mean he lived in a nice house, but maybe half a mile from the courthouse. Pretty close.

[RS] It sounds like the NAACP and the VSCRC were working pretty closely.

[SW] We did the, uh, what every Civil Rights project did, and that was to try to work with established black leadership, You're not trying to supplant people. You're trying to get things going. And so, yeah, I mean, Nathaniel Hawthorne was a ball of fire down in Lunenburg County. but he was like the head of the NAA

CP] there you know. And sometimes you would find guys that, but because of their position in the community, they just couldn't do stuff or they're too scared to do stuff. Mr. Edwards wasn't scared, but he already had an established position and his father before him had one. So he had a certain level of protection. Now when they merged the school systems, I'm not sure what happened. But I know that a lot of black teachers lost their jobs when the segregation ended with the school system was a terrible thing.

[RS] What was your primary work? When you were there?

[SW] Well, that's a good question. I mean, I- looking back I'm not really sure. During the time I was there because of the restrictive voter registration laws in Virginia, there was one day, and I managed to recruit two people to go up there and register to vote. So I spent, spent two months to register two people to vote. Kinda hardly seems worth it, but there was also the primary going

on in Virginia that in particular one in particular I was interested in was the Senate race were A. Willis Robertson and one of the, Pat Robertson's father wanted staunch segregation in the state of Virginia. My cousin was running against him. And managed to beat him by six hundred, six hundred nineteen votes, just a little over 600 votes, in the Virginia primary. They had no Republican opposition in the fall. And so- that was basically the election. But I remember recruiting people to go and poll watch. You know, and some people said they would do it and did it and other people said they would do it, and they didn't do it. But that was the only, the only election in those two months that I was there. But you found out who was reliable and who wasn't. And I remember doing some poll watching myself and these people kinda looked at me and said "say who are you?" Right. But I mean, they, they couldn't. But it was also interesting to watch, as it is all paper ballots. And people made x's way outside the box. But I mean, the lines crossed inside the box, you know, but it's not. There's not much point in challenging these because the intent is obvious, even though it's not according to court. But still, it was my first experience doing that. Kind of an interesting process. And of course, all white people there in McKenny, in the voting precinct there.

[RS] And can you tell us what was the general response to the white community to the VSCRC in Dinwiddie?

[SW] In Dinwiddie County I never had any problems. There was a Klan rally on the edges of the county up towards Petersburg. Not sure that it was actually in the county or not. And I went to that, but hung on the fringes of it, because I was interest to see whether they were gonna mention me or not. They didn't. So it later turns out this guy that was posing is the head of the Ku Klux Klan and was given speech and his cadences were all wrong, his kind of speech patterns were, I mean, he was from Pennsylvania, but he was trying to be the head, and represent the Klan from Pennsylvania by giving a speech here in Virginia. But I mean, his rhetoric, was all- I mean, it was weird. It turns out he was an FBI agent. Seriously. Then later we found out the same guy, interviewed Nan but posing as a sociology professor from the University of Delaware, FBI agent. And he was kind of investigating. Both sides, I guess. I don't know. I don't know that anything came of that, but when they had the Klan rally down where Nan was, and she can tell you more about that, It was some touch and go stuff there. But there was nothing that came out of the one that I went to and they never mentioned my name, you know, and people didn't look at me strange or anything. I hung onto the side so I can get in the car and go. If I had to, but there wasn't anything- I was kind of curious as to what was going on.

[RS] So the whole time you were-

[SW] I'd never had any problems there. But it also may have been because the Edwards family had established relations and whatever so that they didn't have that problem. But that's just a guess. I mean, I'm only there two months so...

[RS] And at that time period, was was, could part of it had been that the local whites recognized that working with local blacks, working with an organization like the NAACP was a better alternative than perhaps the rising black power movement or-

[SW] I don't think that that hit their mind-frame yet. But I don't really know. I mean, I just didn't have any interaction with white folks there. Other than maybe to go into a store or something. But the main store I went into there was run by the Willie guy's sister so. She ran a little country store and at a gas pump out there. So I've got all my gas there, bought Coca-Cola's and

whatever else there, and she lived cross the street. And they had big parties and whatever in their backyard, so I'd be at those parties.

[RS] But also beyond the Edwards in your hosts, you mentioned recruiting the two folks to come and register to vote.

[SW] Right.

[RS] Were you're going door to door at the time or were you visiting churches?

[SW] These were these were people, uh, the names of which were given to me by the people in the NAA

CP] So I just went out there and try to encourage them and actually, you know, chauffeured one person, the other person drove on their own. But I think they also wanted just the- somebody to be there with them. So but there wasn't any any problem there. There were little, there was some trepidation there, but they wanted to do it.

[RS] What did they make of you getting involved.

[SW] I don't know. I just I didn't see or feel any kind of hostility or whatever. I think it was okay. But uh, you never know. And in that two months period I was trying to do other things like work with teenagers and whatever, but that turned mainly into high school girls who wanted to flirt with me, which, what are you gonna do?

laughter]

[RS] Did you have a car?

[SW] I did have a car, not mine, but it was given to the project by a professor of English, Charles Vandersee I think his name is, from UVA. And so I drove it from Charlottesville down there, so really- I had one repair to make that summer. But that I mean, very reliable. Simca, I don't even know if they make Simca's anymore 'cause it was a Swedish car.

[RS] Did you hear about any boycotts or organizing?

[SW] No. The Dinwiddie County thing wasn't as well organized as, say, the project down in Victoria where they had the boycott. But I think also there was the, there was a higher level of discrimination going on in Victoria that people wanted to fight back against. And also, the NAA CP] is also stronger there, I mean under Mr. Hawthorne's leadership. Willie Gye was kind of an accommodationist. But I mean, you know, and he and his dad had obviously been there for years and years and years. They had a certain amount of property and businesses and all that. And so they had an establish relationships with different people. But they didn't want to advance things, you know, and they were interested in getting more people to vote and building up power gradually. And I'm not sure how all that ended up, 'cause I was only there the two months, but it was a good time, for me.

[RS] Were you the only VSCRC-

[SW] I was the only one. Now, I apparently Bill Monnie had been there before me, but when I was there, I was the only one and I never heard from anybody about previous guys there or other people, you know, although I knew that they had been there.

[RS] Meaning the previous summer?

[SW]The previous summer- And I think Bill went back in in the winter at some point too, but he had left by the time I got there. Or maybe he went to another county. I'm not sure. But I, by the time I was there which was basically June, July, and a little bit of August, I was the only person.

[RS] Did you ever go to the, I think there was offices in Victoria, is that right?

[SW] Yes, we had occasional meetings and so I would drive down there. Actually it was here in Blackstone. Bill and Betsy-Jean Towe, the place where they lived and it was kind of like the meeting place for all of us.

[RS] How many people would be at the meeting?

[SW] 10,12,15 something like that, it just depended. Sometimes, sometimes sometimes there would be people from other... "Did everybody get along?" Well, there were some tensions between David Nolan and some of the other people on staff. Now he's apologized this morning for being a teenaged twerp.

laughter] Yeah. Yeah. So he took out some of his rebellion on us. He was kind of manipulative, whatever. So he's more aware now of what he did when he was that age.

[RS] It sounds like you were happy to get back up to Dinwiddie?

[SW] I mean, yeah. I mean, I never had any conflicts with anybody. So, the thing between Nan and David, I don't know, that had gone on- that preceded my involvement. But it went on for a long time.

[RS] And can you tell us a little bit about the relationship between SSOC and VSCRC and where are you familiar with any of the SCOPE workers that were in Southside?

[SW]I never heard about SCOPE until they started organizing this thing, they asked us to come to here for the 50th anniversary and I'm kinda shocked that I had never heard of it. I mean, I knew about the Virginia Council on Human Relations and some of their involvement, and whatever. Although they weren't involved in our Southside project, but they were involved in civil rights activities and had been for quite some time. But, and I think a lot of that knowledge came from Paul Gaston who was in touch with a lot of that in Charlottesville.

[RS] How much did you get to know about the funding? Did you get a stipend yourself? Did you see donations coming into the offices?

[SW] You know, I don't I don't remember. I must have gotten some money because I had some money. And I certainly didn't have any of my own, but I don't know how much we got paid. I don't remember how much, but it wasn't much.

[RS] And who is leading VSCRC at the time? Who would have been kind of the managers or-

[SW] Well, Bill and Betsy-Jean were kind of the adults among, you know they were good ten years older than the rest of us, and they handled a lot of the money stuff. But I can't remember how- they must have sent me a check or something like that, but it wasn't for much. And I don't remember how often it came or whether I had to go over to Blackstone to pick it up or- I don't, don't I just don't recall that. And the records I had from that time, I had it in a box stored in this house. And you know my roommates cats got down in the basement where the box was and peed all over, I had to throw everything out there. Just, the stench never went away.

[RS] Happens to the best of us, unfortunately.

[SW] Yeah. There's records there from all of, you know, paper records. So, '65, '64, '65 through '69. They've just gone.

[RS] They were your personal stuff?

[SW] Yeah. Yeah. But it's all related to civil rights or the student activities that I've been involved in, both at Emory and University of Virginia and a little bit after that.

[RS] And how did your parents respond to your work with the VSCRC

[SW] They weren't real keen on it, but they didn't say too much. I was pretty headstrong anyway.

[RS] Any of your other siblings get involved in similar work?

[SW] No. My little brother was sympathetic, but he never got involved in stuff. My sister was a little bit interested, but not enough to do anything. So, my good example never did rub off.

[RS] And were you active in any of the activities at UVA as well?

[SW] Oh, yes. I mean, I got in touch with Ed Hamlet from SSOC he put me in touch with this whole group of people there. And so I got to know them all pretty much right away, I mean in in September and October. They were mostly undergraduates, but SSA had a weekly meeting. So we met all all the time and we socialize some degree.

[RS] And what was the was the work there, was it mostly antiwar work or? What was it at UVA?

[SW] This was really before the Anti-War stuff. Well, I guess it started because the escalation of the war started in what, February of '65. So I was sort of on I mean, I wasn't really all that interested but didn't- I grew up as probably a "staunch anti-communist" and all that and straight out of the Cold War. And I think, um, summer of '64 when I was in New York, I'd been really impressed with the Village Voice, so I subscribed to that and I would read it religiously. And there began to be more and more on Anti- War stuff in that paper written by Michael Harrington and other people and it begin to have an impact on me. And I think by the spring of '66, I became pretty, pretty much against the war, but it had taken awhile. Man, I really didn't know anything about it. But I would subsequently learn probably more than I really need to know about Vietnam, but still.

[RS] What about anti-poverty? When you're working in Southside, Virginia, was there ever an economic component to what you're doing?

[SW] Well, we didn't have an Anti- Poverty program as such. I did a lot- I did a lot of research on the Department of Agriculture's allotment system for tobacco and whatever and talked with some of the guys who had their little plots of, that they were allowed to have, you know it was all carefully regulated, about how much tobacco you could grow and et cetera. That's kind of interesting, but I was only there- SNCC workers in other states had done a good bit with tobacco allotment stuff I wasn't, I mean being there only two months, I didn't really get anything more than just some knowledge about how it worked there. So I really wasn't able to do too much other than just get a knowledge base.

[RS] I was going to say, walk us through your timeline here. So you were in Dinwiddie until about August 1966?

[SW] Sometime in the middle of August '66, yeah.

[RS] And then you return to Charlottesville for your, to continue your graduate degree?

[SW] I think what I did, yeah. But eventually, that would have started in September, I think I went to a SDS conference . Oh, well first I went to NSA conference in Bloomington, Illinois. And where I'm at their Allard Lowenstein, Allen Ginsberg, and all these people, ya know in the sixties and David Harris who was a leader at Stanford. Later Joan Baez husband. So they were all involved in that. And then I went over to the national conference of, well the national meeting, annual meeting of SDS, and that was in Clear Lake, Iowa. We were near where Buddy Holly's plane crashed. So that's so that must have been to the latter part of August that I left. So I was probably their mid June to mid August, I'm thinking in Dinwiddie County. But after that, after the SDS thing I went and traveled with somebody to New York City and came back to school.

[RS] And you finished your degree?

[SW] No, I uh, I spent a couple of years there with Woodrow Wilson but and Virginia was offering me more to stay, but I wanted to go and do other things. And so I went to unintelligib[LE] policy studies, looking at studying some economics and getting more involved in stuff. We spent a lot of time with Galbraith and The New Industrial State, whatever, going into all that. And it was very interesting and at the institute, I mean, they were highly connected with the movement. So there were like seminars, not everyday but often- seeming like 2, 3, 4, times a week with different people coming in. I mean, there were all kinds of people: Kenzaburo Oe from Japan. Noam Chomsky, I mean, just all these people that, you know, became big names. But then to me there were just these guys. But I'm a very knowledgeable, and some really good discussions and just a very, very heady time. This is '67, '68.

[RS] Did you feel you are able to contribute?

[SW] Oh, yeah.

[RS] Because you had...

[SW] But I mean, it was... it was interesting because a lot of people, the people from up North trying to and talk real fast and seemingly articulate. And as I began to realize a lot of these guys just talk. And they don't really know what they're talking about. And because they didn't have that much to local experience, I mean, the kids my age. So I began to see, you know, it's just a question of how fast or how slowly you talk doesn't mean anything about whether you're saying anything worth hearing. And so it was it was a sort of a revelation. It took me a while to catch on.

[RS] It raises a question in my mind, you must have been one of a small number of VSCRC people that was from Virginia. So how was your relationship with-

[SW] I think a lot of us were from Virginia?

[RS] Native Virginians?

[SW] Well, I considered myself a native even though I was born in Raleigh because it was just an accident of the War. Well and my Grandfathers' wife was from Raleigh] and she- my grandfather and my grandmother actually met in China, but their fathers knew each other. So they were told to look for each other. And they wound up getting married in Shanghai.

[RS] And the other VSCRC-

[SW] Oh, but so I have that those North Carolina relatives, but the other three branches of my family just- they're all Virginian and Nan

Grogan] is from Virginia. Tom Gardner is a Navy brat, but, he uh- so he's like from all over but I think some of his relatives are kind of Kentucky people. But he doesn't really sort of identify much with any place because they were just constantly moving. Bruce Smith is from Virginia. I was surprised how many people were from Virginia, I guess. I mean there were always people from different places, which is what I was used to. Except at Emory. I mean at Emory it was just, I mean it's very different now, but then it was just like the elite kids from every little small town in Georgia and Florida. That's, that's where they went: to Emory. If they didn't go to the Ivy Leagues.

[RS] Did you have a family of your own after all this? Did you get married or oh?

[SW] Oh yeah, I had a wife, now ex wife, and two children. So we're all still in Atlanta.

[RS] So, big question. If you think back to what you did in 1966 here in Dinwiddie or what the

VSCRC did, what do you think the impact was? What do you think the significance of it is?

[SW] That's a good question and I don't know. I think the best way to find that out really would be the interview some of the people who lived here and were involved here and kind of also study like what happened over the period of time, say '64 to '70 or '75 and just say... I know Mr. Hawthorne was very active and doing stuff, you know, with the NAA

CP] for years. And so there were some places, you know, sometimes you have local organizations that are really dynamite or you have one dynamite person in them. They get stuff done. Other places, not so much. And in the NAA

CP], it's very much like that. I mean if they have good leadership, that get a lot done. It's like the Moral Monday thing going on down in North Carolina. And it's all one guy, Reverend Barber, who is just a ball of fire. And he's got tons of people working with him. But you go to Georgia and it has nothing. The NAA

CP] is just like: "I don't know about that."

[RS] So, you don't have strong feelings about what you had or had not accomplished in that summer of '66?

[SW] While I think probably it was for good. But I don't know how much good. But anytime you get people moving for, even just a little bit or just even interactions, sometimes they have consequences you don't realize, you know, 5 and 10 years down the road. So I think, all in all everything was for the better. How much for the better? I don't know. In fact, I don't even know how to evaluate that.

[RS] And did you maintain connections with anyone in Dinwiddie? With the Edwards family or anyone?

[SW] No! and you know, Mrs. Edwards is coming here. I mean, Mr. Edwards is dead. They were a very different age, she was his second wife and second as far as I know. And she, she's a little bit older than me, but maybe ten years older, but she's coming today So, it'll be the first time I've seen her in 49 years. I've maintained connections with some of Nan's friends and like Sarah Foster and Alfred Stokes, who died a few years ago. Mainly through Nan because we live pretty close to each other in Atlanta.

[RS] And Sarah Foster was down in Lunenburg, Mecklenburg?

[SW] Lunenburg, right. She was part of a group in Victoria.

[RS] And tell us a little bit about your job, or your career, after-

[SW] Well, umm after I left the Institute went down to Atlanta to work on the Great Speckled Bird newspaper. And I worked there for, I worked for all the ten years of its existence. But later on I did a number of jobs. Did some factory work, trying to work with unions and organizing workers. And eventually I wound up, in the '80s, early '80s. As a courier which I did for 23 years before I retired.

[RS] Can you say more about the union work?

[SW] I worked in several factories but the main one that I worked in was Rife Brother's plant which made containers, kind of paper, reinforced paper containers, which were meant for one use. They were, oh, 20 gallon to 55 gallon drums. And it would be used for holding powders, like soap powder, or butter, margarine, whatever. I mean, all kinds of things that you would have in a container. And then once the container was used, it's thrown away. Not sure why they weren't reused, but they weren't- they weren't meant- they weren't really strong enough for more than

one use. You couldn't guarantee them for more than one use.

[RS] Did they have a union already?

[SW] They had a union there already, but it was not very strong. So I worked to, um, it was the part of the railroad union and sort of a catch-all industrial thing. So the business agent had about, I don't know, 29 different companies. Ranging from somebody that had maybe nine workers to ours had 55, 60, something like that. And there were some that were a little bit larger than that. But they were basically mainly a lot of small shops and it was sort of a catch all union. At some point because I became active he- the business agent- recruited me as his recording secretary. I was like- just because I was interested. I think he was happy to have somebody who was interested.

[RS] Was it biracial?

[SW] Oh yeah, And uh "tri" maybe? There were- the plant I worked in was about half, maybe a little bit more than half, Mexican workers. So I, I became able to converse in Spanish there, whereas before just having just gone through language school, just academic reading and whatever I did, really didn't have much language skill. Man, I could get around as a tourist, but, you know, being able to talk, particularly with guys who are working class and and farming family guys that were from Mexico would- you know not speaking correct Spanish and slurring words. I mean, it's, you learn- you learn the language, you learn how it's used, and it's not the way, often, that it's taught. So that was very, very helpful. Just for language skills. Not even having anything to do with organizing a union or whatever. But it helped a lot to be able to talk to guys who didn't, who maybe didn't have- I mean their English wasn't all that good. I mean a lot of guys who come up here, like the best friend that I came out of that plant with had worked in a hotel or wanted to work in a hotel. But he had worked taxis and stuff like that in Acapulco, but he wanted to get a hotel job and needed English. So he came up here as an illegal immigrant, to pick up enough English, to go back. One thing led to another, and he and his brothers now own a chain of restaurants all across North Carolina so he never went back. But his English became pretty good, I don't know that it was good enough to work in a hotel, obviously its not- he went through third grade. Obviously a very bright guy, but very poor family and not the- but that was it. I mean, you know, for, from a a little itty-bitty town in Mexico.

[RS] Was your work there during the 1980's?

[SW] This was uh, when did I work there- This was uh-end of the '70s, early 80's.

[RS] But where do you live now?

[SW] I still live in Atlanta. But I'm retired now, working on a history of The Great Speckled Bird.

[RS] You had mentioned that oral history there that you're-

[SW] So I'm hoping this oral history project will feed into that. I'm not sure how many people they want to interview, but we have our first meeting about this coming up this Friday. I think.

[RS] You're finally putting that history degree to work.

[SW] Yeah. Well, I went back to school at Georgia State and I lucked into uh- my whole interest had changed from Southern history to Latin American History. So which- when I was coming along they just weren't any Latin American specialists. I mean, unless you went to Texas or Stanford or Berkeley, I mean, basically, or UCLA, So basically weren't, there weren't any people teaching Latin American history. Now every history department seems like it has a Latin America

professor]. At least one, sometimes two or three. And at any rate, I lucked into David Macquarie there who had worked in Guatemala and in Brazil. And very interesting guy, one younger than me, but he turned me onto a lot of stuff. At any rate, I did all my coursework but never finished it. My marriage broke apart. I needed to get out and really-get some money for we had two kids to put through school, et cetera. So I never went back to that. Still have always maintained an interest and subscribe to various periodicals and whatever. Now you can find a lot of that online. Although there's paywalls and stuff too.

[RS] Well, going back to the '60s, this is kind of a general final question if you have any final thoughts about the VSCRC or about your role in all of that?

[SW] My, I mean looking back on it, it was just a good time in my life and, you know, and you look back and you forget all the horrors and the fears and whatever that existed, and you kind of get nostalgic about all the relationships. But I mean, you know, meeting here, down here and hearing people joke and whatever and we're all laugh and caring- I mean its- Some of these people I've known all my life now, I mean, from that time forward. You know? A fair number of people in that room worked, at one time or another, at The Grey Speckled Bird. So it's kind of like the paper in the south and people just came through and stayed a while. Worked on it, moved on. So there are relationships I've maintained all my life since that time. And some people I haven't seen in years. But Well,

[RS] Thank you very much for what you did in Virginia in the 1960's and for taking the time to speak with us today, we really appreciate it. Enjoy the rest of the conference!

[SW] Alright. Thank you. Yeah.