

SCLC Chapter 1

ANONYMOUS BLACK MALE

0054

Interview:

Male; Negro; 23 (in Luverne, Ala.)

SCLC volunteer - five years in the movement,  
student Project co-leader in theory but not  
in practice.

Q: Can we just have a little background on you if we could  
before we start ? Just tell me, how old are you ?

A: Ah, my name is Edward Thomas, and I- I'm twenty-three  
years old and ...(inaudible)... I've been working in the  
movement - bout ever since I started high school. That's  
since sixty-one. I, ah, joined the movement in St. Augus-  
tine, Florida. I was in the demonstrations in St. Augus-  
tine, and you know, hah, St. Augu - St. Augustine, and, ah I  
was in the movement in Galveston. And, ah, we ha- we spent  
'bout two or three months in - in - in - in this camp in  
Galveston...

Q: An incarceration campor, do you mean, ah -

A: It's sort of like a prison, hah. Yeah. And so we got out,  
we demons- we demonstrated again, you know, had some, had  
some sit-ins ?

Q: Yeah.

A: And we didn't have no trouble, and ...

Q: Let's see, were you on the SCLC staff at that time.

A: No, I was - I was with SNCC, Student Non-violent Coordinat-  
ing Committee.

Q: Did you work with them in - in - let's see, wasn't it SCLC  
in St. Augustine ?

A: Yes they were. I was working with SCLC in St. Augustine  
and also I worked with SNCC in Galveston.

Q: I see, ah, in ah, in - when did you - lets see, you're  
on the SCLC staff now, aren't you ?

A: Yeah.

Q: When did you first get on the staff?

0054-2

A: Oh, 'bout ah, 'bout ah, 'bout six months ago.

Q: How, how did this happen ?

A: Oh, I - ah, I heard about this boy who got shot in Prairie County (?) and so I just quit school and came down. Came up the - up from my - I was at home in school at ( inaudible )

Q: And let's see, your - your - your home is in Miami (?) and you go to school there too ?

A: Yes I go to school there now, I go to school in Miami.

Q: How long, how long have you been in school ?

A: Oh, ah -

Q: - been in college -

A: Oh, three and a half years.

Q: And then you quit just before you graduated ?

A: Yeah.

Q: What made you, ah, decide to leave school ?

A: Oh, I heard about, ah, I have a - I have a grand-father in Alabama, and I figured that, if I could come down to Alabama, you know, and he'd solve some of the - he'd try to solve some of the problems in Alabama that a - my grand-father could have a better time in Alabama. And also I've some nieces and nephews, you know, and I wouldn't want them to come up the way I came up, here in Alabama.

Q: So you just took off and -

A: Yeah.

Q: And, let's see, what - I mean, how, how did you - what kind of work did you do when you first came up?

A: Well, I was working with the students in ah Prairie County. We was turning out schools, and ah, and, and going to town and protesting ... protesting that ah, their, their, their parents was denied - let their parents register.

Q: Umhuh.

0054-3

A: And now their parents are registered.

Q: Ah, um how long d-did you work there in Prairie County ?

A: Oh, I worked in Prairie County for about ah ... a month ... and I was ah, transferred to ah, ah Demopolis, Alabama. And I wa' workin' with Reverend Summwa Welles (inaudible) and they workin together in (inaudible). And also, we turn out the school in Demopolis, and, and ah, we, you know, was ah protestin' against the ah voter registration, an' we also had - had some pickets, and ah boycotting stores an' things like that. Going out and canvassing an' getting people registered...

Q: And then ah, you came to ah Luverne from Demopolis ?

A: Yes.

Q: How long have you been here ?

A: 'Bout, I think we been here about four weeks.

Q: Did you come about the same time Bruce did ?

A: Yes, (inaudible)

Q: Ah, lets see, can you tell me how, how many s- how many Northern college students have you worked with before ?

A: Ahh, let's see, how many colleges ?

Q: How many students, college students would you say ?

A: That I worked with ?

Q: Yeah.

A: Oh, it's kind of hard to say.

Q: Did they - were they at St. Augustine.

A: Yes, mos- most of them were at St. Augustine. It's about - ten colleges down at St. Augustine, other than with, the, ah, the local colleges I worked with around the area.

Q: And, ah, about how many students were down there ?

A: Oh, there was about eight hundred students down there.

0054-4

In and out of jail, ge-, get-, getting in, and then they go be back home, and then some more come down.

Q: 'Bout how-, about how many of them were, you know, Northern students ...

A: 'Bout four hundred, and some of them were from the West Coast, East Coast, and the North.

Q: And, ah, would - would you have any idea what, ah, what per centage were Negroes and what per centage were whites ?

A: Oh, ah, oh, it was 'bout half Negro and half white.

Q: Uhhum. Of, of the, of the Northern student ?

A: Yeah.

Q: Ah, and let's see, were, were there, were there any students in ah, in ah ... what was that place called ?

A: Oh, in St. Augustine ? Oh, in ... Galveston.

Q: Gadsden. ( Unclear whether Ed Thomas is saying Galveston or Gadsden )

A: Yes, there were. I - I work for Amy Pearl Avery, and ah, for Marvin, Marvin Robertson.

Q: Did ah -

A: Kathy Patterson, yeah, Kathy Patterson, and ah, for some more whites, but I - I forgot their names.

Q: Ah, then you've been working -

A: ( Name, perhaps French, indecipherable )

Q: Oh, wha- what has been your - you know - your impression of the Northern students who have come down here ?

A: My impression ?

Q: Yeah...

Oh, I feel that they - I feel that they ah, that you know - that ah - hear'n the problem'n people in the Soth, and they gettin' next to 'em, you know, and they feel tha-, that, that, that it, that it somethin' that they, that they can do, and, and they comes down.

Q: Well, do you think that they, you know, are they ready to work, you know, are they good workers ?

A: Most of them are.

Q: Have you had any problems in, in working, you know, in, in your, your, you know, in your experiences with the whites ?

A: No, I haven't had any problems.

Q: None at all ?

A: No.

Q: Wo-, would you say there would be any differences between ah, Northern students and, ah, you know, Southern, ah, whites, or South-, Southern Negro students that, you know, in terms of, of their being effective workers ?

A: Southern Negroes and, ah, Northern Negroes .... Northern whites ?

Q: Northern whites.

A: Y-y-yes, there's a whole lot of difference because the Southern Negro know - know his problem better - better than the white ... Northerner. He can, ah, he ah, he's, he's more, ah, he's more, you know, familiar about-, about what's happening. See, he - he been in the movement all his life and he knows what's happening.

Q: D-do y-you think that that makes, ah, well say, you know, Northerners with their, with their education, counter balances this, Southerners with their, with their experiences, and you know, their closeness to the situation ? Or is there, how can you compare ?

A: Ohh, -

Q: What - or let's say - what value does education have

down here ... you know, Northern college -

A: It hat - it has, it have great, great value ... because, because education down here means survival ... in the South. You goin' to have to have education to do anything, now you-you goin' - in two more years, you going to have to have education to change a flat tire ... here in the South.

Q: Well, ah, w-would you, ah, rather work with, with ah, Southern Negroes, or with, with Northern whites if you were running, you know, if you could pick either one ?

A: Ah, like, like this, I, I don't believe in white supremacy, I don't believe in black supremacy, I, I would rather have them mixed. Because I think that once you get a Northern Negro - I mean, a Southern Negro and a, a Northern white, this, this Southern Negro, he, he know the problem, and this, this Northern white, he got, h-he has an education. And, an' they can, they can be a good, a go-, good record together. They work good together.

Q: Ah, how would you say that they, ah, the Northern students react to situations of violence ?

A: Some of them, some of em make pretty cane (?)

Q: Ah, what, you know, which, ah, I guess there are, you know, there are a lot of people in the movement that, you know, think there are, there are big reservations to the, or drawbacks to the use of, of students, and you know, they would rather have local people, or they would rather have, you know, Southern people in there, in the, in the, in their projects.. Would - do you feel this way or do you feel that ?

A: No, I would - I don't feel that way, feel, I feel that if a man want to work, let him work . He come in - he come in here to do a job, and the, and the man, he, he wouldn't be here if, if ,if he, you know, didn't want to work, and have him do the job,... that's the way I feel about it.

Q: Can you, ah, could you t-tell me somepin about, about the, you know, the kinds of jobs, that you - you feel are pretty, ah, important, ah, how do you feel about, you know, the, the - let's say, the voter registration part of, you know ...

A: The voter registration part, that's - that's the main, the

main part. Here in the South, that's, that's the number one problem. You see, if, if we get all the people registered in the South, we won't have to worry about nothin'. W-w-we-we can deal with this sittin'-in later. And this, this sandwich or something, get-getting a hot sandwich, that, that's not important. The important is the poll, ought to be getting out ~~the~~ the poll, the ballot.

Q: H-how do you feel about, ah, say other things that people, some people are working on, say like you know, freedom schools and ah, you know, and some kind of education -

A: Freedom school is good. That's good to a - that's good, the fact that the white man havin' helped the Negro out of school down here in the South, and h-he, he'll have enough education to pass their test, an' 'dis, dis can give this man a, a educ-, can educate him to a up to standards to a where he can pass the test. And get registered and vote.

Q: Do you, ah, think that, ah, the South will change much when the Negro gets the vote.

A: T-the South will change a lot when the Negro gets the vote.

Q: Wha-what kinds of ways do you think it'll change ?

A: In, in many ways, and one way the South will change, ah, well, when the Negro gets the vote, the South will change in the government. T-they, they'll, they, t-they'll start giving the Negro, give him the thumpin', the thumpin' that they took away from him, that, that they need, you know, that they really, that belongs to them ... like payroll, better, better jobs, opportunities, and things like that. Better, they can have better houses, better schools, and things like that.

Q: How - how fast do you think this will happen, when the, when the, or let's say how, yeah -

A: If the Ne- Negroes get registered down herre, in less than two years I think. Maybe less.

Q: Ah, let's seee, ah, in terms of this county right here, what, ah, you know, do you really see any big problems, or, you know, things that are really going, that are going to be good, ah, in terms of registration in this county ?

A:



A: It's hard to say in this county, because...the people in this county, they're actually scared. Scared stiff. I was out in the Branley area today, and everyhome that we went to, they say, "I know what it's for, but I ain't ready to vote." "I don't want to go down there and vote." "I realize what it's for, and all that, but I just don't want to vote." They scared. And you can see fear in their face. In the eyes.

Q: Is there any way you can get around this?

A: Some-some people, you can do it by going back and forth, and talking to them over and over. But different things... you find every time you go to talk to a person, you find a different thing to talk about. And the same line--voter registration.

Q: What do you think about, you know, the people, the SCOPE workers here who are going to be doing this work? Do you think they can think up things to talk about and convince these people that there's more to be gained?

A: I think they can. They have the ability to do it.

Q: I wonder...if you could, well, let's see; I'd sort of like to go back to how you got involved in the movement, because...what was the situation at St. Augustine and ...that got you involved?

A: How I got involved in the movement--I was in high school, and I was in this little junior school, and the white boys used to come over and beat us up all the time. Not beat us up, you know, but just come over in a block and start throwing us around. And we get a gang up, and...this say, we say, we going to stop this. You know. And so when the white boys came back over there, we ran them up the block and... and they had a big do, and we almost started a riot down there. Over this...you know, between the young people. And the police came out, and a couple movement guys came down, like Dick Gregory. He came down and started talking to us about the movement. And how it wasn't like, you know. And what we could do for the movement, what the movement could do for us. You know, send us to school and so forth. Like that. So I got interested, and I...since my father was a teacher in school, at this junior college in St. Augustine, and I wanted to stay with my father for a week. And this...this thing broke out in St. Augustine. And I joined.

Q: Do you think you would have joined if it hadn't been for the St. Augustine incident?

0054-9

A: Yes, I do.

Q: Did you have any friends in the movement when you went in?

A: I had a whole lot of friends in the movement. I had a whole lot of friends in Alabama, Perry County, that was already working with the movement.

Q: How did you meet them?

A: Oh, I have a grandfather in that there county. And... I used to come back and forth to Alabama.

Q: What did your parents think about your involvement?

A: My parents were 100% behind it. My father was a field secretary for NAACP, my mother worked with the local movement in town.

Q: And your sisters?

A: My sisters, they're in college; they work with the local movement in town, for the NAACP.

Q: How does this working with the movement fit in with your career plans? What do you plan to do?

A: I...I'm going to school to be an engineer. Electricity engineer. And...I already have...I have a scholarship. The NAACP gave me a scholarship.

Q: If you go back to school?

A: If I go back to school.

Q: Do you think you will?

A: Yeah, I think I will, next fall, I don't know. I have a half a semester to go back, before I graduate.

Q: Do you think you'll work in the movement in the future? Or will you be working as an engineer?

A: I think that since I've...I have a whole lot of experience in the movement, and I think that...I have a great deal with my job. From my education. Since I've been in the movement, I think...a lot of people...you know, in Miami, people just don't respect you. You walk down the road, you know, and you see people sitting on the porch, and you say,

"How you do, Ma'am? How you do?" They think you's a fool. You know, and that's not respect. Since I've been there in the movement, and been working in the movement, I think when I go back home and have a whole lot of respect, well, in my neighborhood, and I'll have a whole lot of people just give me a whole lot of jobs. When I finish school.

Q: Do you think you'll...you'll be going back to work, then, or will you be working somewhere else?

A: I'll probably go North; I don't know. That's hard to say.

Q: Do you want to go north?

A: If...I might go North.

Q: I wonder...well, what makes...can you just tell me your impressions about the movement, you know, and what is central in the movement...what make s the movement...why is the movement getting all these people?

A: Well, what makes the movement--the people. And number two, and the people are here to...to better...not better the people's conditions in our community, to help better their conditions, and our movement, why, it has an education value, mainly. You learn more about the movement.

Q: Is there anything else that is distinctive, you've noticed, really has impressed you, about the movement?

A: Well, it's...what...in the movement, I found that it's a hard life. In a way. And...in another way, it's the only life. An easy life. I feel that, I'm a Negro. And the Negro problems, this is my problems. And I'm here to help better our conditions.

Q: What kind of state do you think white people have in the movement?

A: Well, you want my honest opinion? Well, since the white man see that...the white people down here in the South been giving us a hell of a way, and they get next to 'em, you know, and they feel that there's something down here that they can do. They can help. They'll do. And they come down and try. That's the way I see't. There's a lot of white people been down here and did some great things. Movement-wise.

Q: And have any of them come down and hurt the...that you know?

A: I don't think so. Before we...before we let a Negro or white man in the movement, they give them a ticket back home before they hurt it. Before they wreck the movement.

Q: Have you seen this? I don't know too much about it.

A: Wrecking the movement?

Q: Or people leaving.

A: Yes, I have.

Q: What kind of...people does this happen to?

A: What kind of people? Both Negro and white.

Q: I mean, what kind of people, you know, are they?

A: Well, people come down, they get the wrong impression about the movement. They in the movement, sakes alive, not ...now I'm talking about some people...they come down here and they want to...well, to lay around and they wants to work, and all that, but some of them...and then too, it's kind of hard for them to go out in the field. Some of them ...some of the people want to come down here and want to work, but they're scared to work. And they just lay around, you know, doing nothing.

Q: And those are the ones that have to leave?

A: Uh huh.

Q: I'm wondering...you said that the movement's in one way a pretty easy life, and in another way it's a pretty hard life. How did you mean that?

A: Well, in an easy life--that in the movement, you can work in the movement, and nine times out of ten, when you're working in the movement, nothing is...nothing's going to happen to you. But when you're out there by yourself, anything's liable to happen to you. They...the white man figure that "this man's in the movement, you know, and if we do something to him," maybe they...they can start...start something here in town. But if they leave them alone, in that area, nothing'll have to happen. And this hard life I'm telling you about, it's kind of hard to explain. Because I've been having the hard life for 23 years. I came...my mother died when I was 16 years old; I was...like a year ago, my father married; she real nice.

Q: Why do you think it is that you got involved in the movement and a lot of Negroes don't get involved?

0054-12

A: Well, that...involved in the movement, see...if you're involved in the movement, maybe you're just not working hard like some of them out there work hard. If your skin is black, you're in the movement. I don't care what nobody says; you're still black, you're in the movement. A lot of people say, "I'm not in on this." "I'm not in this." If you're black, you're in the movement.

Q: Well, how is it that you came to give up your...you gave up school, and you came to work, and most...a lot of people never do anything like that?

A: Well, I did this, you know, I can get my schooling later on. But I can't get my rights later on. I want...I want to help my people and myself get...get things that belongs to us, and things that we need, and things that...that the white man took from us and don't want to give back to us.

Q: I think I'll just stop with that.

END OF TAPE