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MEMORANDUM

To: Tim West

Fm: Joe Sinsheimer

Re: Speech Transcripts

Dt: June 30, 1999

I have sent you almost all of the interviews and tapes I can find. I probably have a lot of other interesting materials in my basement, but that will have to be a project for later in the summer/fall. I did find two additional interview transcripts. Please add them to the collection.

Are you still planning (or have you already sent) to send a notice of this collection to the public. If so, can you send me a copy.

Enclosed are two items:

An interview with Sue Thrasher who was one of the first 3 white students to get involved in the Southern civil rights movement. Thrasher was one of the founders of the Southern Student Organizing Committee (SSOC). Thrasher was a student volunteer in Biloxi during the 1964 Freedom Summer Project.

A transcript of Norman Thomas Press Conference with SNCC in November 1963. Norman Thomas was a leading member of the Socialist Party at the time.

Interview with Sue Thrasher
Highlander Center
New Market, Tennessee
November 11, 1983

Joe Sinsheimer: You were telling me about a civil rights conference you attended in Mississippi.

Sue Thrasher: But looking, the two of them looking retrospectively at the whole issue of voter education and what had happened to that. And (Lawrence) Guyot was saying why did we register all the voters that people died for if we are not going to use the power of the ballot and get blacks elected to office as a political program now. And other people were critiquing what that meant in terms of blacks getting elected to office and then not being responsible to any organization or any group of people, and not being very good elected officials. So you had that argument which I thought was really interesting and good. And it was between two people who had a lot to say to each other and were very respectful of each other. And that was the kind of thing I thought the conference was really good at.

The other thing that was sort of ... just poignant in a way was the difference between the people, the black people, the young black people from Mississippi. McCarthur Cotton wasn't there but Hollis Watkins and Willie Peacock and Jimmy Travis who had been in Mississippi when the volunteers came down, and who had been there when they left. And who had, it was beginning to surface that weekend, a great deal of bitterness about all the sort of romanticism surrounding the Summer Project, and they felt like they had been left holding the bag. And especially that would come out, I think it came out-- I missed the first night-- but Clay Carson was on the panel the first night and I think it came out a lot over his presentation, people were really about it.

Sinsheimer: Yeah.

Thrasher: That was the first time that you could sort of see years later the difference really in southern Blacks who were from local communities where the civil rights movement was active. And how they felt about that time in their lives.

And their lives have not changed substantially since, they are still in Mississippi. And you know for awhile they had poverty program jobs, but now they have to hustle for jobs like everybody else.

Thrasher (cont.): And they don't write books about it, they don't get invited to conferences often, they don't do those things, people have sort of forgotten them. And that was a real poignant moment in the conference. You could really sense that was happening.

And then at this conference at Amherst that I was just at, one of the women who had just left Mississippi said that weekend that they were still angry about, they still ... everybody had cut back and fifteen years later they were talking about all the good times, and they were angry.

Sinsheimer: Well, let's back up a few years and (laughter). I guess I am initially interested in how you got involved with the Southern Students Association (SSA) and how that connected up with SNCC. I guess we could start a little beyond that.

Thrasher: Okay if I tell you too much then you should stop me.

Sinsheimer: Okay.

Thrasher: Or tell me to go faster, or cut it , or whatever.

Sinsheimer: Okay.

Thrasher: I ended up in Nashville in 1961, so I was there following the sort of the height of the sit-in movement. There was still a strong student movement in Nashville. And Nashville was one of the central places for the student movement.

Diane Nash Bevel, Jim Bevel had already gone, but there was still John Lewis and Lester McKinnin and a lot of other folks around who had a very strong SNCC chapter. Which of course I didn't know about when I first arrived in Nashville.

But I was at this little tiny Christian, well not Christian, Methodist school, Christian school but not Christian in the sense of a Christian academy. It was a liberal institution, it had been integrated for fifteen years, which was longer than any other place around, and was sort of a worldwide Methodism center, so it had people from all over the world and one fifth of its student body was international.

And what happened was that ... the sort of clash over civil rights was just everywhere, it was an issue, and it was being tested everywhere, and was in peoples' minds. Well the first thing that happened that first year was that there was a good friend of mine who was from the Figi Islands got denied service at a local, you know, greasy spoon, which was on campus. And we started picketing that, and formed

(Thrasher) p.3

Thrasher (cont.): in that process a thing called the Joint University Council on Human Relations with Vanderbuilt and Peabody students.

Sinsheimer: Were there a lot of white students involved in that?

Thrasher: Yeah, it was all white students, basically all white, actually it was not all white, there were a couple of Black students at Scarritt and maybe some from Vanderbuilt. But it was predominantly white. To tell you the truth I can not remember at what point the Joint University Council, whether I was already involved in that when I started going to SNCC meetings. But anyway that was one of the main things that happened that first year was that we did this, we set up a little campus committee.

And what happened to me which was really central, is that in establishing that, in helping to establish that local committee-- and I was on the Student Council and trying to get a statement drafted through the Council-- we became a small minority on campus, which really shocked me because it was not, it was nothing especially radical about what we were doing or anything. But we got isolated almost immediately from the majority of the students at Scarritt, and we were just more activist that is what it came down to, that was a way that people were separated out.

But there was a teacher at Scarritt named Alice . I didn't have a class under her, and didn't know her very well, but she caught me one morning at the mailboxes and said that she was going to a meeting that night at a black church across town and why didn't I come with her. And I remember thinking why doesn't she leave me alone, I really don't want to do this, and why is she trying to pull me into this. And I knew it was a civil rights mass meeting and I really did not want to go because I sort of didn't want to make that leap, being involved in stuff.

But I went and it really was the end of me (laughter). Because it was a mass meeting and C.T. Vivian was one of the major speakers that night, and was there, and all these people. It was just, it was terribly inspiring, and it was sort of my first time to experience what civil rights movement was about in real personal terms, because that is the way they preached about

Thrasher (cont.): it, and talked about it, and singing, and being a part of it, you really had a sense that this was a movement that was morally right. And that was the overwhelming sense.

Sinsheimer: So when you say personal do you mean sort of basic values that your parents taught you, or religious principles, or ...

Thrasher: You mean that I could experience in a personal way.

Sinsheimer: Yeah.

Thrasher: Yeah. But also, actually when I said that I was talking about getting a sense of what it meant to the black community, for them on more personal terms. More than just sort of nameless faces picketing downtown. But through the stories, and through the sermons, through all that, and really liking the people. And just getting a sense of the viscousness of segregation and how wrong it was, and how right it was. It just became so clear to me immediately that evening that this was the right side of whatever the struggle was about. And to not support that was the wrong side, it was to be on the side of backwardness and the past, rather than on the side of what was right. It just basically was a matter of right and wrong.

And it really did happen to me that first night, and I never really have thought differently about it since that time. What they were saying made a lot of sense to me and seemed to be the right thing to do. So then I really got pulled in very quickly after going to SNCC. I met some SNCC people. And I started going to SNCC meetings and we kept up then the Joint University Council on Human Relations, and I went to SNCC meetings to.

And it was actually the Joint University Council that led to SSOC (Southern Students Organizing Committee). Because what we did then was started having, we started talking about what had happened to us as white students that had got involved. And the isolation which was the most apparent thing and being And in some ways that really forced us, I think made us more open to getting involved in SNCC and the larger civil rights movement.

Sinsheimer: Was this your first year at Scarritt?

Thrasher: I got involved my first year and I stayed involved my second year. It seems to me that the second year

Thrasher (cont.):

I was there I was much more deeply into it. But the first year I started going to meetings and stuff. I just don't remember, you know, the sequence of events. But I know the second year if I had not graduated when I did, I might not have graduated at all. I might have been one of those people who dropped out in the sixties. Becasue the second semester of my senior year I was really off a lot, sort of going to class. I was able to get good grades without paying that much attention to it. But I was not that interested in what was going on in school.

By that time I was pretty much, I was feeling-- it wasn't like I was feeling isolated but I was feeling like I had already left it behind in some ways. But it was the Joint University Council that really started us thinking about trying to find other white students like us. And we called the meeting-- the Joint University Council actually issued an invitation to people in other parts of the South that we had heard of. And it was pretty easy then because you could hear of where the white students were involved. And one of the ways was through the Southern Patriot which was published by SCEF, the Southern Conference Educational Fund. So I had done some writing on the Nashville stuff in the Patriot, and we knew that in Durham for instance Harry Ward was active and other places where people were.

So in, it was April of '64, is that right, do you know, that we had this meeting in Nashville.

Sinsheimer:

Right.

Thrasher:

And that was sort of the founding meeting of what later, of what became the Southern Student Organizing Committee (SSOC). And there were about forty-five people there, it is written up in the Patriot, maybe, as I recall from about seventeen different places. And it was both white and black. One of the people who was there Marion Barry.

Sinsheimer:

Right.

Thrasher:

And Bernard Lafayette, who didn't think that we should have a white student organization. And the whole intention of this is that white students would not join SNCC, and they needed some vehicle that could pull them into activism and being in the civil rights movement. And what we saw it as was a

Thrasher (cont.): bridge into SNCC and we always talked about it that way. I didn't realize, I knew it was controversial but I never quite took that in I think, because it was always so clear in my mind what we were doing. But at this conference at Amherst, Forman really took me on about that and told me about some of the internal debates in SNCC about whether it should be ... and he felt like the formation of SSOC was the beginning of other organizations spinning off from SNCC. And he really wanted it to be a part of SNCC, which I did not know at the time. Because we had a with the SNCC Executive Committee and I did know that the people who supported us the most, the strongest in that meeting were Stokley and Courtland (Cox), and Stokley was of course was the first one to sort of talk about Black Power, and understood I think what we were talking about in terms of just organizing whites.

Sinsheimer: So the initial leaders of SSOC were who?

Thrasher: The initial leaders were myself and a guy at Vanderbilt called Ron Parker and another student at Scarritt called Archie Allen. We were sort of the nucleus of that group in Nashville that pulled it together. And then _____ was a real key very early who had been at, he was at Emory. And he was one of the few white students involved in the Atlanta movement. And _____ was another student from Vanderbilt, it was heavy on Vanderbilt.

Sinsheimer: Where did Ed Hamlett fit in?

Thrasher: Ed Hamlett came a little, well Ed Hamlett helped set up that meeting and when did I meet him? I met him in either the fall of '63 or early 1964. And Ed worked for SNCC, he didn't, he wasn't that he came to one of the local things. But somehow or other he had gone to work for SNCC and I don't know how, I don't know that story. But he had come to work, to follow Bob Zellner, to work with Bob Zellner and Sam Shirah on what was called the "white folks" project within SNCC.

So Ed came to see us, he campus traveled basically and that what is was called, to Nashville and he started staying at my house and helped plan that conference. And I am pretty -- he probably did some of the traveling to recruit, to get people in. Because that is one of the things you did then was travel, they called it campus traveling.

Sinsheimer: Right.

Thrasher: You just got into a Volkswagon and went all over and talked to people personally to get people there. And I suspect that he traveled for that reason.

Sinsheimer: I think you went before the SNCC Executive Committee in April of '64.

Thrasher: Before that meeting?

Sinsheimer: The SSOC meeting, you think that was that same month too, the SSOC organizational meeting.

Thrasher: It was that same-- I think it was April, sometime around seventeenth, eighteenth.

Sinsheimer: In other words it was quickly organized, within a few weeks you were in front of the SNCC Executive Committee?

Thrasher: What was the dates when we went before SNCC, it may have been before, because they gave us The end of that conversation with SNCC is that they gave us \$300, I remember.

Sinsheimer: Right.

Thrasher: And I don't know whether that was to plan that meeting or for something else.

Sinsheimer: That was to continue, to decide whether, from what I read, where the white students would go.

Thrasher: Ed would be better on that than I would. I mean that is an important thing to figure out but I really don't remember.

Sinsheimer: Okay.

Thrasher: I remember the meeting with SNCC a lot, but I don't remember when it, if it happened before or after. I think it probably happened after, that we sort of went to them with our plans.

Sinsheimer: Do you remember Moses at that meeting? Was he a supporter or ... ?

Thrasher: Moses was always supportive of SSOC, now I don't know what he argued in terms of whether it should be a part of SNCC or not. I know that, I always felt personally that he supported us a lot and was helpful.

Sinsheimer: So then the plan for the White Folks project for the summer, how was that developed, do you know?

Thrasher: Let's see, the meeting was in April of '64. I don't know whether Ed and Zellner and the people who were planning the project had talked at that point of whether there should be just a white But I think Ed probably was the primary person behind that. And I was going to say that it happened pretty late so it may have been after that meeting. I don't know the answer to that, you will just have to ask Ed. But I know that, I am pretty sure that we were thinking that we would be in Mississippi that summer by then, several of us and I think we were thinking about it being a white community project that would be separate. And it would be an attempt to reach whites separately. Which you know in retrospect I think was crazy (laughter).

Mississippi in 1964 was no time to be reaching out to people, it was just much too polarized.

Sinsheimer: So in the spring of '64 you would be finishing up school?

Thrasher: No, I graduated in 1963.

Sinsheimer: '63.

Thrasher: Came in '61 and graduated in the spring of '63 and went to work at the Methodist publishing house, which was a way of hanging around Nashville and doing full-time SNCC work basically. So all that year then I worked at the publishing house, and most of the time at night was in meetings of one kind or another. We were beginning to talk about SSOC, a lot of SNCC people were coming through. Sam Shirah was traveling at that time, Ed was coming through. There was a lot of activity going on that year and SNCC was very active. Ruby Doris Robinson was one of the people, a lot of SNCC people were just passing through and our house was sort of a central place. I met a lot of people. Real heady (laughter).

Sinsheimer: So did you go to the Oxford (Ohio) training sessions?

Thrasher: I went, yeah I went one week.

Sinsheimer: The first week?

Thrasher: Yeah. I was still working and I went late to Mississippi actually. I ended up going late, I think mostly because of money, I couldn't afford to leave early enough. But I worked at the publishing house and quit my job there. And I had an interview with, it was some sort of interracial organization in the South, it was like a hiring agency for civil rights jobs. Inter-Agency Council on Human Relations or something like that. And I had an interview with them sometime early in the summer to talk about getting a job, I don't know if it was a specific place or what. And I went to that and went from that interview to Mississippi. And that became a big thing for me, because the option at that point was to take sort of a job in an agency, a civil rights

Thrasher (cont.): agency, or to go to work full-time for SSOC, which was no money, more student, more radical and not as respectable. It was clear what the decision was.

Sinsheimer: So you went to Oxford and then went back to work?

Thrasher: I went to Oxford and ... Oxford was two weeks right?

Sinsheimer: Right.

Thrasher: And the middle, the weekend, in the middle of the weekend SSOC had an Executive Committee meeting at Oxford, and some of the people who were going to be on the White Folks project had already been there a week. And it was decided that they would do two weeks of training rather than one.

Sinsheimer: Then they were sent here (Highlander Center)?

Thrasher: Right. Then they were sent to Highlander but it was not here it was in Knoxville at the other location.

Sinsheimer: Oh I see.

Thrasher: So I arrived in Oxford and the decision was not made until then to send us to Highlander.

Sinsheimer: So you missed the first week of training and just came in for the weekend?

Thrasher: I missed the first week of training at Oxford but was there for that weekend. And I was there the night that news came in about Goodman, Chaney, and Schwerner. It was a real heavy time to be there. And we left that night and drove through the night to get to Highlander.

Sinsheimer: Now were you there when the news was actually announced?

Thrasher: Yeah.

Sinsheimer: Do you know who actually announced it first?

Thrasher: Word circulated around before it was announced. I suspect that it would have been Moses, is that not right?

Sinsheimer: I believe it was Moses, but there was an account that said Rita Schwerner came on stage.

Thrasher: I don't know, I don't remember her if she did. Was she still at Oxford? Rita Schwerner was in Mississippi, because she was in the Meridian office.

Sinsheimer: Okay.

Thrasher: That is what I think. What I remember was that she was in the Meridian office and that they had left the office. Maybe Moses will know.

Sinsheimer: So then you went the week of training at Highlander?

Thrasher: We came down and had the second week of training here and we didn't have any idea what we were doing frankly. We didn't, we sort of sat around and talked which is what you do at Highlander, and which is good (laughter). And we sort of mapped out what we thought we wanted to do. And we were going to talk to a lot of ministers, sort of liberal ministers, because they were some. I think there had been a group of ministers who had issued some sort of statement, and we were going to try to find them. and talk to them.

But then, one of the issues in our project was whether you organized around , with working class whites or with liberal middle-class whites. And Shirah at that time was being to think that you could do a working class project. And that project actually split with Sam moving into a working class white neighborhood of Biloxi and their having what was called a Freedom House in this white neighborhood. And with one guy who they had recruited who was a white Mississippian, who later became a MFDP delegate, and a lot of people always thought he was an FBI agent. I never thought that but a lot of people were always skeptical of who he was. Sort of a _____ character.

Sinsheimer: All the students who were going to work on the White Folks project, were they southern?

Thrasher: No not all of them, a majority of them were. But I think what Ed did was that he took, he looked at the applications coming in and there were a couple of people that he requested come and work on the project. And one of them was a woman from Canada, Diane Burrows; one was a woman from, she was in school at Union Theological Seminary, she was originally from Ohio. _____ I think her name was. One was a student at Harvard who was originally from John Strickland.

Sinsheimer: Yeah it is John Strickland. I can find that out.

Thrasher: Where was he from?

Sinsheimer: I think Harvard.

Thrasher. Yeah he was a student from Harvard, but he was from somewhere in the South.

Sinsheimer: Now do you think, how were the volunteers split on the issue, did they favor middle class whites or working class whites?

Thrasher: I don't know how widespread an issue it was outside of our project. It may have been an issue within the SNCC staff, and there were staff meetings but I wasn't in those so I wouldn't know. I think a lot of people thought it was a good idea that we should try to organize -- it was, one of the things about SNCC was that you could do almost anything. I mean on the one hand it was highly organized, and the security was amazing, so it was incredibly structured and disciplined. It really was very disciplined. On the other hand you could do sort of anything, it had both of those elements to it. So that Shirah could actually move into this neighborhood and attempt to do this. Partly because there was room to play around politically, I mean to try an experiment like this. I think people thought it was a good idea but were very skeptical of whether it would work.

Sinsheimer: How did you go to Mississippi?

Thrasher: We took the train from Atlanta I think, took a train right to ... no, I took a Greyhound bus to Jackson and Howard picked me up, and then we worked, he took me down to Biloxi. And Howard and I worked together with the Mississippi Council on Human Relations, trying to put together a mailing list, actually establish the Council which at that time had not been established. And I think that was some of the better work we did ...

Sinsheimer: Do you remember a Reverend Gray who I think was ...

Thrasher: Was it in Oxford, was he in Oxford.

Sinsheimer: Right.

Thrasher: Yeah, I remember his name.

Sinsheimer: He was the President of the Council ... his daughter goes to Duke that how I know ...

Thrasher: Is that right. Yeah. I remember his name. He was ... there were maybe ten or twelve ministers who you had names. I mean we used all those contacts later for SSOC. But see Mississippi was a hard place to organize whites. Two years later I went back to do a student conference there with white students and it was hard to get students out and active. And in '64 it was so polarized it was just virtually impossible to do anything with whites.

Sinsheimer: So where did you live in Biloxi?

Thrasher: We lived (laughter), we lived in this old hotel called the Hotel Riveria, which was a white clabboard building on the beach that would get blown away in a hurricane. And it really was a sleazy, old hotel. It was very cheap and the guy didn't care who he rented space to. So we had, I think we actually had what in the 1930's was the honeymoon suite, which was upstairs in this big room. Then we had a couple of more rooms in the hotel. Actually Diane and I in a week or so moved out and got a little room around the corner from the hotel. But Ed stayed in the hotel, the office was there and that is where we would go to work everyday.

Sinsheimer: So how many people were in the Biloxi project?

Thrasher: I want to say about twelve. It was about that many. A guy named Jeff _____, Nelson _____, me and Diane, Mickey, Mickey I think worked a lot in Jackson. She stayed in Jackson and worked with Jane Scott. Shirah, whoever this guy was, Shirah's girlfriend, a woman named Liz, John Strickland, there were a few other people.

Sinsheimer: So on a day-to-day basis you were trying to contact ministers, what else were trying to do ?

Thrasher: It was a real muddle as I remember we would sort of talk a lot about what we were going to do. I actually did go out and try to talk to some ministers which was really hard and you couldn't get much. I did that and somebody else did that. It didn't feel to me like we did a lot.

One of the problems was that it was real seductive to get swept into what was going on with the COFO projects in general. So there was a good bit of back and forth between our project and the COFO project in Biloxi. We would go to some of those meetings and stuff, we were not at all isolated from COFO. And we did a lot of traveling in the state, we were all the time going to meetings, various meetings in the state. Going up to Jackson.

And we had a lot of internal meetings of our own to talk about to be sure of what we were doing. We must have tried to work some on the MFDP stuff, Sam mostly did that. Basically we just went out and talked to people, that was the main thing. We did hit ministers in that area and other people.

But my sense that the summer for me never really took off until the end of the summer I went to Hattiesburg and worked for a very intensive week at Palmers Crossing in a Freedom School and community center there. And that was, I felt like that was the first time I got a real

Thrasher (cont):

flavor for the Summer Project. I never felt a real part of it, because I felt like we were just sort of an odd assortment of people sort of stumbling around.

The other thing that was good for me, and this is just for me personally, was, actually going up to Jackson and spending a couple of weeks working with Jane Scott and staying there. We sort of had assignments. But there was a lot, as I remember there was a lot of internal debate about what we were doing and all of that. We wasted an awful lot of time on that. Not exemplary about our work habits by any stretch.

Sinsheimer:

So tell me more about the Freedom School.

Thrasher:

The Freedom School, it was-- what happened was at the end, when everybody left Mississippi to go to Atlantic City, they needed staff people in various places. And our project closed early. And some of us went to work in these various places, and Diane and I, Diane Burrows and I went up to Hattiesburg. And Palmers Crossing was where Victoria Grey lived who was one of the MFDP... she ran for Congress, but she wasn't a committeewoman but she was one of the leaders in it. And we lived in her house, which everybody did who passed through Palmers Crossing. And went down the road a ways to this little Freedom ... it was really a community center but it had a Freedom School in it. And there were kids, black kids would show up every day, fifteen or twenty of them and you had to figure out what to do with them all day. Because it was like the place people had been coming to for the summer.

So we figured out activities, played with them, did some sewing projects with them. We didn't teach because the Freedom School had basically closed by that time. So we did a lot of things with them. And that for me, that was a real important part of the summer for me because I think if I hadn't had that, maybe I was there two weeks but I think just one, I would never have really known what COFO was about. Because our project was just so different.

Sinsheimer:

Right. The Black children were at this point very receptive?

Thrasher:

Oh yeah. They were used to white volunteers and they were receptive and it was a community center before COFO moved in. But it had a lot of life to it. I think we actually talked to people about registering to vote, but I didn't do any of the real canvassing that other people did, that you hear about.

Thrasher(cont.):

I was looking at the (Tracy) Sugarman book (Stranger at the Gates) not long ago and just thinking it was so different from what we were doing, totally different. We never got into I think the real stuff of the summer. We were doing also, the other thing we were doing was a lot of SSOC work, really organization building. And we were having meetings among ourselves and talking about the fall, and working out all of that. So in some ways it was like, that project was really a continuations committee to really get the organization moving in the fall.

Sinsheimer:

Do you think other people shared that frustration about not having a sense of being part of the summer or?

Thrasher:

I don't know. Because in a lot of ways, like in terms of going to the meetings and stuff, you know we were-- we may have had more access in some ways to SNCC staff and that end of it than other people. But that just may be me because I had the contacts before. But I was certainly always intimidated when I went to the COFO office in Jackson and always fearing the big operation and people running around knowing what they were doing. So I was always totally intimidated.

Sinsheimer:

Was the intimidation people-related or sort of organizationally.

Thrasher:

More organizationally. Its just that's where a lot of the leadership was which added. But it was also where the operation really was run from and everybody had jobs. It was well organized, that was an overwhelming sense I had, it was very organized. And people were real busy, didn't have time to sit around and talk.

And then there were special projects, like Stokley's project, of course in Greenwood was always one of the major projects and stuff. Vicksburg was another big project.

Sinsheimer:

Did you ever have regrets about, you know in the middle of the summer, about why am I here?

Thrasher:

No I had a lot of frustration but I never had any regrets. I think probably it may have been, I may have had, it may have been the frustration that sent me up to Jackson or something. The thing we did, it is not that I think that we were messing around, or weren't trying to do good work, it was just how do you organize white people in Mississippi? And it was just hard. And we would get up every day and you would try to think of what to do that day that would make the most sense. And go out and try some things and then get real depressed you know (laughter). You know you go talk to a couple of ministers and you

- Thrasher(cont.): would see that that was going nowhere. And that you really couldn't do a lot of that. But Ed (Hamlett) may have different feelings about this because he had much more of an overview than I do.
- Sinsheimer: Now, after you taught, after you were at the Freeom School, did you stay there, you said you were there for one week, what did you do after that?
- Thrasher: I came home to Savannah, Tennessee which was a real culture shock if there ever was one . And I came home and watched on television the Republican Convention which was, you know, just seared in my mind the difference in being in west Tennessee with my family and watching the Republican Convention which elected Barry Goldwater.
- Sinsheimer: Right.
- Thrasher: And the difference in being in Mississippi. I just, I never could quite, it was always very hard for me to go from being in a movement setting like Mississippi, or any other traveling that I did, and coming back to a situation, a normal living situation. It was just extremely difficult for me. And that week was really, I remember trying to put it all together. My mind and heart were still in Mississippi and what was going on in the civil rights movement. Then I was watching this horrible thing on television.
But I had made the decision in Mississippi to go to work for SSOC, so I stayed at home very briefly and then went to Nashville and started the SSOC office there.
- Sinsheimer: How did your parents feel about you going to Mississippi?
- Thrasher: They didn't, they were scared. They didn't, I mean I sort of didn't deliberately mislead them, but I didn't tell them how dangerous it would be. But they came down to visit me in the middle of the summer, toward the end of the summer. And they had known Ed already by that time I think. And liked him. And they liked other people that they met. And they stayed at the Hotel Riveria (laughter). They felt okay by it, but they were frightened by it. They didn't really understand what I was doing and they knew enough to know it was something that to them was dangerous and it was very different from anything else most people were doing, certainly from Savannah. And that I was involved in something that they didn't really quite

Thrasher(cont.):

know much about.

But they were always pretty supportive of me, they never, I never felt that I ran the risk of being disowned or put out of the house or any of those things. They wanted me to be careful and they wanted, you know, they were a little nervous about it. For the next several years that I worked for SSOC I could always take people home and never have any feelings They were always real good about that. And when they left Mississippi two of our volunteers left with them and rodr up, got a ride somewhere. Jeff _____ and Nelson _____ got a ride somewhere. They thought they were neat (laughter).

Sinsheimer:

Did you get the sense that some of the people were working against their parents' feelings?

Thrasher:

Oh yeah. One of the interesting things at this conference in Amherst was that one of the black women, Martha Prescott _____ talked about her family, and her father actually sued Jim Forman one time for contributing to the delinquency of a minor.

Sinsheimer:

Wow.

Thrasher:

And that was real interesting because you had both black and white, you saw then both black and white parents were opposed to it and not supportive. Yeah, but some people did, but it is odd but I didn't feel that most of the southerners I knew, it was never that extreme. And I don't know why because you would expect it to be the other way.

Sinsheimer:

Do you think it was harder for women?

Thrasher:

For women?

Sinsheimer:

To get parental consent or approval.

Thrasher:

It didn't seem to be that much harder. Men, men -- see the other thing is that Mississippi if you lived ten miles from the Mississippi border, which is where my home is, Mississippi was not as scary as if it was if you were recruiting on the Stanford campus and it was this deep dark place where people got killed. So the mentality of that being in the South was never the same for us, I mean it was home. But being in the civil rights movement was a little different, but that whole thing, the whole aura of Mississippi was not there for us at all.

I don't know about women, I didn't ... it is a good question. But the women who were in SSOC I don't think had that much of a problem.

Sinsheimer: What were your parents doing at this time?

Thrasher: My father was a farmer and a carpenter, never made much money, never was able to make a living off the farm, he would work carpentry during the winter season. And later gave up the farm and traveled and did construction work, carpentry. And my mother had worked in a factory, they were from west Tennessee, my mother's family actually were all from Mississippi because it is real close, that area. So a lot of her family still lived there. In fact, people that I had met at family reunions lived in Biloxi and I certainly (laughter) didn't go to see them that summer. Although my mother and father did when they were there.

Sinsheimer: Oh wow (laughter).

Thrasher: There was a family that I had liked very much, the daughter of it was a little bit younger than me and stuff, but I didn't bother going to visit them that summer. But they were working people, not wealthy at all, worked hard and by and large would have been classified as the people who would have been opposed to the civil rights movement. But they really weren't. They were decent ... they weren't liberals, but they were decent and thought that people should have a fair shake. They didn't, they learned a lot I think from what I did. They were at least open to that.

Now later when I went to work for SSOC full-time and got much more involved in stuff, my brother who was two years older than I was went into the army straight out of college and was in Viet Nam. My mother told me that he went through a security clearance at some point, he was an officer. My mother told me at one point that she had been visited by the FBI about me and also about my brother for two completely different reasons (laughter). But she seemed to take that in stride, it wasn't, she didn't get overly excited about it.

Sinsheimer: Right.

Thrasher: But the FBI did come to Savannah and once went to the local sheriff and stuff like that. And that always frightened them, they didn't know what that was about. And that is why I think the FBI came, is to do that.

Sinsheimer: Do you think most of the southern students had parents like you did?

Thrasher: Ed's parents, Ed's mother and father, his parents were supportive. Again they really didn't understand, they weren't, you know, we could always go home. My sense is that certainly as many of us had parents like that as we had parents who were really just opposed to it. I didn't get any sense that people were really getting that isolated that quickly from their families. Although we, I think

Thrasher(cont): we felt that when we started SSOC. That it could cause trouble with your family, that you couldn't do the kind of things And a lot of people, it was true, a lot of people wouldn't come out on a picket line for fear that they would have their picture in the paper. And then their family would know. So a lot of white students would choose to work kind of behind the scenes. And I did a lot of that in Nashville, I didn't go on picket lines for awhile in Nashville when I was getting involved. Because it just would have been too hard for me to have my pictures in the paper.

Sinsheimer: Do you think the students who were involved in the White Folks project maybe were more conservative in terms of what they were willing to do, or they just happened to be assigned ... was that a function of Ed Mamlett's selection process or was this people gravitating toward doing that.

Thrasher: I think people gravitated toward doing it, and I don't think they were more conservative at all. I think in fact that they were more, I don't want to say more radical, but I think their politics were certainly equal to anybody else's. Now they were different, there was not that sort of, the southern students were always different from the northern radical students who came down. We were never as intellectual, we didn't have intellectual backgrounds that the northern students had.

And we didn't have the, we didn't have the same sort of political _____ but I don't think that makes it, our politics were not as, or were conservative or anything. In fact, I think, I mean I have always felt, I felt then and still feel now, that the kind of thing we were doing was really much more aimed at long-range change in the South. I mean all the people who came south for one summer and then left, you know, are doing a lot of different things now. But I think if you looked at what people are doing politically after, the White Folks project people in terms of their political commitment over the long haul would probably be higher. Miles (Horton) thinks that, he sort of always felt that the, that project And he came down and met with, in the middle of the summer, did sort of a retraining session. And he has always felt, that people are more involved because we really couldn't leave and we had to figure a way to work over the long haul.

Sinsheimer: I guess when I said that... .

Thrasher: But Ed and me and Jean sort of worked full-time for a long time.

Sinsheimer: Well, I guess when I meant "conservative," I meant in terms of what they were willing to risk as opposed to sort of political views.

Thrasher: No, I think the risks were just as high. In fact I think they were higher. I mean if you were in a working class neighborhood in Biloxi talking about integration then you were at risk, you were a lot more at risk there than you were in the heart of, protected in the Black community. So I think we were more at risk in some ways. And more visible than people-- not more visible that is not true. But we were, at least as much at risk as people were in some of the other places, with the exception of southwest Mississippi, with the exception of places like McComb and down there. Nobody could go in there.

I certainly didn't feel safe, and we had the same, we were a normal, regular project, and we had the same security measures. When we left Biloxi we called Jackson and told them where we were going and what time we expected to arrive. When we arrived we checked back in, we did all those sort of things that you were expected to do.

The only time I felt-- I mean one thing you did was, you didn't, before going to Mississippi-- and I think everybody had to deal with this in their own personal way, and it would be an interesting story to find out how people did-- but you had to deal with the danger I think before you went down there, so that you didn't get paralyzed by it. And on the one hand you could get paranoid about it because I think the danger was so random that it really was not high. And there were random incidents of violence but it was constant, there was not a lot of constant harassment. So it was a matter you know of whether you happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time or something. But you just had to think through all that, and I think basically put it out of your head. You couldn't go about worried about what was going to happen to you. But I think the thing that helped were the security measures, people were very careful, we did do that.

The only time that summer that I was just frightened to death was when we went-- (Martin Luther) King came to Mississippi that summer and we went to hear him from Jackson. We drove from Jackson to Vicksburg to hear him. And there was myself and this woman Mickey and another guy who was in our project, he was not from the South and I don't remember his name. But for some reason-- and there were highway patrol on every overpass between, on the freeway between Jackson and Vicksburg, they were just crawling

Thrasher(cont.): all over. And of course they were not our friends and we were as paranoid about them as we were about anybody else. For some reason this guy turned off and got on the back road to Vicksburg. The worst of all possible things to do (laughter). And about, you know it was dark and we hadn't been on the road very long, and shortly after we got on this back road, we got picked up and tailed the entire way to Vicksburg by this car behind us and it was virtually on our bumper. It was a totally isolated road, totally more like the mythology about Mississippi than anywhere else, there was Spanish Moss all over and we were getting into Yazoo country where we were. So it was really scary in terms of the way it looked and this car was on our bumper and we were in a car with an out of state liscence, we were obviously three civil rights workers.

Sinsheimer: What did you think of King's speech.

Thrasher: Oh it was wonderful, it was really the only time that I heard him. And I had two reactions, one was to him, and one was to just seeing how he moved an audience which I have never really seen. He was the most charasmatic person I have ever seen. And he had the utter absolute devotion of everybody there. People couldn't get in the church, people were all outside on cars and all around and everything else. And, you know, it was a King speech, it was eloquent and beautiful and all the things that he was. It was really moving and just the way people responded to him was amazing.

Sinsheimer: Do you think the SNCC people felt that way about him?

Thrasher: I think they felt that he was, certainly they knew he was a good speaker and could move audiences and stuff. There was a lot of organizational rivalry already by that time so all of that was there by that time.

Sinsheimer: But that would be the SNCC staff not the volunteers or had the volunteers accepted that by that time?

Thrasher: I imagine that a lot of them had. There was a sort of, there was this you know, the SNCC sort of style was to be more radical and more swaggering and SCLC was sort of not quite as radical and not as good. And

Thrasher(cont.): they were not as involved in Mississippi, I mean SNCC, Mississippi was really A SNCC project. I mean SCLC was involved to a much lesser degree than SNCC was, with a wonderful woman named Danielle Ponder who had the respect of all the SNCC people that I knew. She was SCLC's major person there.

Sinsheimer: Did you ever consider working for SCLC?

Thrasher: No, never, never came up. I went ot work for SSOC and the nleft supposedly to go to graduate school and got waylaid at IPS in Washington and never made it to graduate school. C.T. Vivian was the person that we knew at SCLC so we had some ties with them, but we didn't have a lot of organizational ties. SNCC was really the organization that I sort of-- SNCC was the organization that I felt close to and closely identified with, and felt like it was mine more so than SSOC, I mean more so than SCLC.

Sinsheimer: Becasue it evolved out of Nashville you think?

Thrasher: It was just the people that I met and it was student, it was sort of the people who had taught me and gotten me going. Although in Nashville, the local chapter of the SCLC in Nashville was a really active good group. And there, there was never the schism in Nashville between the student movement and the SCLC chapter that you saw regionally later. The Nashville Christian Leadership Council as it was called was very supportive of the SNCC chapter there always. And all the demonstrations started out of _____ Roy Smith's church. And the committee would always come down and get people out of jail and do whatever they had to do. A very close working relationship. It didn't, I never was aware of all the SCLC-SNCC stuff so much in terms of what it really meant.

I got a lot of that from Julian (Bond) in an interview we did with him for Southern Exposure. He told me a lot about that stuff years later. It is funny I am finding out things now that I never knew. Like the thing with Forman and the whole, which side he was on in that debate about SSOC, I really never knew that.

Sinsheimer: Do you think that the volunteers went to Mississippi with this sense that there was this controversy or had that pretty much been bottled up in the staff meetings.

Thrasher: Controversy between SCLC and SNCC?

Sinsheimer: No controversy about having white students there at all. Just a sort of general

Thrasher: Yeah I think they knew that. I think they knew that. It is certainly-- I think it came out in the orientation sessions. My guess that is one of things that was talked about prettily openly. And there was some hostility toward white students from black organizers. I mean that was always an element that was there. There was a wonderful tape that Vincent Harding did, a speech that he made at Oxford to white volunteers talking about racism and what was going to come up. Have you heard that tape? Where he talked just **about** the whole issue of white women and black men, and the whole sexual overtones and all of that, just prepared people for what was going to happen.

Sinsheimer: Right.

Thrasher: And we used that tape later in, I didn't hear it that summer, but we used it in a project that SSOC did in Mississippi in 1965. We did two Christmas projects in Mississippi where we took white students to a black community basically, and idn't do much there. The main thing was to get people there, it was a way of getting people radicalized.

Sinsheimer: I am pretty much out of questions I guess.

Thrasher: I feel like I don't remember enough to be really helpful to you. (Break) I think it probably got planned late it was sort of like an idea that got tacked on to an overall project. And it was hard becasue it was not an intregal part of what was really going on in Mississippi. Otherwise I wouldn't have felt that way about being in Palmers Crossing. I mean the real-- Mississippi Summer was, I mean it may have been about voter registration and Freedom Schools, but what it was really about on another level was politicizing a whole group of white students. I mean that was what I think people got out of it. I think the volunteers who went there got much more out of Mississippi than they gave. And so we did not get that working in the white community like other volunteers did.

But it sort of got tacked on, it was never that sort of intregal ... in terms of what was going on there the whole summer. There was a , I mean there was I am not sure it was a lack of leadership, but the leadership was not strong enough that it had any coherence because the leadership split. Sam went one way and Ed sort of was the director of what we were doing. And there was no clear indication of what we should do. There wasn't a strong organized, here is what we are going to do this summer, here are the things we are going to accomplish, we didn't have that. I don't think Ed would have, Ed is not that kind of person, he wouldn't have done that, and SNCC didn't help him do that,

Thrasher(cont.): there was no, there was no sort of worked out thing that SNCC wanted, that COFO wanted from the project.

Sinsheimer: Right.

Thrasher: And then it-- it probably was not a good idea, and that is what I think in retrospect. It probably was just not a good idea. That what we could have done is worked with people like Jane Scott, the Mississippi Council, and a few other places where white volunteers, where white southerners could have been helpful. But the whole notion of going into Biloxi and setting up a house in a white working class neighborhood, and saying you were organizing the white working class for the MFDP was utterly insane. And it was a waste of time I think and not helpful, and it sapped energy from whatever else we might have done, what the other part of the project might have done, the internal debate.

But I don't feel, you know, I don't, I don't even feel defensive about all that, because I think it was still good. And I think most of the people who were in it would think that too.

And one of the things that struck me about this thing in Mississippi is how all of us tend to talk about Mississippi in terms of what it did for us and our lives. I think that is a real thread that runs through everybody that was there. I think when you really evaluate what happened in Mississippi, what happened to the volunteers, and what it meant in terms of their political lives is one of the key ingredients.

The n the question is whether it did good or ill to Mississippi. Which I am sure the question will be debated for a long time, and a lot of different answers.

Sinsheimer: At the beginning of the summer how optimistic do you think the staff was, sort of let's say Forman and Moses, going in to the summer? Do you think they were outwardly more enthusiastic and optimistic than they were inside. Or do you think they knew

Thrasher: I think everybody was scared about, I think Moses in particular was scared about the responsibility of lives. I mean everybody, no one knew what was going to happen. And I think it was possible, do I believe this, I do, I think it is possible that if Goodman, Chaney, and Schwerner had not been killed right off like that and with that national publicity, that there could have been more lives lost in Mississippi that summer, just more consistent, more attrition in various isolated places. And I think that sort of national media event,

Thrasher(cont.):

which it became, with the horror of the story behind it really sort of undercut other kinds of things that might have gone on that summer. Because it was not, it was not a safe-- it was an evil place to be, you could feel that in the air, you could feel that you were in a minority and that people did not like you and what you were doing. Which is another, which is why I say given that atmosphere that it did not make sense to try to work with white people. And certainly without a much better worked out ... strategy for what we were doing, and that's what was lacking in it.

And I don't know whether that is, I wouldn't say that that is Ed's fault, or my fault because in a leadership position we all came out of SSOC, it just was poor planning really.

Sinsheimer:

I want to ask you a question not necessarily related to your experiences but one that I am trying to figure out. How do you think it is, for example sort of my feeling is that the summer volunteers came from a world where people believed in their political "efficacy," you know if you go to Yale or Harvard, you know a lot of these people are Congressmen now.

Thrasher:

Right, exactly.

Sinsheimer:

And they go into a situation where let's say fear has gotten to the point where apathy exists. Do you think it is possible for any of them to be transferred or do you think it is two worlds apart, what do you think would be the best method for approaching that?

Thrasher:

Well, on the one hand you had, you sort of had that apathy, on the other you had the shining example of people going down and registering to vote, so you had, that was as important I think in some ways as anything else. Because as soon as people went down and got jailed and got out here with _____ more people would go. So that was happening, and I think that loosened up, I think that was more important than the sort of other ideas coming in, trying to change that.

I really think that, I really think that what moved Mississippi were the Mississippians themselves and the Black Mississippians, that is where the change came from. And their willingness to risk all the things that they did. I don't think it was a matter of other people being able to persuade them about the political system because it wasn't the same political system. You couldn't, I mean for Blacks in Mississippi those were not politically workable ideas, you couldn't go down and register and get somebody elected to Congress, you couldn't do those kinds of things.

Sinsheimer: So, I mean what do you think the volunteers, I mean when they did work, when the volunteers were able to motivate people, why was that?

Thrasher: I think it was because it, they were just part of a whole movement, I don't think they were necessary-- now I think one white volunteer going out and registering people to vote, it may have been personal one-on-one things that were truly important and I think that is true-- but overall they were part of a big project and people knew that they had come there to help them.

People, I mean black people in Mississippi were incredibly receptive to all the volunteers because they felt that people had come, had been willing to come, and to help. And felt like they were part of a growing movement, whether it was registering to vote or joining the MFDP and attending all those meetings, or sending their children to Freedom School, or being involved at whatever level in the community. I think it was really a big package rather than the one-on-one stuff.

I think the same thing is probably true of the Freedom Schools too, although I don't really know that. But ... people had a sense of being part of a movement I think in Mississippi. And that was every bit as important, and there was a Mississippi movement that the volunteers were a part of, but they were not necessarily acting on people in Mississippi, or really organizing people in Mississippi. See, I don't think that happened, I don't think white volunteers really organized people in Mississippi that summer. They provided a lot of the foot work, and a lot of the skills for certain things that happened, but I think the real organization and the real activism was coming from Black Mississippians.

Sinsheimer: Would it be fair to say that the volunteers acted as a catalyst then? Or is that too strong?

Thrasher: ... Yes, if you would say that they were the only catalyst I think.

Sinsheimer: One of

Thrasher: One, yeah as a part of an overall thing, yeah I think so. I think it was important for people to see, for Mississippians to see that commitment and that willingness to go to jail and put their lives on the line, I think people respected that. And were very patient with all the mistakes that people made, they just weren't culturally, they didn't know where they were. It was not easy, I felt that southerners had it a little bit easier because we weren't in as much culture shock as other people were that summer.

Sinsheimer: What do you think were the major elements of that culture shock? Do you think-- a lot of people have talked about religion.

Thrasher: Religion I think was one of the major ones. And being sort of anti-religious or atheist or whatever, and yet seeing, you know, how important the Black church was to the civil rights movement, which it was.

I think adapting to the living situations and the poverty that people were in. But it had such an aura and romance about it, those weren't the real hard things. Those things became part of the mystique of being a volunteer pretty easily. I think the religion and just the Black Mississippi culture, and then I am sure it was hard to find people who were not open to going, to being registered. There was, you know, to find the Black community that was apathetic and was not willing to make the commitments that other people were, which was surely there.

End of Interview.