

Civil Rights History Project
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Interviewee: Ms. Anne Pearl Avery
Interview Date: May 31, 2011
Location: Bridge Crossing Jubilee Office, Selma, Alabama
Interviewer: Joseph Mosnier, Ph.D.
Videographer: John Bishop
Length: 1:31:05

John Bishop: Okay, we're going.

Joe Mosnier: Uh, today is Tuesday, May 31, 2011. My name is Joe Mosnier of the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Uh, I am with, uh, filmmaker John Bishop in Selma, Alabama, where we are recording an oral history interview for the Civil Rights History Project, which is an undertaking of the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture. We're especially happy to be here today with you, Ms. Avery. We're in Selma, as I mentioned, with Ms. Anne Pearl Avery, to talk about your life and work and engagement with SNCC and all your efforts in the struggle. Thank you for welcoming us to Selma, and we're really pleased to be with you. Thank you.

Anne Avery: Thank you. I'm pleased to meet you.

JM: Um, let me start this morning just to have you talk a little bit about, um, where you were born and where you came up, a little bit about your family.

AA: Um, well, um, what, um – I was born in Birmingham, Alabama. Um, and, um, my mother and father are Will and Hattie Townsend. I was the first baby, and my father was fifty-fi – fifty-four years old when I was born. I was the first baby. [Laughs]

JM: Um-hmm.

AA: But, um, anyway, um, [clears throat] we were, um – I, I'd say we were, we were po' – I'm poor now, but we were po' then. [Laughs]

[Clears throat] But, um, anyway, as time went on, uh, uh, in, in Birmingham, I had, um, this situation where my, my aunt by the name of Hattie, Aunt Hattie up in, uh, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, had a, um – uh, she and her husband didn't have any children. The husband deceased, and, um, she wanted somebody to come stay with her. And my mother had four of us, so my mother decided to share me with her for a few years.

JM: And that was your great-aunt, actually?

AA: That was my great-aunt. That's, that was my, my mother's aunt, which would've been my great-aunt. And during that time I was in Pittsburgh, I went to Gladstone Elementary, lived in Hazelwood, um, [pause] lived on Sylvan – I think it was Sylvan Road – or Sylvan Avenue. It was Sylvan Avenue. I'm trying to, to –

But, anyway, during that time Emmett Till [someone coughs] was murdered. And, I guess, you can say for a child – I was only about nine or ten years old when he was murdered. But the adults were in, uh, you know, talking about it in the community and talking about it at, uh, at, at my, uh, at my home there, 'cause my Aunt Hattie had, had boarders. And, um, they were talking about it, and the way they were talking about it, they were just talking about a child.

Only thing I could understand, get out of it, was a child had been murdered, um, a Negro child. And I – that's – I think that's what kind of piqued by interest, uh, although I didn't understand lynching or anything. But I *did* understand that a child was murdered, and I was a child.

And I was curious about this, uh, the child being murdered, and I looked for a newspaper around the house. Usually a newspaper would be there, because she had the boarders and stuff; they'd bring newspaper, but I'd head for the comics. And, uh, there was no newspaper that day, so I decided to, um, [someone coughs] go down to the, uh, little neighborhood grocery store where they had a, had a news, uh, rack there, newspaper rack, and I wanted to, um, take a look at the paper. And I was fumbling with the paper, and the, the uh, uh, um, store attendant told me that I couldn't, um, handle the paper unless I paid for it.

But, fortunately, by me being the only child [5:00] member in the family, period – cousins, and I had some, uh, cousins there, but they were adults – they spoiled me. They made sure I had pocket money to go to the movie. They made sure I had money to buy cookies and candy, uh, bubblegum, whatever I wanted to do, you know, for – so, the, I paid for the paper. Uh, and when I see it now, [laughs] uh, in a humorous type of way, I say, “Well, I sacrificed a nickel.” [Laughs]

JM: Yeah.

AA: And I can't remember which paper it was, whether it was the *Pittsburgh* – the regular paper, everyday paper, there would have – I'm not sure whether it was the *Pittsburgh Courier*, uh, *Pittsburgh Gazette* or something like that. It could have been. I'm not sure, you know. But anyway, I tried to read this paper to try to understand the death of, uh, Emmett Till. But I still couldn't understand it, really, because I'm trying to understand it from a nine- or ten-

year-old point of view. The only thing I understood that it was a child murdered, and it was, um, a black child murdered.

Um, later on, I'm back in Birmingham, and a man was murdered by the name of Mack Parker, Poplarville, Mississippi. But I'm fourteen years old now, and what happened is they had arrested him, uh, basically the same type of thing that Emmett Till was, uh, murdered for, making insulting remarks to a white female or something like that. And they arrested him, kept him in jail for a couple of weeks, and there were threats to take him out of jail. And I was keeping up with that, too. And then, all of a sudden, they went in and took him out of jail and killed him.

And, um, right after that, there are a lot of other things begin to happen: the bus boycott in Montgomery; um, Autherine Lucy trying to enter the, enter the University of Ole Miss; Reverend [Fred] Shuttlesworth right there in Birmingham, um, along with, uh, Reverend [Charles] Billups and Reverend [C. Herbert] Oliver and Reverend Pfeiffer, uh, these are the ministers that I remember, um, that, um, were trying to desegregate the schools there in Birmingham. Matter of fact, specifically, I think he was trying to desegregate Phillips High, which my children graduated, both of my boys graduated from.

But anyway, [clears throat] these things went on, and then after that came the sit-ins and the Freedom Rides. And I was really excited at that point, uh, but I'm sixteen years old now, so I understand this from a different level. And [clears throat] on the news, I was hearing about young people being involved and young people, uh, wanting change. And I was young, and I wanted to get involved. So, um, what I did is I said I wanted to go with 'em. I wanted to get involved; wanted to go with 'em. And I didn't know whether they were going to come to Birmingham or what.

JM: You're speaking of the Freedom Riders?

AA: Um-hmm.

JM: Yep.

AA: I'm speaking of the Freedom Riders. And when they got to, um – when they got, they, they – in Atlanta, I think, and they said they were coming to Birmingham, then I purchased a ticket from Birmingham to Montgomery. And not long after I purchased the ticket, and, I remember the bus arrived, the, about the bus arriving in, uh, uh, Anniston, Alabama, and was blown up in Anniston.

JM: Yeah.

AA: And then they came on to Birmingham. But, you know, is that, during that time, they had two bus stations. They had Trailways, and they had Greyhound. And Trailways, uh, was one that I was not that familiar with. I was more familiar with the Greyhound bus station. And I found out later on why I was, uh – I thought about later on why I was in, eh, really, uh, more attracted to the Greyhound bus station. My grandfather, my daddy's father, uh, uh, when he got older, he couldn't go anywhere by himself 'cause he'd get lost – well, some of us had to be with him. He was always going to the Greyhound bus station. [Laughs]

But, anyway, uh, [clears throat] this is where I [0:10:00], you know, I kinda, uh, wanted to be, so I went and got my ticket and everything. So, when they got to Birmingham, and, uh, I went down to the Greyhound bus station, along with a young lady at that time that lived in the projects when I was a little girl. Her name was, um, um –

JM: Candace Grimes?

AA: Candace! Candace. Now, Candace, [someone coughs] uh, told me that her uncle was, uh, Reverend [Ralph] Abernathy. But I didn't know this, you know, who Reverend

Abernathy was. It really wasn't that important as, you know [laughs] – to me, Abernathy, okay [laughs]. But we had decided to go down to the Greyhound bus station and take a look. But, uh, what happened is, it was roped off.

Then, uh, I wanted to go – I went down there, I think, the next night after and I talked – I met a guy by the name of Wilson Brown. And Wilson, I think, was some kind of a, part of a welcoming committee or, or something there in Birmingham for the Freedom Riders when they got in. And I told him I wanted to go. And Wilson said, “Okay,” said, “But,” uh, he started talking to me about nonviolence, and I didn't understand nonviolence.

But when I bought the ticket, I had bought me a knife to go with the ticket, 'cause I'm going to protect myself on the bus. And, um, Wilson told me I couldn't go 'cause I didn't understand the concept of nonviolence. And I asked him what did nonviolence mean. He said, “This is when someone hits you, you can't hit 'em back.” I said, “I don't think I want to do that.” So, I got a refund for my ticket.

And later on, I was seeing Wilson every, every night or every other night, coming into the, the, uh, A.G. Gaston [Motel and] Lounge, which was a special spot for, uh, my, uh, my friends and myself, my other girlfriends and myself. And, um, [clears throat] one night Wilson asked me, not long after that, did I want to go to a Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee meeting in Atlanta? Well, the thought was, I said, “Well, I've never been to Atlanta before, [laughs] and now I'm going to get a chance to go free,” and plus I wanted to learn more about what was going on in the Civil Rights Movement.

JM: Sure.

AA: And I told him yes, I left my knife at home [laughs], and everything is history after that!

JM: That was your first big move towards direct involvement with SNCC?

AA: Yeah, that was the first, first big movement towards getting involved in the Move – in, in the Civil Rights Movement.

JM: Yeah. Can –?

AA: I came to the meeting –

JM: Can we pause just there for a minute before we tell the Atlanta story? I want to ask a couple of things. [Clears throat]

[Recording stops and then resumes]

AA: When, when Mack Parker –

JM: Excuse me. Excuse me one sec.

JB: Ask the question again.

JM: Okay, let me ask the question again. John was, was – um, I have a note, um, from the research that I did in preparing for this session that in the late '50s you had become, um, quite interested and considered joining and perhaps, um, did become a member of the Nation of Islam.

AA: Well, what happened is, um, I made my first, uh, contact with people in the Nation of Islam when Mack Parker was in jail before he was murdered. And they were the only – they had the *Muhammad Speaks* [Nation of Islam's newspaper], and this was the only paper that had, that had something meaningful about this man every day in the paper, even up till the time he was murdered and even after he was murdered. And this is what attracted me to them, because this was something visible that I had saw, saw going on – well, I saw something going on, I should say.

And I started going to some of the meetings. And, uh, the thing about this was that, um, they weren't visible enough for me, you know. Maybe it just wasn't enough activity, uh, which, um, I'm not saying that what they were doing wasn't important. But it just – it just wasn't enough activity going on around it for me. Uh, I, I guess I wanted more action, and I saw more direct action with, uh –

JM: SNCC.

AA: The, the civil – the, the sit-ins and, and the Freedom Rides, although I know CORE was a part [15:00], more a part of, uh, some of the, uh, fr – the Freedom Rides, itself and –

JM: Sure. Sure.

AA: But the, the, the thing about, about this is they, they just – so, so, I went with what, what was more, more active, visibly active, than, uh –

JM: Yeah. Can I ask you on the, on the – just before you were about to head for that SNCC meeting in Atlanta, what was your life like in Birmingham? What – can you describe the community, the, the things that, um, were taking up your time, the – what you were witnessing in the community?

AA: Well, I was riding the back of the bus. And I don't know, maybe – maybe this thing of living in Pittsburgh, uh, and living under different conditions might have made, made the difference, because, uh, when I went to Pittsburgh, and we got to, um, Cincinnati, I think, and my aunt told me I could sit anywhere I wanted to sit. But I still – it still didn't dawn on me, because you have to remember I'm only nine or ten years old, and sitting anywhere I wanted to sit, it really didn't – although in Birmingham, when I got on the bus, I saw the sign saying, "Colored," but it still wasn't, you know, didn't, wasn't as meaningful.

But then, once I got to Pittsburgh and associating with other children is really where I learned a lot of stuff, because they were saying, “Don’t say ‘yes sir’ and ‘no sir.’ It’s ‘yes’ and ‘no.’” And they were telling me about how to – I’d go to the store and ask for a “drink,” a orange “drink.” And they’d say, “Don’t ask for a ‘drink.’ You ask for a ‘pop.’” And I just found out just about four weeks ago [laughing] why they called it a “pop,” you know, what, what, what started them to calling these things a “pop.” But anyway, [laughs] I, uh, I changed a lot there, and I guess the coming back to Birmingham and then going back to riding the back of the bus – and I went to an integrated school, now, in Pittsburgh, and it was different. It wasn’t perfect, but it was different. And, um, this – I guess this is what, what motivated me to probably, uh, get involved.

JM: Tell me about the, tell me about the trip to Atlanta.

AA: Well, the, the, the trip to Atlanta, when I got to Atlanta, um, and I met people, uh, met people there, um, that eventually, um, I became friends with and affected my whole life, and especially in terms of the idea of meeting some decent white people, ‘cause I had never met any decent white people to know them until I got to that meeting. I met, uh, Anne and Carl Braden. I met, uh, Bob Zellner. I met Dottie Miller, who became Dot—uh, Dottie Zellner later on. I met Penny Patch. I met Bill Hansen. And there was a lot of other people I met, um, and, uh, and even the, the blacks that I met – I met Ms. Ella Baker. I met Jim Forman. I met Ruby Doris [Smith]. Um, I met Julian Bond. I met so many, so many people, um, that I, I had, I had never met before. And I, I guess you could say I went into it, uh, from a learning to – from a learning stage, um, and –

JM: How long did – ?

AA: I never knew anything I did was going to be important. [Laughter]

JM: So that, that was an annual meeting that lasted, what, a couple of days?

AA: Uh, this went on, I think for, uh, uh, uh, yeah, a couple of days or a weekend or something like that, because at that time SNCC had their first – their first office was on, um, Auburn Avenue, upstairs over the, uh, *Atlanta World*, where the *Atlanta World* was on Auburn Avenue. Uh, and it had holes in the floor. You know, we had to be careful [laughs]. We went upstairs but we had to be careful about where we walked, you know, ‘cause of the big hole there in the floor. They were doing construction or something on the building. It was – you know. And then, we went – it went from there to Raymond Street. [20:00]

But, um, anyway, after that Atlanta meeting – um, matter of fact, on the way back home, we got in trouble [laughs] and almost got, uh, murdered right there in Marietta, Georgia.

JM: What happened?

AA: Well, what we did is we, we got confused, trying to get back to Birmingham. Wilson Brown, uh, Nathaniel Lee, and, uh – there was a white girl that wanted to meet Reverend Shuttlesworth.

JM: Do you remember who, who that was?

AA: No, I never knew, ‘cause I never saw her again. Uh, she wanted to meet Reverend Shuttlesworth – and myself, that’s why we, we, we were all in the car together.

JM: And she’d been at the SNCC meeting, too?

AA: She had been at the SNCC meeting, too.

JM: Yeah.

AA: And we got confused and ended up in Marietta, Georgia. And we said, “Well, let’s go in the bus station [laughs] and get some information.” Well, we went in the bus station, and now we’re in trouble, because we go in the bus station, and these people see this white girl with

us. Um, and during that time, if you were, uh, in a mixed group together, you were considered part of the Civil Rights Movement, which I didn't know at the time and hadn't really thought about it at that point.

But this is what the situation was: When we left the bus station, the police followed us. And when the police followed – we still don't know where we're going, and we couldn't find any black people [laughs] to ask. We didn't see any black people. And we got stopped. Uh, we hadn't done anything, but we got stopped. The police pulled us over. And by being Marietta, Georgia, I'm saying, it was just like you go two blocks and you're out [laughing], out of the city limits [laughter], or you're headed out in, into the other area there.

And, and what happened is the police stopped us, arrested Wilson, commandeered the car, and now we don't have no way to get around, and Wilson's in jail. And we were standing out on the street trying to figure out what to do. Tried to find a black community, and no black folk. And I said, "Let's go back to the bus station." [Laughs] 'Cause we could still see the bus station right there once we got back into the city. They made Wilson drive his car, with us in it, put us out, take Wilson to jail, take the car, and there we are.

And we decided to go to the bus station, finally. And when we got to the bus station, the attendant told us we couldn't stay because we weren't customers. I said, "Hmm," I thought about it and I said, "Let's buy tickets!" [Laughs] You know, back to – we couldn't buy tickets too far – back to Atlanta, anything! But this made us – 'cause I understood the part about the, uh – what was it the – Interstate Chamber of Commerce [note: she intends the Interstate Commerce Commission] – the law is that they had to, you know, once we became customers – since they said we weren't customers, okay, we'll become customers.

JM: And you should be able to travel freely.

AA: Yeah, and that way they couldn't kick us out of the bus station.

JM: Right.

AA: And we stayed in the bus station there. And, uh, what we did is, right after that, we called, called, uh, back to the SNCC office and, um, talked to someone there. Uh, I think, you know – I don't know who we talked to now. I forgot now. But, anyway, we talked to someone. But during that time, if you remember, they had switchboards. You couldn't dial directly out. You had a switchboard. And we were using payphones in the, uh, in the bus station. And, finally, um – but this was a way to communicate and at least let folks know where we were.

And by this time, it's about dark – dark, just got dark, and it was really, really frightening. Um, it wasn't [door closes] too frightening at first. It was kind of, uh, uh, like [pause] kinda odd, but not too frightening, until it got darker and we got crowd—crowd—people crowded the bus – only white people.

JM: More and more were coming to the bus station. [25:00]

AA: More and more people. That bus station probably hadn't had that many people in it in the history of Marietta, Georgia [laughs] – Marietta's bus station. But it, it, it had a lot of people that night.

JM: So, that's you, Nathaniel Lee, and, um, and one, uh –

AA: One white girl.

JM: White woman, yeah.

AA: And we started getting phone calls – well, we first had to figure out where we going to take a refuge. We didn't know whether – it was three phone booths there. We decided we were going to take a phone booth apiece if things got worse.

JM: Tell me a little bit more what you mean by that.

AA: Well, during that time, they had phone booths.

JM: Sure.

AA: You know, when you used the phone –

JM: Yep.

AA: They had a booth –

JM: Yep.

AA: That would – the door would close on it.

JM: So, you were thinking each to get inside of one of ‘em and close the door.

AA: Yeah, we’ve got three, three –

JM: Yep.

AA: Three booths. We’ve all got a booth. [Laughs] This was going to be our refuge.

[Sound of squeaky door opening] But in the meantime we were getting calls.

JM: Let’s pause for just a moment, okay?

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We’re cooking.

JM: Uh, we’re back on after a short break to meet Ms. Sanders [Ms. Rose Sanders, attorney and head of Bridge Crossing Jubilee Program in Selma]. Um –

JB: So, you were just getting in the –

JM: Ms., Ms. Avery, you were just, um –

AA: Well, I was just getting into the part about the, about the, um, the switchboard. You know, they had, um, switchboards then.

JM: Yes.

AA: And in order to get a call out, you had to go through a switchboard. And not long after we made the call, obviously, uh, they must have – must have called the Associated Press. ‘Cause at that time, I think Julian was, uh – Julian Bond was, uh, was on the staff for the *Atlanta*, uh, *Inquirer*. Uh, is it the *Atlanta Inquirer*?

JM: Okay. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

AA: Anyway, he was on the staff of some little small, black – a, a black newspaper. And what he did, what they did was, um, the Associated Press started calling us.

JM: Back on the payphones?

AA: On the payphones – they started calling us, asking us were we okay. Uh, every few minutes, they’d call back and ask were we okay. Uh, but the thing about this is, this is, uh, I don’t think nobody could have gotten to us if, if they really, I think, if we had stayed there longer than we did. It just so happened, um, we were there until probably about twelve or one o’clock that night. But the later it got, the worse these people got and the more hostile they became. They got sticks and started beating on the, uh, seats, and, and, and, and, and shouting all kinds of obscenities and threats that they were going to kill us, uh, and calling the white girl a nigger lover, and this kinda, this kinda stuff. And, “We’re going kill y’all niggers tonight.” And, uh, the later it got, the more frightening it got.

And finally, uh, Julian Bond and some other people showed up. Um, I think Howard Moore was one of the people. Uh, he was, uh, one of the SNCC lawyers, and he finally married, uh, Julian’s sister, Jane. But, um, Jim Forman, Julian, Howard Moore, and a few other people came along, I think, with some people from the Justice Department, to get Wilson out of jail and get us out of there. And Forman decided we shouldn’t, uh, we shouldn’t try to go to Birmingham that night. Stay in Atlanta and then go to Birmingham during the day.

JM: How'd they – how'd they deal with the crowd when they got there? How did they find their way in to get you and extract you from being surrounded by that crowd in the, in the bus station?

AA: Well, we don't really – we don't really know, except, uh, they came in and told us we can – you know, to let's go. You know, after they got Wilson out of jail, they came to where – because the town is – [laughs] the jail is on the corner, the Greyhound bus station probably it, it, you know, when I can visualize it now, just probably across, across the street, 'cause we could see the Greyhound bus station from the jailhouse on the corner, and –

JM: [Clears throat]

AA: Uh, it wasn't that, that far.

JM: Did they come back with any local sheriff or police officer to manage the crowd?

AA: No!

JM: No?

AA: No!

JM: None at all?

AA: No, never happened.

JM: So, they just on their own authority, they came in and –

AA: They – well, the people who came, came from Atlanta.

JM: Yeah, of course.

AA: They didn't come from Marietta.

JM: Right.

AA: These were people who, uh, came in from Atlanta, and I think it was part of the Justice Department. I remember, uh, something from the Justice Department.

JM: So, they had somebody from the Justice Department?

AA: I think so.

JM: Who would've been a white guy?

AA: They had a black, them black cars then, you know.

JM: Yeah.

AA: Government cars. They had all those black –

JM: Okay. Gotcha.

AA: I, but I'm assuming it was, uh, some [30:00] – anyway, somebody from the Justice Department that came there to, uh, assist us.

JM: Who was – who was white obviously?

AA: Hmm?

JM: That, *that* person was white, obviously – the Justice Department person.

AA: I, I think so. Uh, it's, it's a lot of stuff that's kind of vague in that, uh, except for [laughs] the part in the bus station.

JM: Yeah. That must have been – tell me about, tell me about the impl – you know, what, what the impact on, on you was of being in such a, a very fearful situation.

AA: Well, um, I – I, I knew that it was very, very good chances of us getting really hurt or killed there. *But*, on the other hand, I learned to keep – be calm and use my head when I'm in a situation, and that's in any situation. I apply that today, because going to that bus station was the best thing we could do, instead of trying to look for a black community. We don't know where the black community is. We didn't see any black people. The bus station, we could see that.

Then, when they told us we couldn't stay, and we had – you know, it came to me *quick* to get the tickets. “Let's get the tickets!” We got the tickets. We weren't out of harm's way, but we were in a situation – and I'd have rather been there than out on the road somewhere when it got dark. It's a good thing they did stop us before it got dark, you see. Because stopping us out on the road with no communication, nobody around at all – even if they were *bad* people, it's better to have some people around. But anyway, um, it was just, uh, um, something I learned, learned early on, in terms of some of the things that I did later on that probably saved my life.

Um, now, when we finally got to Birmingham, we met Reverend Shuttlesworth. And this was my first time meeting Reverend Shuttlesworth. [Laughs]

JM: Had – had he heard about what had happened in Marietta?

AA: Uh, no. Uh, Wilson called him and told him he had somebody [laughing] that wanted to meet him. And we, we went to, uh, went to his place, and he was still in his pajamas when we met him, and this was my first time meeting, meeting him. Being right there in Birmingham, with all this activity going on, this was the very first time I met Reverend Shuttlesworth. Um.

JM: And, and not long thereafter, I think, you, you participated in a sit-in at the Woolworth's.

AA: At where?

JM: You participated in a sit-in at the Woolworth's.

AA: Yeah! Yeah, he had me down there at the Woolworth's with him, 'cause we, we were going to test the sit-ins there. Um, and we went to – I think it was a Woolworth's or the Kress's or one of them places. I think it was Woolworth's. And, uh, when we went in there, and Wilson and Reverend, uh, Shuttlesworth and Reverend Billups were standing on the side, and the

group of – I guess this was, I think this was the very first sit-in that Birmingham had, and we were going to test the sit-in.

Well, they didn't ser – they didn't arrest us, but they didn't serve us. But what they would – what happened is they had a, a white fellow that was going down the counter, spitting and pouring ketchup. And I hadn't quite been adjusted to this nonviolent thing. I wasn't sure how I was going to react to this spitting and being, you know, uh, pouring ketchup. And Reverend Shuttlesworth [laughs] saw how I was acting and I was – you know. And he said, "Come here. [Laughs] I want you to stand here beside me," because I hadn't really, uh, learned much about the, um, nonviolence thing to really want to, want to use it as a tactic or anything. I hadn't learned enough about it to, to accept it for any reason.

But I wanted to go sit on the lunch counter. And, uh, I told Reverend, "Sir," I said, "I want to go back up there." He said, "You can't go. You need to stand right here with me." But anyway, uh, later on, I went to – I think it was Albany, Georgia. I don't know whether I had went there then, or either had – anyway, I got arrested in Albany, Georgia. And, uh, I think we had an attorney then by the name – was it C.B. King?

JM: Yeah.

AA: And, um, [0:35:00] uh, there were some other people I met. The first people I met were, uh, Rutha – I met, met Rutha Harris. I met, uh, I think, Bernice [Johnson Reagon], uh –

JM: Reagon?

AA: Reagon. And I met, uh, Charles Sherrod, I think, there. I had already met him up at the – and I met Bob Mantz.

JM: Bob Mantz?

AA: Bob Mantz. And Prathia Hall and – I'm trying to think of some other people that I met, met there.

JM: Can you – while you're thinking of these names, can you tell me a little bit about your impression of these people, these other folks like yourself who are making up SNCC in these days, and what they were like, and what you liked about them, what you maybe didn't like about them, what, what attracted you to them?

AA: Well, what attracted me was – it's mostly just – I, you know, I met these people, and they were already involved, so I was like, uh, in a learning stage. I considered myself being in a learning stage, that all the time there was something I could learn from them – and, um, uh, participate, but mostly it was a educational thing for me, because, uh, some of these people even had higher educations than, education than I did. Uh, but I was getting educated, too, just being there with them and just talking with them and exchanging ideas, or either just ask 'em – I, I said very little during that time.

JM: Did you feel, um – when you were getting involved in, in, in the protests directly, did you feel – I, I wonder how, what a, what the emotional experience of going through a protest with a lot of hostility around you is – was like for you? Did you feel a lot of anger? Did you feel a lot of fear? Did you feel a lot of calm? What was the mix of emotions for you in a, in a situation like that?

AA: Well, the thing about anger, I had been in, been in a, uh – this environment so long, I'm saying, you know, I didn't walk around being angry all the time. Um, it might have been emotional, um, [pause] uh, either just wanting to, to, to achieve something and do, and want things to be better, basically, uh, uh, because – I guess because I had been exposed to a different

situation. You know, you know, they say if a slave's been a slave, [laughing] they don't want to be a slave no more. If you've been free, you don't want to be a slave anymore.

So, I guess that, that – psychologically, that might have, uh, uh, in my subconscious probably had a lot to do with it. I can't say which, uh, which, uh, which one thing or combination of things. I really can't, can't, uh, say, except I can just probably, uh, pinpoint some things and say that this, this probably was what, what happened. And I'm just realizing that in the last few, few, uh, months or few, uh, years that these are the kinds of things that probably prompt me to do what I did.

JM: Yeah. When you moved down to Albany, [clears throat] was your status – what was your status with SNCC? Were you a volunteer or were you getting paid?

AA: No, I was a volunteer. I don't think anybody was getting paid at that time. But they finally, uh, somehow or another, because this thing was probably too good to be true – [laughs] the, I guess the government and everybody else figured it's too, uh, this was a way to, to also, um, um, disqualify SNCC but, and, and, you know, the younger groups, because where can you get people who want to go to jail, take a risk on their lives, and don't get paid?

We were going to people's houses, uh, staying with them and helping do the housework and stuff like this, and then, do voter registration, too, and do, uh, do the demonstrations or whatever was going on there, uh, to support the community. So, it's kinda, uh – [laughs] it's kind of strange that they asked to – I think we were getting – they finally forced them into giving us ten dollars a week, I think it was, [pause] which is still nothing, but it was just a way to, uh, probably make, make us use our funds, um.

JM: Yeah. What, um, what are you, what, what, what [0:40:00] what are some of the things that come first to mind when you think about having, going down to Albany that first

time, and Charles Sherrod and the other folks are down there, and, um, they put the Albany, um, Movement together?

AA: Well, I wanted to find out, um – well, in, in Georgia, I think they were, I think, uh, Bob Mantz was in, in Americus, I believe. But what happened is, um, I was just there to assist in whatever they wanted me to do pretty much. That's basically where, where, what I did during that time.

JM: And, and tell – can you tell me in more detail what – how you spent your time, what it was like to go out to do voter registration, what it was like to –?

AA: Well, I did – I think I tried to do voter registration one day, and the next day I went on a demonstration, uh, uh, and I got locked up there, uh. And I was in there for, I don't know, it was quite some time. I was about three or four weeks, I guess.

JM: Tell me, tell me about, if you would, what it was like to be in jail. What's the whole experience like of being in jail at that time and that kind of place?

AA: Well, uh, I was in there for something, uh, good and important, I thought. But what happened is I really – uh, just in order to, to adapt to this situation, I just, uh, uh, really kind of put, put out, put in the back of my mind what was going on outside and tried to adapt to the, uh, environment around me. Um, I was able to get, uh, cig—packages of cigarettes and stuff like this, um, anything that I could read or something. It was – that's how I, I adjusted. I just immediately adapted. Uh, and I guess that's probably one of the things, um, that I've been good at – is adapting to my environment at all times, whether I'm in jail or out of jail, I adapt to my environment.

JM: Let me ask about, um – let me ask about the episode – experience you had when, um, after, uh, [someone coughs] after, uh, William Moore, who was a white postal carrier, actually, was –

AA: Yeah.

JM: Doing a march and, um, was killed near Gadsden.

AA: Gadsden, Alabama.

JM: Yeah. And, um, there was some uncertainty about whether or not SNCC would – how they would respond. And, and you made a choice about how to respond. Can you, can you talk about that a little bit?

AA: Yeah. Well, they hadn't – they, they were, they, they, they, they hadn't decided on what they were going to do. And my position was to go do what William Moore was doing, to finish what he started, uh, even if I had to finish it alone. And I didn't realize when I decided to, made the decision to do this, that I was really, actually, taking on the march the way he did it, alone. Um, I just didn't realize it. I just figured that we needed to go ahead and march. And [pause] my intention was to go with other people, but I didn't know how long it was going to be before – or either whether they were going to go at all, because there was so much – uh, it was a dilemma and so much discussion about it.

And I made the decision to get me a sign and go on the William Moore March. Uh, I was arrested, uh, a few minutes later after I started walking with the sign and placed in jail in Gadsden, Alabama, where, uh, [pause] a day – the next day or two some other people were arrested. And the, the females that I know were arrested were, uh, Diane Nash, believe it or not, Madeleine Sherwood, who was one of the movie stars. She came down and she was arrested, uh, uh, in the, in the William Moore March. Uh, she played in – what is it – *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*?

JM: Hmm.

AA: She played the, the, the pregnant woman on the hot tin roof.

JM: Hmm. Hmm.

AA: And, uh, she came down and she bonded out right away. Uh, she was the only white female in the group, I think, and, uh, she was bonded out right away. But Diane and two other young ladies from Birmingham were locked up, and they [0:45:00] put them in a cell, I think, next to me.

But before that, they were trying to interrogate me and try to find out how I got there, who brought me, and I didn't give 'em any information. I told them, "Y'all just might as well take me on into the cell and put me in the jail, or do whatever y'all are going to do, 'cause I ain't talking." I never did tell them how I got there, who brought me, [laughs] or what the details – no details at all.

And later on, we were moved to, uh, Wetumpka Prison after we'd been in there something like – I think we were in there for about ten weeks. We were in there quite a while together for that, uh – I can't be exact, you know, uh, but we were in – um, they moved us to Wetumpka, uh, because it was supposedly a threat to come in the jail and take us out.

JM: And lynch – for a lynching.

AA: And, and to do us in. So, uh, they took the both – the young men who marched, they took them to Kilby [Prison, near Montgomery, Alabama], and took us to, uh, Wetumpka. And when we got to Wetumpka, they put us in a hole. Uh, the first night we stayed in a hole. Then they, they put us in the hospital, with the people in the hospital; although, we weren't sick. [Laughs] But I guess they decided that this was the best place for to be, us to be, so we wouldn't stir up any trouble in jail.

JM: Ms. Avery, you just said a moment ago they put you in the hole?

AA: It was a hole. We had to crawl –

JM: What do, what do you mean by that?

AA: It was a, uh – it was a cell, it was dark, and it was a hole, like, ‘cause we really couldn’t stand up in there. It was dark. [Pause] Only thing I can remember it was dark in there, and we couldn’t maneuver around. I guess they had us in there for – in that particular area, for a reason, uh, that night.

But then, the next morning is when they moved us to, to the hospital part of the jail. And one of the women who was bringing around the trays – it was a trustee. She was bringing the trays for the, for the sick people [laughs] in the, in the hospital, and she asked us, she said, “Where y’all from?” Said, “We knew that y’all – knew the Freedom, Freedom Fighters were here. And they didn’t want us to know, but we knew about it. *Everybody* know!” That’s what the lady said. She said, “*Everybody* know!” So, she asked us where were we from. And she asked Diane – Diane said, “Nashville.” The other two girls said, “Birmingham.” I said, “Birmingham.” And I asked her where was she from. She said, “Tuscaloosa.” And she said she was in there for life, um, some guy she, she was with, you know.

JM: You mentioned [clears throat] – you mentioned a moment ago that after, um, you know, after Moore was killed that there was a lot of discussion as to what to do. And you made a decision to go forward with the march.

AA: Yeah.

JM: And you mentioned earlier, too, that, that, um, you know, when you first encountered these arguments about nonviolence as a strategy in the movement, you, uh, you know, had some skepticism about that in some ways. Can you, can you explain a little bit about

how your perspectives, how your opinions and viewpoints compared to the ones that you saw in SNCC in these years? Did you feel sometimes that there was some difference between your instincts about how to do things and what SNCC was, was doing?

AA: Well, I can only, uh, speak to individuals, because there were certain individuals who took this on as a way of life. I was just one of those people, among others, who did not adopt nonviolence as a way of life, only as a tactic.

JM: Yeah. If you would, we're, we're – as we, as we work up towards what [coughs] what we'll include –

JB: Let's pause and break the file.

JM: Okay. Okay.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay, we're back.

JM: Okay, we're back after a short break. Uh, Ms. Avery, uh, we'll build the story towards all the way up through and beyond Selma, but I want to ask now '60 – say '62, '63, um, you had a, you went to a number of different places for SNCC. You had lots of different roles.

AA: Yeah.

JM: Can, can you sketch that out and talk about what you did and what you saw and how, how you felt? And what – those were very busy, busy years for SNCC, and you were right in the middle of that.

AA: Well, um, well, cause – what, what happened is I was there in Birmingham, too. Um, I had been a, one of the first, on one of our first demonstrations, and was arrested. And we called it a decoy march, 'cause what we did is, um, Reverend, uh, Wyatt T. Walker, uh, had me to go on a decoy march [0:50:00], and it was only about, uh, maybe ten or fifteen people. And

this was to throw, throw the, throw the, the police off, because what they were doing is, if you marched once that day, they didn't expect any more marches. But little did they know that the bigger march was coming later!

And one of my best friends, I was talking to her, I said, "You" – she said, "You going?" I said, "Yes, I'm going." And she said, "I ain't going." But on the second march she came along, [someone coughs] and I guess she did because [laughing] there were so many other people who wanted, who, who – she was the only one going to be left out. 'Cause, uh, they arrested, um, the other, other people and myself, and then later on, they show up. And I said, "What you doing here, Betty [Hill]?" [Laughs] She said, "I" – I said, "But you said you didn't want to go, you wasn't going." She said, "I wasn't going to be out there by myself." So, I guess when, uh, several other people who were our associates or friends had decided they were going to go, and she just decided she wasn't going to be, be alone. She decided to go, too. So.

JM: Yeah. You were in Danville for a while.

AA: Yes, I was in Danville, Virginia. Um, I was, uh, arrested several times in Danville. Uh, but I was arrested there and put in solitary confinement. I had a ninety-day sentence for contempt of court, uh, in Danville.

JM: What, what, what was it that the judge found you in contempt for?

AA: Well, we, we came to court. My, uh, Matthew Jones, who just passed, uh, recently and was, uh, one of the Freedom – one of the Freedom Singers – Matthew, um, along with Avon Rollins in Danville – we were, we were there, there working in Danville together, and I think there was some other guy there from – finally came in from the SCLC, and I can't think of what his name is. Um, I might think of it in a minute. But anyway, uh, we'd gone to court on some cases. You know, we had several cases already pending, uh, from jail, um. When we got there,

and it was crowded inside the jail – inside the, um, the courthouse and out in the hall. Uh, Matthew and I just showed up, and we looked in there, looked down, um, and the trial, the court case – court had already started. And the judge was asleep! Asleep! Literally asleep! He was just nodding.

I said, “Matthew, [laughs] see this? He’s asleep!” [Laughs] I, I said to Matthew, “Let’s wake him up.” So, what we did is we went down to the front of the podium where he was asleep and went limp, just laid down on the floor. So, he woke up. And he asked the police officer standing on the side, he said, “What’s wrong with ‘em?” And the police officer said, “Your Honor, that’s what they call ‘going limp.’” And he was mad! He – [laughs] he gave us ninety days. He wouldn’t take it back, so we had to serve our ninety days in solitary confinement.

Uh, and when I got out of jail for that particular incident, um, Avon Rollins, who was project director at the time, told me to go home; take a break. Well, I go home to take a break. I get into Birmingham late, you know, Saturday evening, and I go to bed, and what awakened me the next morning was the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. That’s what awakened me.

And I, uh – I lived about sixteen blocks from there, walked up to, um, that – during that time on Sunday morning, the buses ran slow, so I was able to walk. Um, and it wasn’t that far during that time. Sixteen blocks, eighteen blocks was nothing to walk. So, I walked, um, up to as close as the A.G. Gaston, uh, Motel, and they had everything else roped off.

And soon after that, um, Ms. Ella Baker showed up, Dr. King came in, uh, Reverend Abernathy. There was, um, Jim Forman, Andrew Young, and, um, and this was the first time I met Larry, Larry Steele, who was, uh, editor of *JET* [magazine] at the time. Um, and things were

kind of, uh, kind of, uh, kind of, uh, uh – we were, you know, emotional because of the children being murdered.

JM: Absolutely.

AA: And later on that, uh, that night, we were in a room standing and sitting down talking. And this is where the, um – we were in that room, uh, talking about, uh, things to do, you know. ‘Cause – and we were, you know, pretty upset. We didn’t know which way to go. Uh, we weren’t sure about just – we were – we weren’t planning to do anything violent, but we wanted to take some kind of direct action that was more, um, more, um, aggressive than, than just marching and going to jail at that time. Uh, and then, um, I was in, uh – where was it? Uh –

JM: Let me ask – while you’re thinking about that, let, let me ask the two other places that you worked. You worked in Hale County, [Alabama].

AA: Yeah.

JM: And you worked in Natchez, [Mississippi].

AA: I was – uh, Hale County, I was project director in Hale County, uh, on voter registration and, um, that was before I came here. But I was in Mississippi. When Cheney, Schwerner and Goodman were murdered, I was in Clarksdale, Mississippi. And I went from Clarksdale to Natchez, Mississippi. I was arrested in Natchez, Mississippi. Uh, I came here to, uh, to organize a voter registration project, and there were several other friends of mine came in. Uh, Cynthia Washington, I think was up in Greene County [Alabama] – she might have been in Perry County, [Alabama], or Greene County. I think it was Perry County, Greene County –

JM: Can you, can you –?

AA: And then –

JB: Joe, I’m going to pause for a second.

JM: Okay.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're back.

JM: Okay, we're –

JB: I just wanted to manually switch them.

JM: We're back, uh, after a short break. You're talking about, um, project director work in, um, in Hale County.

AA: Um-hmm.

JM: Yeah. Can you tell me what, what being the project director was like, all the things that you were, you were required to do and how you went about that work?

AA: Well, what, what we did is we first – um, when you first go into a community, we tried to, uh, find a place to stay in the community. You let the community people know who we are, and why we're there, and find a place to live. Sometimes we found places to live; sometimes we didn't, uh, because of the fear of the people. But, um, we were able to rent a house there in, uh, in Hale County.

And when we first went through the community, we would, uh, we met, uh, some guy, uh – I done forgot his name. He was a, he was a sergeant in the Army, and he said he wasn't going to – he said he didn't believe in everything we believed in. And he said he didn't believe in [laughing] nonviolence. So, we still asked him to come to the mass meeting. But, lo and behold, the first mass meeting we had, [clears throat] when the meeting was over, he was standing outside with his Army rifle. [Laughs] He said, "I just wanted to be sure everything was going to be alright!" [Laughs] I said, "Okay." [Laughs]

And, uh, you know, sometimes I know they say, say that we had but – had guns, but the thing is, um, a lady by the name of Miss Johnnie Mae – I forget her in – in, uh, Hale County, said [laughing], said, “Y’all have weapons?” [Laughs] We said, “No.” [Laughs] Uh, the two people was working during, eh, during that time were St. Clare Jeter and myself. And he was the one taught me how to drive, [clears throat] so if something happened to him, I could still drive the car.

But anyway, [1:00:00] they gave us a shotgun, a ten gauge shotgun, and so every morning, [clears throat] we got up, St. Clare was teaching me how to use this shotgun, ‘cause his father taught him how to hunt. And just across the road from us – it was a dead-end street we lived on, and just across the road from us, there was a white family, and they had a big fence up [laughs] around their house. But the funny thing about it is, us having that gun and him teaching me how to use it, actually, uh, probably helped save us a lot of times, because they probably said, “Well, these people are supposed to be nonviolent, but they got a gun.” [Laughs]

And that’s what I call “mind-adjusting,” you know. “They got a gun!” “But they’re nonviolent” – “Yeah, but they got a gun!” You know? We went to register the people to vote. We went to the march at the courthouse and stuff like that. But, “These people got a gun.” And, you know, uh, in my opinion, the, the Klan and all of these people who did all these evil things were *cowards*. So, a, a coward [laughs] don’t want to encounter nobody that really can equal up to them, see. So, [clears throat] just the eff – psychological effect that, “They got a gun.” And the only thing St. Clare was doing was, out of the backdoor – it was a big, a long field, woods down in there – he just said, showing me how to hold a shotgun and, and how to use it. [Laughs]

JM: Yeah. Did there ever come a time where you, you picked up the gun thinking you’d have to use it?

AA: Um, no. Uh, we had some, sort of the same situation in Natchez, Mississippi. Uh, Chico Neblett was the, uh, project director there, and we didn't have a place to stay. We stayed in a lady's room. She had a room that she was renting, and she worked in a café at night. And we slept there 'cause we didn't have anywhere to go. People wouldn't let, wouldn't give us a place to stay. And SNCC ended up buying a house there. I think the house was pretty cheap. I think they got it for about three thousand dollars or something like that, maybe less, you know. But we did have a place to stay there.

But I came, uh, here after, uh, Natchez, Mississippi, to work with the – on the voter registration. And then, when Jimmie Lee Jackson was, had, had been killed here, um, there was a decision to – the original decision was to take his dead body to, uh, Selma, in a casket, and finally it boiled down to us just marching.

But now, [clears throat] the night before the march, uh, we got a call. The reason Dr. King – 'cause Dr. King was supposed to be here, but he was not here. Uh, we got a call. We were in a strategy meeting and sitting around talking, and a phone call came in directly from [U.S.] Attorney General, uh, [Nicholas] Katzenbach's office, saying that Martin's life was in danger. And we took Martin away from here that night, and Hosea Williams and Andrew Young flipped a coin on who was going to represent SCLC on the march. That's how Hosea Williams got that spot.

JM: Standing next to John Lewis.

AA: That's the reason you see Hosea Williams out there in the, in the, in the, in the park.

JM: Yep. Yep.

AA: And you'll see John Lewis, and you'll see Ms. [Amelia] Boynton and Ms. Annie, uh – Ms. Marie Foster. And Marie Foster was, was one of the, um, people who marched all the way on the last march.

To go back, though, I got arrested here on Bloody Sunday, but I was the only person that got arrested. See, the intent was, was to terrorize us and brutalize us [pause] and to strike fear in, so much fear in us that we wouldn't want to march. Now, with all the polices they had, and where they had 'em – they had 'em at the, um, what, uh – the police line was the, the traffic light, the first traffic light you get to after you go across the bridge –

JM: Yeah.

AA: It was just about right along in that area.

JM: Yeah. Let me, and let me just mention, too, for the tape: We [clears throat] – we turn and look over our shoulder out the, out the window, or Ms. Avery looks straight out the window, [1:05:00] you can see that bridge.

AA: Um-hmm.

JM: Yeah.

AA: Uh, what happened is the, the, uh, they had, had the road blocked off, and their intention was really to hurt us. Now, [clears throat] before we marched, myself and some other people came out and, uh, drove around and took a look, just to see what the situation was like.

JM: Scouting.

AA: Scouting, yeah. And we could see where they had it, had it lined off. Not only that, um, the reason I got arrested was the police and I was having a physical disagreement about where I wanted to be and where he wanted me to be. 'Cause after, uh, I guess the tear gas,

'cause I didn't get effects of the tear gas. I was arrested pretty, pretty quick when the police and I had this, uh, difference and taken on off to jail.

But the intent was to really, to brutalize us, because if, if their intent was to, to stop us, uh, and arrest us, that was what – they didn't arrest but me, one. But most of the stuff that went on was beatings and tear-gassing, and – and they even took pictures of it themselves. They took their own pictures of it, and you go to the museum now and you'll see on the bottom where it says "Alabama Department of Public Safety." [Laughs]

Well, we didn't have any cameras anyway. We couldn't afford cameras. Uh, 'cause I've had people to ask me, say, "Where's your picture?" I say, "There's no telling where I was." I say, "We didn't take the pictures." And plus, I wasn't trying to star up on any, any demonstration I was on. I was just part, wanted to be part of it.

JM: So, you marched, um, on the twenty-first?

AA: Seventh. I marched on the seventh, that was – all three of them.

JM: Well, Bloody Sunday.

AA: We had three marches.

JM: Sure, and then on the ninth.

AA: Then on the ninth, and then on the final march.

JM: And then on the final march all the way to –

AA: But I didn't walk all the way to Montgomery.

JM: You didn't?

AA: I rode –

JM: What was your role?

AA: Hmm?

JM: What was your role?

AA: Well, I was, I was still, uh – still just project director.

JM: Yes ma'am.

AA: Uh, [laughs] of Hale County.

JM: Sure, sure.

AA: That's all I was.

JM: I, I had read that you had done – you have a lot of – um, they often would ask you to help with security, like you mentioned going out scouting and, and trying to get a sense of what might be waiting in terms of police response and – is that a, were – did you sometimes do some of that kinda work?

AA: Not often, 'cause I didn't drive, you know.

JM: Not often? Okay. Okay.

AA: I had just learned to drive.

JM: Okay.

AA: Uh, but I was sent on certain, uh, certain, uh – I had certain things to do, uh, from time to time. I was just chosen out of, I – not maybe out of the clear blue, because the people knew who they were choosing to do.

JM: Um-hmm.

AA: Because right there in Birmingham, uh, the state patrol were looking for Dr. King to give him an injunction, and I had just gotten out of jail in Birmingham, and what they were trying to do is enjoin all the people who would march or either they thought were going to march, like Dr. King. And I'm sitting in the lounge there with my friend, Betty, and some other people. But Dr. Walker, Dr. Wyatt T. Walker, uh, choose – chose me to do this. But I think that

I was chosen to do it because Betty couldn't have kept it quiet, you know. [Laughs] In hindsight, that's probably what it was.

And he walked over to me, and he whispered in my ear, and he said, uh, "Go around to room such-and-such" – I've forgotten what the room was now. "Go around there and tell them that the police is out here looking for Dr. King." Said, "Dr. King around there, in the room around there. He's around." They had him registered in the, in the master suite, but he didn't – wasn't staying in the master suite. He was, uh, around there in a room with Andy [Young] and, uh, and Bernard Lee, who was one of his, uh, lieutenants. And I discreetly and quietly got up and walked out, told my friends I'd be back in a minute, walked out, went around, told – carried the message, come back and sit down. Uh, that was part of the decoy march and stuff like that.

JM: Um-hmm. Um-hmm.

AA: And I did stuff like that from time to time.

JM: Especially since we're right here looking out the window at the bridge, what other memories come most, uh, vividly to your mind when you think about those [1:10:00] three marches on that bridge?

AA: Uh, Bloody Sunday, you know. Um, what happened is after the march was over, and I finally got out of jail – but you know something? This was the shortest time I'd ever stayed in jail was right here in Selma. [Laughs] Um –

JM: And, and why was that?

AA: Attorney Peter Hall bonded me out of his pocket. That's what happened. He came in from Birmingham. He was one of our attorneys. He came in. And somebody – they had been looking for me, and somebody told him that I was in jail. And he came to the jail, bonded me out, got in his car, went back to, uh, Birmingham. Matter of fact, he was back in

Birmingham before I was released. They didn't release me right away. I don't know why they kept me there until eleven or twelve o'clock at night, because the march had been over and stuff like that – and I had been bond out long before that, but they wouldn't, they didn't release me until then. Maybe they thought I was going to get out there and join 'em again, soon as they let me out or something – I don't know. I can only assume.

But, um, I just stayed in jail a few hours, [laughs] and that was phenomenal compared to all the other times that I had been to jail. The longest time I spent in jail was in Danville, Virginia, ninety days for contempt of court.

JM: Yeah. Can we take a little pause?

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JM: Um, we're back after a short break. And, um, one thing that I know you wanted to, to share some thoughts about was the, the election of Barack Obama.

AA: Yes. Um, well, being the, uh, first African-American president, I never thought it would happen during my time, but if it did, I always thought his name would be Charles, [laughing] Joe, John, Henry, Bob! I never thought he would have an African name, and that kinda excited me even more. And I, uh, I said, said to myself, this is my personal thought, I said, "It don't get no better than this!" [Laughs]

And also that he was being elected on my sixty-fifth birthday. And, you know, on your sixty-fifth birthday, that's a turning point in your life. And I said, "Oh, boy! This is real good! [Laughs] Real good!" [Laughs]

JM: That is a good birthday present, isn't it?

AA: Yeah, I was really ex – really excited, uh, not just about him being African American, but because he, he has an African name.

JM: Um-hmm. Um-hmm, yeah.

AA: Which wasn't expected. I – at first when he started, I said, “Oh, no. [Laughs] We're going to have a problem.” [Laughter] And I just – you know, it was just, uh, astounding just to, just to think that it happened! You know?

JM: Yeah. I want to ask, too – I got a few more things to ask you. One is [clears throat] you were relatively young when you first went to that Atlanta meeting.

AA: Yes.

JM: About eighteen years old. Seven –

AA: No, I was sixteen.

JM: As young as sixteen?

AA: Sixteen.

JM: So, you were born in '43.

AA: Um-hmm.

JM: Okay.

AA: But I didn't – I turned, I was sixteen turning seventeen in that November.

JM: Okay.

AA: So, when I got arrested, I was seventeen.

JM: That very first meeting, then, would have been still in 1960.

AA: Um-hmm.

JM: Yeah, okay. Um, thanks for that. That's a good –

AA: Oh, you're talking about the, the very first meeting with SNCC people?

JM: Yeah, yeah.

AA: No, it would've been '61.

JM: Yeah, exactly. Okay, so, okay. Alright.

AA: I thought you said '60, but '61.

JM: Okay. Okay. Um, so you, but, but still a fairly young person, about eighteen, seventeen, eighteen, and, um, you will very quickly, uh, be moving fulltime into a lot of important roles with SNCC, and will emerge as a project director. I'm wondering about your feeling about, about your roles inside SNCC, and the roles of women inside SNCC, and how you felt, um – how you felt about how you were able to use your skills and your talents and your personality and all your efforts on the, on, on behalf of SNCC's, SNCC's wider program.

AA: Well, I didn't think too much of it of the time. I was just being myself and I wasn't trying to star up, so I was just – but, uh, one thing I, I found out later on. I didn't know who Harriet Tubman was, but I found out that I was a modern day Harriet Tubman when it, when it come down to going to jail. And the people would get in jail, and it was an experience of, um – sometimes people, some people would, maybe one individual would break down, [1:15:00] 'cause the, the, uh, psychological effect of closing that iron door had an effect on you, *if* you didn't know how to adapt to that, and take it and turn it in, into something, uh, uh, uh, what you call suffering for doing, getting something better done, or getting something done that was good.

But what happened is [someone coughs] when people would come in and when somebody started that, I'd say, "Hey, no! We can't have that, 'cause we have a problem in here. We're in jail!" And what happened is the people who are jailors and stuff will take the advantage of this and try to do things to frighten us. And this is one of the reasons you *don't* want to do this, 'cause you – you know. And then, the other prisoners in jail will think that they can run over us. So, the best thing we can do, if you feel like, you know, you want to cry, go in a closet or go in a – or either call me and talk to me. Don't, don't start that here! And then,

another thing, if one do it, uh, three or four others might do it, and start demanding to get out of jail, because they don't – I said, "We going to get us some cards, and we going to get us some dominoes if we can."

And sometimes we were able to do this. And sometimes we had money on us. It wasn't much money, but remember, now, you're in jail. And if you want to get cigarettes and you've got fifty cents, you can get a pack of cigarettes. Somebody'll get you a pack of cigarettes or, you know, things that, that, you know – if we were in a situation where, where you were allowed, 'cause a lot of times we weren't allowed to have anything, point blank, nothing. But there were times when, you know, we were in jail, and there would be, uh, uh, they – when they come around, they didn't discriminate on that. They'd come around and say, "Well, who wants cigarettes, or who wants this?" Or either, if they wouldn't get us a book or anything like that, uh, we could get it. And even, if we had, uh, had a little money, we could get some information out. Uh, you know, you'd give somebody something and say, "Well, uh, call this number and tell them that such-and-such a thing is alright," and, and things like this. And it was better to appear to be strong than to be weak. So, that, that's, that's, uh, pretty much, uh, what I – but I didn't understand it. I, I call it now being a modern day Harriet Tubman.

JM: Um-hmm. Um-hmm.

AA: But I didn't realize this at the time, 'cause I didn't know who Harriet was.

JM: Yeah. Yeah. Let me ask the last couple questions. One is, um, what was your opinion of, um, folks in SCLC compared to the folks in SNCC? Did you have a – since you were so SNCC – your work was so much centered in SNCC – did you have a opinion about the SCLC folks?

AA: Well, SCLC, uh, was, uh, um – had its place, and so did SNCC, and so did CORE, and so did NAACP. But the older people, the more mature people, wanted not to move so fast. And the young people wanted to move now. They didn't want to wait twenty years to come from the back of the bus. They didn't want to wait twenty years to sit at a lunch counter. And that's the reason, I – by me being young – I wanted to, uh, be a part of what, of what the young people were doing.

And this, the, the difference between SNCC and SCLC was that, really, SNCC and CORE, uh, were like the infantry, 'cause we went into places where you couldn't walk the street. Forget about doing – I don't care what project director – whatever you're trying to do, it ain't fixing to happen! [Laughs] They're going to come – they were arresting us just for being in town. If you walked the street, you got arrested. Uh, anytime they decided to pick us up and arrest us, that's what they did. Vagrancy – and we had to have, uh, uh, uh – we had to be careful not to get arrested for these kinda things, if we could, because, uh, we needed their funds to bond out for something else. But the, um – getting arrested for vagrancy, they'd say, "Okay, everybody have fifty cents on 'em or whatever." You had, you had some money on you, uh, which also worked to our advantage if we *did* go to jail. You had fifty cents and you could do something with fifty – fifty cents don't sound like much now, but you could do much more than you think, think you could now with it in *jail*.

JM: Right.

AA: So, um –

JM: Did you have, did you have, um – make certain friends or have certain allies inside SNCC who mattered most to you?

AA: Yeah.

JM: Who, who were those people?

AA: Well, uh, one of the, one of the, one of the persons that I was really, uh, uh – I, I consider Jim, Jim Forman and Ella Baker my mentors. But, uh, people like my friends were, especially people that I worked personally with, and, um, Janet Moses, uh, Ruby Sales, uh, Gwen Patton, uh, Bob Mantz, uh, you could say Julian – you know, the people that I, uh, I, uh, uh, uh, – Ruby Doris Smith, Prathia Hall, um, Sam Block, uh, James Peacock and Willie Peacock. James is dead now. Uh, they both came – James Peacock, Willie Peacock, and Sam Block came from Mississippi. Uh, Frank Smith, who has a museum up in, uh, Washington, a slavery and Civil War museum, Charles Sherrod – all of the people that I knew – Charles Jones – there's a whole lot of people that I knew – Dottie Zellner, Bob Zellner. Um, over a period of time, you know, you get to know people and you see 'em all the time. You work with 'em. Uh, you get to, uh, have a certain bond. Um, Constance Romilly, uh, who's one of my best friends, uh, she came in from California to work. She worked mostly out of the Atlanta office, but, uh, Judy Richardson.

JM: Um-hmm.

AA: Of course, Judy and I went to jail together. That, that's another thing: A lot of us who went to jail together, uh, and spent time in jail together, you know – uh, like, [laughs] I didn't know much about Diane, except for what I had heard. But, I'm saying we spent ten weeks in jail, [laughing] saying you're really, really, really going to get to know somebody in ten weeks.

JM: That's Diane Nash?

AA: Yeah.

JM: What impression, what, what, what – how would you describe her?

AA: Um, I, I, I describe her as a, a strong black female, um, probably, uh, uh, you – she was much more forceful than some other people. Um, and by me wanting to be forceful myself, and do it – well, probably just wanting to see things go ahead, these are the people that I, that I kind of looked up to, um, and especially people in Mississippi, ‘cause Mississippi was really a hard case, you know, “going to Mississippi.” Matter of fact, one of the worst things, one of the most frightening times in my life in the Civil Rights Movement was in Mississippi, in Clarksdale.

JM: What was that?

AA: The night that the Klan surrounded our office. They had a, uh, curfew on black people. Couldn’t be on the street after, um, twelve midnight. So, eleven-fifteen, eleven-thirty, you had to be headed home. And the Klan surrounded our office one night. We couldn’t leave, and we didn’t want to stay. Only thing we could – and we couldn’t see their faces or anything. Only thing we could see was headlights. Now, we knew there weren’t any black people out there doing it. It was white folks. [Laughs] The headlights – and they were screaming, shouting all kinds of obscenities. And this went on all night long. The only thing we had to guard us was under a desk or under a table or something. Uh, Lafayette Surney was the guy who was, uh, head of the project there.

JM: After, after ’65, [clears throat] um, and after the Voting Rights Act passes in the summer of ’65, and, what, what’s your role with SNCC [1:25:00] from ’65 forward?

AA: Well, we kind of thought everything – at least I did – uh, I guess you could say we dropped the ball. We thought things were going to get better, things were going to, you know, be alright, um, ‘cause, um, when I finally went to New York and stayed, I think it was ’67, um, I was around the, the New York SNCC office. You know, this was still SNCC, and, and, um, it’s

been SNCC all the time, only because – actually, uh, SCLC didn't put me on staff. That's one of the only reasons, too. Another thing is they weren't – they were, they were, uh, older and more mature. And just like I said, the, the, um, the – a lot, a lot of the places that we went, a lot of the places Dr. King, just about all the places, uh, people like SCLC or SNCC, CORE went, there was already a movement there, when we got there. There was already a movement in a lot of these places.

And NAACP was our legal – much, most, most, uh – mostly our legal. We had a lawyer once, though, Len Holt, I don't know where he is now, but Len was – stayed in jail as much as we did for contempt of court with the judges. [Laughs] And we'd get in jail and we'd – standing around there and you'd see him – “Len, what you doing in here, man?” [Laughter] He'd say, “I been in here, too.” “What you – we thought you were outside trying to get us out!” [Laughter]

JM: So, you moved up to New York in '67?

AA: Um-hmm. And I stayed there for a while, but then I came back to Atlanta.

JM: Yeah.

AA: And, um, when I, I – I had a taxicab service in Atlanta, and I represented cab drivers there. I was organizing cab drivers.

JM: Yeah. Yeah. Let me ask you about one more thing – '66, Stokely Carmichael obviously replaces John Lewis as the head of SNCC.

AA: Um-hmm.

JM: And the rhetoric shifts, there's more move towards, um, the question of armed self-defense, there's more – the Black Power rhetoric comes in, folks talk about – there's a little bit of a different spirit now in, in SNCC –

AA: I think it was radical. You know, it was, it was – we, uh – the, the, the, that part came – became more, uh, culture conscious, too. And, uh, a lot of people didn't understand everything that was behind that. It wasn't just, uh – you know, they heard the word “Black Power,” they thought about something else. But that wasn't what it was about. It was about, uh, lifting ourselves up. Um, [sounds of a group talking in background] and pretty much I don't know of any, any organization, any, any black organization or organization that was mixed like that, that went on a violent march. They went on a – [group gets noisier]

JM: I'm sorry. Excuse me. Excuse me. We need to take a little bit of a break.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JM: We're back on after that, after that interruption. Um, Ms. Avery, you were, you were talking a bit about your perspective on the, the shift in, in SNCC after '66. [Sounds of group in background continue]

AA: Well, the thing about it is, I didn't, uh, uh – we, you know – all of the black organizations or either integrated organizations never did, did a, a, a violent – we never – they never, uh, did a violent demonstration or go after anybody. That's violence. Um, what we did in Hale County was self-defense. You know, there's a difference between self-defense and overt violence. And I don't know of any of that, any overt, uh, activity. Uh, mostly it was cultural and trying to, uh, defend ourselves. And younger group of people are going to do different things. They were – some of those folks were younger than us even. So.

JM: Yeah.

JB: By cultural, do you mean like, uh, learning about Africa, black is beautiful?

AA: Yeah! Yeah. I'm just saying – and, and then empowering yourself, because if you don't think good of yourself, nobody is going to think good of you, you know. And this is –

when I began to learn more about African-American history and African history – ‘cause, uh, I got arrested in, in Atlanta for trying to see a dig – African dignitary. I finally got to see one here in Selma when, uh, Winnie Mandela came here. Uh, I was introduced to her by Rose Sanders, and I hugged her and I said, “I’m so glad to meet you I don’t know what to do! You’re the first African dignitary that I got to see without getting arrested.” [Laughter]

JM: [1:30:00] I, I really want to thank you, Ms. Avery. Any final thoughts or – you’ve been so generous with your time and –

AA: Well, um, what I, I do, do want to say is that, at this time, I think it was an honor to have been associated with *all* of the people that I worked with, the SCLC people, the NAACP people, the CORE people, and now the, uh, people who are working with the Bridge Crossing Jubilee and the National Voting Rights Museum and the Mississippi, uh, Civil Rights Veterans. I’m, I’m just, uh, excited and honored to have been associated with all of these people that I have met and known – Marion Barry – just, it’s just a host of people. We can go on all day, but, uh –

JM: Well, thank you. You’ve, you’ve given us a fabulous interview, and we really appreciate your taking the time and sitting down with us. Thank you.

AA: Okay. I thank you.

[Recording ends at 1:31:05]

END OF INTERVIEW