

Civil Rights History Project
Interview completed by the Southern Oral History Program
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Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African American History & Culture
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Interviewee: Dr. Thomas Walter Gaither, Ph.D.
Interview Date: September 12, 2011
Location: His home, Prospect, PA
Interviewer: Joseph Mosnier, Ph.D.
Videographer: John Bishop
Length: 2:10:47

John Bishop: Okay. It's rolling.

Joseph Mosnier: Today is Monday, September 12, 2011. My name is Joe Mosnier of the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I am with videographer John Bishop, and we are in Prospect, Pennsylvania today to complete an interview for the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture's Civil Rights History Project. Uh, the project is, of course, co-sponsored by the Library of Congress.

[Laughter]

JB: Okay. I'll turn it off.

JM: We're, we're sorting out, uh, yeah.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay. We're rolling.

JM: Okay. Uh, we are delighted today to be with Dr. Thomas Gaither and, um, thank you for the warm welcome, professor.

Thomas Gaither: You're welcome.

JM: And, and, and we, I, I want to, I want to mention that we had a lovely tour –

TG: [laughs]

JM: Of your beautiful gardens before we started and that was an extra special treat.

TG: My pleasure. [laughs]

JM: Thank you so much. Uh, it was lovely, just beautiful. Um, let me, um, let me invite you to start today just with talking a little bit about your, maybe your parents and coming up in, in Great Falls, South Carolina.

TG: My parents, uh, were Walter B. Gaither and Fannie M. Little Gaither. Uh, Great Falls was my father's home. Uh, my mother, Fannie Mae, was originally from Anderson, South Carolina, and, uh, my mom and dad met while they were students at Friendship Jr. College in Rock Hill, South Carolina. Uh, after they, uh, both graduated from Friendship, uh, they, of course, moved, uh, permanently to Great Falls. Um, and, uh, initially, they were both schoolteachers. Um, you could be a schoolteacher at that time with just a junior college, uh, education. Um, my dad did not stay in teaching because he discovered that what was listed on his contract as his per month, uh, payment for teaching was not the same as he was receiving and, uh, this was at a time when the, uh, boards of education were all composed of white men. And so at the end of the year, my father approached the person who sounded, who signed his voucher for, uh, payment and said, "I noticed that there is a discrepancy here." It was a five-dollar difference between what he was supposed to be paid, be paid, and what he was receiving. And

for questioning the five-dollar differential, which the school board member was pocketing, my father was terminated as, as a teacher.

My mother continued to be a teacher and in fact, my first seven years of formal education was in a one-room school. Uh, at that time, one-room schools, uh, in that area of South Carolina were actually owned by churches. The state paid the salary of the teacher, but, uh, various churches across the community had a school. So mine happened to be Pleasant Grove, uh, uh, School. Pleasant Grove was a nearby A.M.E. Zion, uh, church. So for the first, uh, seven years of my education, that's where I learned to count, to read, to write, and, uh, all of those, uh, kinds of, uh, all of those kinds of things. Uh, the good thing about the, um, one-room school was that if you were in third grade, you could hear the lessons for the fourth grade, the fifth grade, sixth, and so on up the line. So you were on stage at some point, but otherwise you were reviewing all the time if you wanted to be, uh, reviewing all the time.

We had to take to the school a jar that we took a piece of adhesive tape and we put our name on that adhesive tape on the jar and we turned it upside down by the cooler, which was present at the back of the room. Uh, we, of course, had no fountains or anything of that sort. But right in the middle of the room, we had this, uh, very large diameter drum that was the heater, and it was never possible to have heat in that room that was even. Uh, you would think that, ah, it's going to work today [5:00] and then all of a sudden, the lid to the heater would start floating up and down and the whole place would be smoked up, and then we would have to open the windows. Ah, and that was, that was a little bit of a sample of the environment.

We didn't have a library. Uh, there was a dictionary, but I think the dictionary was owned by my mother as the teacher. We didn't know very many of the white kids in the community, except by looking in the textbooks that were passed on to us. We could see the kids, the white

kids would have used the books and rather than throw them away, I will say [laughs], they would, they would send them or they would, uh, they would ship them to us.

Um, my mother remained in teaching, uh, until the consolidation of schools. That would have been in the early 1950s. The Supreme Court decision was 1954, but before that, there was some movement in, in teaching. In fact, it was rather amazing that as soon as the South found out that there might be this law banning discrimination or segregation in, uh, in, in schools, uh, suddenly the schools went up and that's sort of interesting because we were supposed to be separate, but equal all the time. But all of a sudden, there's a new black elementary school here. There's one there. There's one there. Now it turns out that I lived right on the edge of two counties, Fairfield County and Chester County. The nearest, um, school in Fairfield County was about seventeen miles away at Winnsboro [South Carolina], but the school in Chester County was just, uh, about two and a half miles away. So actually I went to, uh, elementary school in, uh, I'm sorry, I went to high school in, uh, Chester County after the seven years in the one-room school where my mother was the, uh, the teacher.

Uh, the center of the community for my parents was the church. Uh, we went to church every Sunday. We went to Sunday school. When there were special days, we participated in the programs. In fact, the first time I remember speaking before an audience of anyone other than my parents would have been at Children's Day at the, uh, local church.

JM: And your church was which?

TG: Uh, Pleasant Grove A.M.E. Zion Church. Uh, the, uh, district that my church was in was the Columbia-Camden district and ministers, uh, served a variable, uh, uh, period of time as the pastors of churches and, uh, there was a time very early in my life when we had preaching

only on alternate Sundays. But, uh, at some point when there was a little bit more capital flowing, uh, it got to the point that we had church, we had church every Sunday.

JM: Yeah. You mentioned your father left teaching. How old were you when that happened? Or was forced out of teaching, I should say.

TG: Hmm, how old would I have been then?

JM: Approximately.

TG: Uh, I must have been eleven or twelve, some place in there.

JM: Was that, was, was the cause of his termination explained to you at the time as a child of that age or did you learn that later?

TG: Uh, no, no. I learned that later.

JM: Yeah, yeah.

TG: Yeah. It was, uh, it, it, the trustee boards were all white men, but there was usually a figurehead trustee board of black men, and these black men were chosen by the white men and they were usually people who would not ask questions, who would not rock the boat. So, uh, that's, that's the way the, the, the boards were, uh, structured.

So after, uh, losing his job as a teacher, my father went to work at a, uh, cotton mill. Since he has a junior college education, rather than taking the jobs that, or getting the jobs that were traditional for black men of that day – now this was before the era of power lawnmowers. So there was a yard crew that was all black, and blacks also worked in some of the rooms where the cotton was rendered into cloth that were particularly dir – dirty, the ones where you'd get bissinosis [or “brown lung”] from breathing cotton fibers and, uh, that sort of, uh, thing. My dad worked as a fireman, another dirty job, but the fireman had two responsibilities. It was to keep the steam in the boiler plant up to a particular point where all the machines would operate, but,

uh, you would do that by putting the coal in the furnace. And while that was heating up, you'd have some ideas as to how much to put in because of the experience of having done the job before. [10:00] They had to go around the mill and stick a key in a little box and turn the key. So they were night watchmen. So they did those kinds, two jobs, uh, together.

Well, at some point, my father lost that job, too. Uh, I suspect, although I'm not sure, that it was because of his progressive posture on most things, including, uh, equal rights – the right to vote, the right to get a decent education, and so forth and so on. So in 19 – early 1950, my father decided to go back to college with five kids and, uh, with, uh, only jobs that he could do – I should say this about him. My father was, uh, capable of doing a variety of, uh, chores. He could, he could wire. He could, uh, do brick work. He could do carpentry. He could do all of these, uh, things, and he would get jobs from people in the community. So while he was doing these kinds of, uh, jobs – handyman, but beyond handyman, if he had to, uh – he went back to college at Benedict College in Columbia, South Carolina. And, uh, he completed, uh, the other two years of his college degree, uh, graduating with a Bachelor of Science degree in sociology.

Well, in getting this degree, he had been, uh, told by a local white businessman who was on the board of trustees at the college that he might have a chance at becoming the principal of the local black high school. Well, uh, that was just one member of the board. Uh, as it turned out later on, uh, there was one local Baptist minister who considered himself to be the sort of, uh, uh, highest echelon black in the community. Uh, this man did not have a baccalaureate degree. He was simply a minister who had been called by God. Uh, but he opposed my father getting the job as the principal of the school. By the way, it was one of the best things that ever happened to my dad because, uh, there was a lot of jealousy in the community and he would not have been able to be an effective principal because, uh, he would not have gotten any support from the white

community and, uh, many of the black people would have also been very jealous of the fact that he had suddenly been able to propel himself into a place of authority and respect that they could not hope that they would, uh, be able to.

So, uh, he, um, um, he quit being ah, a, um, um, a person who was working and paying his way through school. In fact, he used to come home in the evening from school and he would say, "Let's get organized." And "Let's get organized" meant that we all got in the, uh, car. Now we used the car as one would use a truck much to my mother's chagrin, but my father was too poor to buy a truck. So I remember one of the earliest cars was a 1939 Buick and, uh, he would load that '39 Buick with, uh, bricks and blocks and mortar and so forth so he could go do the job, so he could take care of his family and he could also, uh, find some money to pay the tuition to, uh, go to school.

Well, uh, at some point, uh, we were getting to close to, uh, finishing high school and, uh, there was never any question that we were going to go to college. The question was where and how are we going to, uh, pay for going, uh, to, uh, college. So, uh, my dad, uh, took one of the gifts that he had in the, uh, construction trades industry, which was brick masonry, and he became a brick mason. And as a brick mason, he would travel to jobs all over that area or region of, uh, South Carolina in the Charlotte, uh, Columbia, Orangeburg, all that, anyplace you could drive to. Well, I was going to say anyplace you could drive to in a day. Actually I remember once we worked down at the, uh, Paris Island Marine Base in, uh, Beaufort, South Carolina, and in that case, we had to go and stay for five days and then, uh, come back home.

But being a brick mason – brick masons, uh, earned a very, uh, nice wage, uh, and that's what enabled us to find the money to go to school. The problem, however, was that brick masonry was reliable [15:00] only when, uh, the weather was, uh, good. If the weather was not

good, you couldn't lay bricks. And in the South, that meant that there were at least two or three months there when it was too cold, but as, uh, things would have it favoring my dad and my family, he got to the point of being in a typical instance among the masons employed on a particular job. He got to be, uh, sort of the master mason. So when all of the other masons had been dispatched from the job because the job was complete, my dad was the person who stayed around to put up a wall where they needed. So he would very often work through the entire winter and they had one laborer who worked with, uh, him and, uh, that is how we were able to get the funds to go to school.

Now it turns out that I was the valedictorian of my class and my brother was the salutatorian of the class, and we jointly decided that we would go to Claflin College, now Claflin University in Orangeburg, South Carolina. My scholarship was seventy-five dollars per year. My brother's scholarship as salutatorian of the class was fifty dollars per year. So that's what got us started, uh, in education, but education was always emphasized in my home. Even though we were too poor to have a library, anything that we could find, we would, uh, read it and we would try to discuss it and try to, uh, grow from it. So all the while this is going on, my mother was essentially, uh, taking care of, of the family. [chimes ringing] She was, uh, very strong in her insistence that we not get involved in things that took us off the path to going to college and to getting, getting an education.

JM: Can you pause for just a sec. That's a chime from –

JB: [brief remark about the chime]

JM: In the house.

TG: Ah yes, my –

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JM: Microscope through the Hubble Telescope.

[Laughter]

JB: Okay, we're back.

JM: Okay, we're back after a short break. Um, Dr. Gaither, let me, you, you were talking about your, your, um, move towards Claflin, but I want to ask a, a couple more things about your family coming up.

TG: Sure.

JM: Um, obviously your, your, your father and through your father, your family had these direct and not so uncommon experiences obviously in terms of, um suffering for the, the slightest gesture of self-assertion –

TG: Mm-hmm.

JM: Yeah. Um, would, would conversations about race and race relations have been, have been open in your household? Were those things around the dinner table? Did you, say the *Brown* [*Brown v. Board of Education*] decision or Emmitt Till, are those kinds of things that would have been engaged conversationally by your family?

TG: Those were discussed around the, uh, dinner table and my parents shared liberally with what their thoughts were on these kinds of, uh, things. Um, I especially remember the, uh, Till case, uh, utterings by my dad and, uh, absolute shame and horror of what had happened to this, uh, young man. In fact, I think it was conversations about Till that lodged in my psyche as one of the motivating factors for participating in the movement later on. Uh, Till would have been 1955. That's about the same time as the Montgomery Bus Boycott. So there were these cumulative things happening out there that were being internalized.

Um, among the other things that, um, my dad was a part of, periodically at the cotton mills, there would be an effort to organize the workers, which meant that a union organizer would come in, and my dad was always the person who hosted the union organizer. So that was one of the other factors that would have caused him to lose his job. Uh, the union organizers often tried to keep a secret of where they stayed, but of course, somebody would know and somebody would go and tell the big boss man and, uh, that would be to your detriment if you happened to be the person.

Uh, my parents were also, uh, openly supportive of the NAACP. Uh, I remember when I was, uh, quite a youngster, uh, probably less than ten years old. We used to go to meetings of the state conference of the NAACP when my dad would stand as we were going into the auditorium and, uh, there'd often be a whole bunch of adults in the, uh, lobby and he would hold me up for awhile so I could get some air and put me down and then take my brother and hold him up. Uh, but we were very supportive of the NAACP. [20:00] Now it was also, uh, uh, a negative if you were known to be an NAACP member and supportive of the NAACP. But despite that fact, uh, my dad was, was still a supporter and my mom.

Uh, I remember that, uh, at some point, there was a suit by the South Carolina conference of the NAACP to equalize teachers' salaries and speaking of a family dynamic, my mom and dad were both in favor of the NAACP suit to equalize teaching salaries, but I had two aunts who were also teachers who were not. They thought the NAACP was stirring up something that was best left alone and so I remember the, uh, sort of tug of war arguments that went on between, uh, them. And at that time, teachers' salaries in South Carolina for blacks were very, very poor, and you had to take the National Teachers Exam. So if you took the National Teachers Exam and you earned an A, in addition to your base salary, you'd get a particular monthly supplement, a B, C.

Well, all of the school districts with a tax base would hire off all of the A people and the B people. So it would mean that a little town like Great Falls, the best it could hope for would be to get the C people, which meant that, uh, our teachers were not the best, but they did their best by us with what they had been able to amass and accumulate as, as, as knowledge.

JM: Yeah.

TG: I don't know whether that's the kind of response that you were looking for.

JM: Oh no, it's, it's, very much, yeah, and we have plenty of time.

TG: Okay, okay.

JM: Um, were your parents able to register to vote or no?

TG: Uh, my parents were registered voters. Uh, to register to vote and I should, I, I have the, uh, form that I filled, that I received when I became a qualified elector, a voter in South Carolina. You had to be eighteen years old, but I remember registering to vote. Yeah, my parents registered to vote, um, and they typically voted in, uh, elections. Uh, I was so, um, uh, involved in making sure that I voted until the first time I was eligible to vote after registering, I remember, um, a three-hundred-mile trip, a hundred and fifty miles one way to vote, a hundred and fifty miles back, and I have tried to point that out to my students that we shouldn't be casual about our input into the political process. I vote almost every election. Even when I've been on leave, I find how long you have to be in the state in order to, uh, vote and register. I remember voting in California a couple of times when I was on sabbatical leave.

JM: Right, right.

TG: Yes. My, both of my parents were qualified electors. The, the, little thing I was talking about that, uh, you have to present saying that you are a qualified elector, you had to read a section of the South Carolina Constitution and interpret it to the satisfaction of the registrar.

But on there is that, “I do hereby swear that I am not a pauper supported at public expense. I have not been convicted of any of the following crimes: uh, stealing chickens, wife beating,” you know, all the kinds of things that [laughs] poor black people might have been involved in, uh, uh, public drunkenness and all of those kinds of things. And that’s on the certificate that I have. It probably is not the case, at least I hope it’s not the case now, that Winnsboro and, um, uh, Fairfield Counties moved beyond that. But there were all the disqualifiers, which is somewhat interesting because we’ve had this recent resurgence of requiring voter ID cards and all of that kind of thing, paying poll tax, which is a throwback to the same thing. It’s a way of disqualifying those whose input into the political process might be at odds with those who control the political process.

JM: A whole half-century later.

TG: Yes.

JM: That’s right, that’s right.

TG: So the greater distance we think we’ve come, [laughs], the more we look around, we’re in the same place.

JM: Yeah. Tell me about Orangeburg when you arrived in ‘56 and what you, what you thought would be your course through college.

TG: Well, I expected that, uh, with the high school background that I had, that I would have to work hard, uh, because, uh, I would be competing with some people who had had, even though, uh, all the students at Claflin at the time were, uh, black, people who’d had better backgrounds, uh, the people who had gone, for example, to C. A. Johnson [High School] in Columbia or some of the large, some of the high schools in the larger communities. [25:00] There were some of those people, uh, at Claflin. Uh, I found myself as, uh, the, my – I haven’t

told you this yet, but since my mother was our early teacher and we did not have daycare, my brother, uh, right next to me about a, uh, year and a half to two years younger and I wound up being in the same graduating class. That's how I was the valedictorian and he was the salutatorian because we couldn't find anybody to keep him. So my mother took him to school and it turned out he was very bright and, uh, you know, didn't miss a beat in terms of handling the academic information that was, uh, put before him. Uh, I remember, uh, uh, finding it, it an adjustment to, to be at, uh, Claflin, but, uh, managing to, uh, to stay above board, uh, academically. I graduated from Claflin, uh, indeed, uh, with honors with a, uh, B.S. degree in, uh, general science with a concentration in biology.

JM: Tell me about the, um, tell me about how race entered into your college experience in, in, in Orangeburg and I know, of course, that South Carolina State is there as well and the community will become a place that, um, under, in large measure because of your efforts that would in 1960, in the spring of '60, become very active. But there is a, there is a story before that.

TG: Well, the only choice of going to a college at that time would have been a, a black college. Uh, the closest two black colleges would have been Allen University in Columbia and Benedict College in Columbia. Not too far away was Morris College. Benedict and Morris are Baptist schools. Allen is an A.M.E. school. And, uh, we didn't, based on the reputation of those, uh, colleges, gravitate towards them or choose them. Claflin was a choice that I agreed upon and my brother was, uh, pleased with. So that's, so we had no choice of, uh, of, uh, of colleges, uh, on a racial basis.

Let me tell you this little story because I, it, it jumps ahead, but it's, it's apropos. Uh, I remember visiting my father in the, uh, '70s and '80s and, uh, he had this, uh, Clemson College

logo around and I said, “What goes with, with Clemson College?” And, uh, he had chosen to root for Clemson College because of an incident that occurred with me when I was at Claflin. When I was at Claflin my senior year, I sent, uh, money to the Educational Testing Service in Princeton, New Jersey, to take the Graduate Record Exam. So there were about a dozen black students from South Carolina State and Claflin who were, uh, to take the Graduate Record Exam at the University of South Carolina. Well, we were told to go to an auditorium on campus. When we arrived, we were intercepted by a professor who said, “We cannot permit you to take the GRE, uh, on the campus of the University of South Carolina. You people will have to go off campus.”

And so across the, uh, street, I want to say it was Bull Street. I’m not sure that was the name of the street at the time. There was a two-story building. The, uh, second story of the, uh, building was just an open room with some chairs and, uh, this is no exaggeration, the temperature in that room must have been eighty-five or ninety degrees. And that is where we were forced to take the Graduate Record Exam, an exam that determines all of your possibilities for the future and these were the conditions or the circumstances under which we were required to take the exam.

Well, I had told my dad that when I came home, uh, to visit him. I went home to visit him after that, uh, event and he had stored that away in his mind that he would never root for the University of South Carolina, but he would root for Clemson. Now at the time, Clemson was not a university. Clemson started out as an agricultural experiment station. It later became a university, but it was the school in South Carolina that he could identify with because he refused to identify with the University of South Carolina.

JM: Right, yeah. You got drawn, uh, into, into, uh, college leadership roles.

TG: Um, yes. Uh, I was the president [30:00] of the youth chapter of the Claflin College chapter of the NAACP.

JM: Starting what year of college?

TG: Um, let's see, I know as, as, as a junior.

JM: Okay, yeah.

TG: Uh, and that is how I gravitated into the sit-ins because it was the natural position from which one might assume a role in, in leadership.

JM: Tell me about –

JB: Let's break –

JM: Okay, yeah.

JB: For a second and then, um, start a new file.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay.

JM: Dr. Gaither, let me have you, let me have you describe the youth chapter of the, the NAACP in, in, on the campus then and how it connected you to the state NAACP apparatus and how it then led you forward.

TG: Okay. Um, the first year I was president of the campus chapter, I would say maybe out of, uh, two hundred students, we may have had twenty-five or thirty people who were members. Once –

JM: Out of how many? Sorry, I'm sorry. How many students?

TG: Uh, it was, I think it was less than two hundred. It wasn't a very large university. We knew every –. If you were a student, you would know everyone on campus. You would know which year they were in and you would also know their hometowns and all of that. It was a very

small, very closely-knit community. Now after the sit-ins started, almost everyone on campus joined the NAACP chapter. There were a couple of, uh, young people or students there who were afraid to join because they thought that word of their joining as youth members of a college chapter of the NAACP might get back to their communities and there would be reprisals against their parents. And I can remember a couple of those people actually coming and apologizing to me that they could not be members of the youth chapter of the NAACP.

Now as a youth chapter NAACP president, uh, I was permitted to, uh, attend regional meetings of the, uh, NAACP. That is where I would have met first people like, uh, Ruby Hurley or, uh, Amos Brown or Medgar Evers. Uh, there were people there from South Carolina, Tennessee, Mississippi, not Alabama. Alabama at the time, the NAACP was, uh, illegal. So we didn't have anybody slipping through, uh, who were, uh, parts of the, uh, Alabama civil rights, uh, scene.

Uh, so when the sit-ins started in Greensboro, North Carolina – February first, 1960 – the first sit-ins in South Carolina were at Rock Hill, and as soon as we heard about that, we said, “The same problems that are being addressed in North Carolina and north of here in Rock Hill are here. So we've got to organize too.” And that's where we sort of expanded out from this NAACP youth chapter to, uh, organizing and participating, uh, in the, uh, sit-ins. Um, yeah, maybe that's –

JM: Tell me, tell me about the process that you undertook then to bring the campus, to bring the campus chapter and, and the wider campus forward into active –

TG: Well, it wasn't just the wider Claflin campus. It was also the South Carolina State, uh, students that we would have to engage. Well, first of all, we didn't know the first thing about nonviolence or how to organize a sit-in. So we were fortunately visited by or someone had sent a

man named James T. McCain, who was from Sumter, South Carolina, and he worked for an organization called the Congress of Racial Equality, or CORE. And CORE had a little thing that was called CORE Rules for Action. There was also a little booklet called “Cracking the Color Line” by James Peck and so those were the very first kinds of sources that we were privy to, to form the philosophical backlog for the organization of the sit-ins. The Orangeburg sit-ins were actually organized by a group of students from South Carolina State and Claflin and we met in the old J. J. Seabrook’s, uh, auditorium or actually gymnasium on the campus of, uh, Claflin. And so with these pamphlets and so forth and with, uh, the inspiration of Dr. King’s book, *Stride Toward Freedom*, we started putting together socio-dramas of situations that might be faced if we were doing [35:00] a sitting, sit-in, or if we were picketing. So that’s sort of how we got, got going.

Now the South Carolina, uh, State students, to my knowledge, did not have a youth chapter of the NAACP, but they were right there with us as, as we organized. So we actually started sort of a, uh, local student movement association with one person from Claflin – that was me – and one person from South Carolina State. I’m not absolutely certain, but the person from South Carolina State may have been Chuck McDew. Chuck McDew was there very early on. So what we did, uh, with a little bit more knowledge of, uh, what sit-ins were about and what the philosophy was, was to train a group of about, uh, a dozen or so sort of secondary student, uh, leaders. These would be the people who would be involved in helping to organize and communicate the philosophy and the modus operandi for Claflin but would also do the same kind for State. Now I think that one of the persons in that group may have been Jim Clyburn.

JM: Sure, sure.

TG: Uh, the current, uh, House of Representatives person from South Carolina.

JM: Sure.

TG: So Clyburn was involved, uh, very early on.

JM: Let's pause just for a second and have you, I think there's probably an important point to be made about the fact that Claflin is private and, and State, yeah.

TG: That is –

JM: And, and how that rippled through these issues.

TG: That, that is, uh, that is, you're absolutely correct because, uh, I think there may have even been for, uh, activities of a similar nature some expulsions from South Carolina State, because at the time, the persons who were chosen to be the administrators of predominately black state schools were often chosen because of their ability to suppress student uprisings, whatever their nature if the nature was in opposition to the existing status of maintaining segregation and so forth and so on. So at Claflin, we could, we could organize. We had the freedom to do so. Uh, there was, uh, in the initial groups, uh, a disproportionate representation of guys, because at the time, girls could be out of the dormitories only until seven o'clock or seven thirty. So we had to communicate what we had done to the, uh, to the girls, uh, because they couldn't be there sitting, uh, uh, sitting with us.

JM: Right, right. Tell me a little bit about, as, as much as you can conjure it and recall it from this distance, it must have been a, a, a wide range of emotions and a wide range of questions and a wide range of uncertainties that were, that, that, that you would have had at a time trying to launch into something as complex and prospectively, uh, difficult as, as organizing in Orangeburg.

TG: Uh, we were, uh, idealists. Uh, we were, uh, in many instances, uh, quite, uh, enamored with the possibilities for using nonviolence as a strategy for promoting, uh, social

change. Uh, we were, of course, fearful of our safety. We were fearful of the reprisals that might be levied at our parents, but we also realized that if we didn't move, we were going to, uh, stay in the same circumstance. So that was a motivating factor that the students have moved in North Carolina, they've moved in Rock Hill. We have to move in, uh, in Orangeburg. So that, despite the, uh, potential, uh, pitfalls, uh, was a compelling and a motivating force for us.

Now I should say that this was done almost exclusively by students. Uh, there was no, there was a very, uh, good local relationship with the adult NAACP, but we really didn't go to the, the president of the Orangeburg chapter of the NAACP saying, "We want to organize sit-ins," because the NAACP's approach to this whole problem was fundamentally different from the approach that we were interested in. We were interested in nonviolent direct action. We were not interested in having one student arrested and then having that person, uh, be a test case and getting a court ruling that at some point would say, "Well, you guys can go sit at the lunch counter."

I happen to think that a large part of the strength and reserve of my generation at least, uh, the passion for our involvement [40:00] was the active participation and the suffering that we endured. That's very different than if you file a suit and you sit and somebody says, "Well, you can go sit at the lunch counter tomorrow." This is that same question I was making, or comment I was making about being compelled to go and vote or feeling an obligation to go and vote. That's different and, uh, that's, I think, one of the, uh, positive attributes at the personal level for, uh, those who participated in the sit-ins. The day in Orangeburg when we had a mass arrest, uh, three hundred and fifty people arrested.

JM: In March, I think the fifteenth of March.

TG: The fifteenth of March, yes. Uh, city jail filled, county jail filled, open air stockade. The president of the Claflin chapter of the NAACP was in Columbia, and we had not even told him, not that I think he would have had objected one iota, but this was *our* movement, this was our time to move, and we didn't want any tempering from anybody about, "Well, don't do this. Wait 'til tomorrow to do this," that kind of thing. We felt that our elders had had their opportunity [laughs]. They had sat on it. We were not going to be, uh, similarly, uh, situated. So we reasoned that if we move, there's no choice. I mean, you've got three hundred and fifty peace-loving young people who have behaved in a nonviolent manner. They have been arrested. What are the adults going to do? There's nothing. They, they'd be forced to be supportive of us, and that was the way we reasoned it. [laughs]

JM: How'd you feel at the end of that day?

TG: [sighs] Well, it was [laughs] an, an interesting, uh, day to say the least. By the way, uh, I, I was not arrested on that day for sitting in. Um, eventually, uh, they had students in the county courthouse where they were arraigning them or deciding, uh, booking them, uh, I'm sure, because there were so many people that they had to deal with and, uh, I was standing outside talking to Herbert Wright, the national NAACP youth secretary and, uh, the policeman came over and said, "You have to move. You can't stand here and talk." And I said, uh, well, I started walking around. The, uh, courthouse is in a square, and the sidewalk is around the perimeter. Well, after I went around one time, they took me out [laughs] and arrested me anyway and, uh, I was also charged with, uh, with breaching the peace, uh, and, uh, disturbing the peace. Uh, uh, at the end of that day, um, just an enormous, uh, number of people, uh, arrested and, uh, involved.

I remember that we met back up at the, um, gymnasium on the campus of Claflin College and that was the first time that I remember meeting, um, Matthew Perry, who just died, uh,

recently. Uh, I remember how gracious he was in, uh, telling us, uh, that we would be, uh, defended. Uh, the NAACP would use its resources for our defense. In fact, he was so gracious that I started to think, “Well, maybe we’ve won something here.” It, it was the just the tone of his, his, his voice. Uh, but we felt good to have contributed that one little skirmish in an enormous-sized battle for, uh, for equal rights. It was just simply the right to sit at a lunch counter and eat a hamburger in dignity like any other American.

JM: Let me ask you about a couple things, um, in, in the, in the run-up to that day. When you first encountered the philosophy of nonviolent direct action, it seems that it resonated with you, I take, and I’m, I’m –

TG: [laughs]

JM: Curious about having you talk about that a little bit, if that did or did not in important ways connect to your personal faith through the church. I’m interested in those things and then I’ll –

TG: It ultimately did, but it did not initially. Uh, the first time I heard someone talk about nonviolence was a man by the name of Glenn Smiley, who worked for the Fellowship of Reconciliation. He gave a lecture at, uh, Claflin talking about nonviolence and I remember standing up and saying, “That is what is wrong with black people. We have been, uh, we have not, we’ve been too, we’ve been nonviolent too long.” But that was my naiveté. Uh, sitting and accepting something, [45:00] uh, that is demeaning or demoralizing is not nonviolence, but that shows you where I was [laughs] in terms of my comprehension of nonviolence. So I actually started to embrace the philosophy when I started to learn something about its tactics and techniques from this man, uh, Jim McCain.

JM: Yeah, tell, and I wanted, that was my next question. I want to ask, I want to have you describe James McCain.

TG: Uh, one of the, uh, most important people in the civil rights struggle, um, for South Carolina especially because that was his home, his home state, uh, a very low-key man, uh, a person whose primary commitment was to the cause, not to any kind of personal advancement that it, uh, would bring him. Uh, he was tactically a nonviolent person. If you wanted to go into the real substance and philosophy of nonviolence, uh, you'd have to, uh, read, uh, Homer Jack's autobiography or, or Gandhi by Louis Fischer or something of that sort, which I, which I later read and, uh, which I found to be remarkably instructive about, uh, how Gandhi connected his, um, uh, how, how Gandhi, uh, staged his, uh, battle against, uh, the British for Indian independence using nonviolence.

JM: Um, tell me more about McCain.

TG: About what?

JM: Tell me a little bit more about, about Mr. McCain. Are there –

TG: Uh.

JM: And, and maybe your, the nature of your evolving relationship with him.

TG: Well, I would consider Jim McCain to have been my mentor, uh, in the, uh, Civil Rights Movement. Uh, he was, uh, interested in me as a person and also as one who would be a participant in the, uh, movement and in fact, he was the person who, uh, persuaded me to attend a, uh, session held by CORE. This would have been in the, uh, summer, I believe, of 1960. CORE held at, um, Miami what was called an Action Institute, and at this Action Institute, uh, all of the, uh, upper echelon of CORE and a large number of, uh, students, uh, from the New Orleans, uh, area especially, uh, we were there to learn about how to stage, uh, sit-ins and so

forth. In fact, that was the second time I was arrested because, uh, I was sitting at a table in a little community that is called Hollywood, California –

JM: Florida.

TG: Hollywood, yeah.

JM: Excuse me.

JM: Hollywood, Florida. Yes, you're, you're exactly correct, Hollywood, Florida, with a girl from New York, uh, named Dottie Miller. Dottie later was, was for a short time married to Bob Zellner. Bob Zellner may be the, the person who's, who's better known in terms of, uh, uh, participation in the civil rights. But we're playing this game, uh, where you'd say, "I'm thinking of somebody," and you have a whole bunch of clues and you finally say who the person is. And, uh, the management of this restaurant decided that they, uh, didn't want us in their restaurant. So we were arrested, Dottie Miller and this whole, uh, group and, uh, we spent ten or twelve days in the Dade County jail. Bernard Lafayette was, uh, among the other persons that, uh, one would identify with who were parts of this group. And we had the most interesting charge I've ever heard. The charge was ejection of undesirable guests, ejection of undesirable guests. When it came before the judge, the judge said, "No adjudication, but if you guys stay down here, and if you are involved in similar activities, I reserve the right, uh, I'll put you on probation and if you're on probation, then, uh, you could wind up back in, in jail again."

JM: I'm not even sure I understand what that charge means.

TG: [laughs] I don't understand either.

JM: Okay.

TG: That was the charge, ejection of undesirable guests. It wasn't trespassing. It wasn't breaching the peace. That was the charge.

JM: Let me, you, you mentioned, this is in Miami and, and I think that Miami meeting, if my dates are right, was August 1960.

TG: Okay.

JM: So you would have graduated the prior May.

TG: Mm-hmm.

JM: Were you already on staff as a field secretary or had that not happened yet?

TG: No, that had not happened yet.

JM: Okay.

TG: Right after I graduated, I worked in South Carolina, uh, with a man named, uh, Frank Robinson who was, he was associated with, uh, CORE. [50:00] Uh, Frank Robinson, uh, was from Sumter, South Carolina, and Jim McCain. I was working with a group of about, uh, four or five people and we were doing voter registration in South Carolina. So we would, uh, go to churches in the evenings and we'd talk about the importance of registering and voting and, uh, that, uh, kind of, uh, thing. Uh, yeah, and that's, I went from there –

JM: Okay.

TG: To the Action Institute and then I was hired on –

JM: Yes.

TG: Uh, by CORE.

JM: Let, let me bring in some more threads here. There are many threads. So, uh, forgive me if I, if I keep –

TG: [laughs]

JM: Wind up the clock back to bring in another theme.

TG: That's okay.

JM: Because there are so many things here. Um, on the nonviolence question again, so initially you, you, you told that very interesting story about your first on hearing this was skepticism and –

TG: Yeah, sure.

JM: And even contempt maybe.

TG: Yeah.

JM: If that's fair to say.

TG: Uh huh.

JM: Um, did you, did you see its merits first in tactical terms or did you go all that distance to sort of internalizing it and being committed to it as a, as a, as a more encompassing philosophy?

TG: No, I, I went to it in, in tactical terms. Uh, I think it takes a lot of discipline and study to go to nonviolence in the philosophical sense of, of, of Gandhi. Uh, in fact, there were times and, uh, this is jumping forward, there were times, uh, when we were, um, on the road gang in Rock Hill, when as the, uh, adult sort of in that group, uh, my mind was clicking in, “How would Gandhi behave in this situation?” And we often discussed the difference between tactical nonviolence and nonviolence as a more involved personal philosophy of, uh, life. Well, I knew how I thought Gandhi would have handled the situation. Gandhi would volunteer to clean the toilets, and I was not likely to be able to get my young colleagues to say, “This is what we should do.” There are practical limits sometimes. We were loading trucks with sand. You can throw only so many shovels in. But I, I happen to think that Gandhi would probably have thrown shovels until he collapsed.

And so there was always that sort of editing between the philosophy as a technique and the, uh, philosophy as a way of, a way of life. I think one gradually grows into it, the philosophy as a way of life, and I don't think I have met a lot of people who have done that. There are some people whose knowledge of nonviolence is far superior to mine, whom I respect for their ability to connect all of this together in a life-encompassing philosophy rather than as a tactic or a technique for acquiring human rights or promoting issues of justice.

JM: Along the way, say, coming through the spring semester of 1960 and into the early summer, you start this voter registration work. Um, what's the reaction of your family?

TG: Uh, my family was very supportive, uh, extremely, uh, supportive. Uh, I kept in contact, but, uh, my, my family was deeply religious, both my mom and my dad, and if you were asking them about their concern for me, they would probably say, "The Lord will take care of it and I just put that in the hands of the Lord." Uh, that would have been their response and, uh, that's truly the way, the way they felt. So even though they knew I was in danger, somehow they were optimistic that, uh, I would return with all of my, uh, senses and, uh, would not have been, uh, permanently impaired in, in any way. I'm not sure that they realized how dangerous it was, but you have to also realize that they were in danger too in a small community. Uh, and they were not nonviolent.

Let me tell you [laughs] this story. Uh, when we were in jail in Rock Hill, some of the local people who had known my dad forever came to him and said, "We will protect you while your son is twenty-nine miles away on the road gang." And, uh, I'm not sure what my dad told them, but I don't think he encouraged them, because there was no one sitting in a car at the, uh, fence around my place to shoot someone who would come there, but while I was in jail in Rock Hill, uh, a cross was burned on the lawn of my, uh, parents' house and I remember when my dad

told me that, he said, “And if I had seen him,” he said, [55:00] “It would have been the last cross that he would have burned.” And it, it occurred to me that I wouldn’t think of shooting someone for burning a cross. That’s where I had grown in nonviolence. But my dad was a different generation, a whole different ethic about how you go about protecting your family. That’s one of the primary things that a man does who has a family.

JM: Tell me about some of your, um, early –

JB: Let’s pause for a second.

JM: Okay, take a little break.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay.

JM: We’re back after a short break. Dr. Gaither, let me ask you to talk a little bit about your, your emerging impressions of this organization called CORE. You’ve obviously met Mr. McCain through the spring. He becomes a very important mentor. You go into this voter registration effort. Are you getting much of a sense of CORE at the national level or how does your sense of that emerge?

TG: Yes, uh, I was getting an impression of CORE at the, uh, at the national level because I had occasion to visit the CORE office in New York and at the time, the CORE office, uh, with the exception of Jim McCain, most of the staff was, uh, was white. Uh, Marvin Rich, Gordon Cary, and the executive secretary of CORE when I first learned about CORE was a very slightly built, uh, white man by the name of, uh, Jim Robinson, James Russell Robinson (laughs), a very nice person, uh, very committed to the cause. And CORE had actually, since its inception in 1942 at the University of Chicago, had been primarily a northern, um, organization composed of, uh, liberal people who, uh, believed that nonviolent direct action could be used to

promote, uh, social change. So once I started going to the CORE national office, I started meeting, uh, other people and my impression of the possibilities for nonviolent direct action, and my respect for the commitment of the people involved, uh, was, was, uh, ever increasing.

JM: Tell me about, I, I think it's the case that your first trip, um, up to the office was as a consequence of the leadership role you had on, on the Claflin campus.

TG: Oh yes, no question about it.

JM: Tell, tell me about that, the invitation, the trip. Tell me about that.

TG: Uh, well, it was the first time I had rode on an airplane. [laughs] And I remember going to the airport in Columbia and, uh, flying up to, uh, up to New York. Uh, the airport in Columbia was, by the way, very small then. There may have been, uh, eight or ten gates or so, rather unlike [laughs] the, the airport, uh, that is, uh, there now. Yeah, and I, I remember meeting, uh, Jimmy McDonald and, uh, Gordon Cary and, uh, Marvin Rich and so forth and being sort of shown a little bit of the big city, uh, never having been to a city, uh, like New York, uh, before, yeah.

JM: Yeah, yeah. Um, through that summer and your voter registration work, what are the memories that, that emerge as, as, or most vividly for you about that, those few months?

TG: I remember, uh, talking. See, what we did, we went individually and talked with people and often we chose to go to projects where there was a concentration of people, many of whom would have not been registered voters and we would actually try to, uh, engage people in conversations about the importance of voting. And it would always get down to this, especially with the little old ladies: "Um, I will go and register and vote if my preacher says it's, it's okay." It was almost always that the minister had to give his blessings or you were not going to get them to. Now there were some people who would, uh, after you told them why it was important,

would say, “Well, I’ll go down and I’ll, I’ll give it a try.” But I remember, uh, almost without fail, the people who were resistant, it was a matter of, uh, “If, if the minister, if my preacher says it’s okay, I, I may go give it a try.” I’m not sure how many of those people we ever really got to register and vote, but, uh, we did have some success and again, we chose projects and places where you could go from one door to the next to the next, and it was almost a one-on-one kind of thing with, with our team.

JM: Um, through that summer in 1960, there is much, there is much, much active conversation and debate even, um, in the civil rights community, um, such as it was structured in its pieces and different parts in that, in that moment, um, [1:00:00] about how to move forward because obviously, the sit-ins oftentimes were met with, most oftentimes were met with very, very vigorous and ongoing resistance and yielded relatively little if anything in sort of terms of a direct result. So I’m wondering about, about your thoughts through that period because obviously, this is going to connect to the emergence of another idea about how to move forward, uh, that you will sort of play a very large part in helping to promulgate and, and, and, uh, advocate.

TG: Well, the, um, early sit-ins, uh, essentially resulted in people sitting at lunch counters and being arrested and then posting bond and, uh, the bond was, uh, uh, used by the, uh, state to perhaps, uh, continue the practice and so, uh, I felt that there should be, uh, more perhaps of a commitment on our part being willing to suffer for something that we really wanted to, uh, to have happen. So that’s why a year almost to the date after the first sit-ins, we, uh, got involved in the “jail, no bail” policy with the Friendship Nine. That was deliberate and, uh, that protest was really to occur one year after the first sit-ins, and it was to take us to a different level of commitment and, uh, that’s the essence of the, uh, “jail, no bail.” Now there were quandaries

about what had been happening previously, uh, in the people who were with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. There were doubtlessly, uh, some NAACP chapters that had jumped on board and so forth who were dealing with the same thing. And so “jail, no bail” would turn out to be a, uh, an important, um, commitment level that we had not seen before, which we would hope would appeal to people of goodwill.

Now these college students, who were just simply sitting at a lunch counter, they were arrested and they are in jail now or they’re on a road gang, uh, now. There’s something wrong with me and I’m, I’m, I’m talking about if someone were really interested in social justice or addressing the problems that we have in this country relative to race. So without doing anything active, at least the people in the other parts of the country could say, “Well, we’re not going to patronize that store” or “I’m going to, uh, insist, uh, in my own personal life that we find a way to, uh, treat those young people fairly.” So that willingness to suffering, uh, we had hoped that that would appeal to the good-natured, uh, sense of social justice that we hoped permeated enough people in the country for some positive change to occur.

JM: Yeah. Let me reach back again for some of these threads that are bringing us forward here. So through, I think in the spring of, the spring of ‘60, in fact, a group of students who are CORE-affiliated at Florida A&M –

TG: Oh yeah.

JM: Get arrested and they serve sixty days.

TG: Mm-hmm.

JM: Now you would have known about that, I gather.

TG: Yes, yes.

JM: And that, that is generally emerging, I mean generally cited in the literature as sort of a first instance of a kind of “jail, no bail.”

TG: Mm-hmm.

JM: Um, the –

TG: May I interrupt a moment here?

JM: Please, please.

TG: Uh, sometimes I, I think the important thing is not perhaps what you do, but the context that you do it in and, uh, I would never detract one iota from the significance of what happened to this CORE group in Tallahassee, Pat [Patricia] Stephens, Priscilla Stephens, and, and, and, uh, those people, but outside of CORE echelons, I’m not sure how well that particular protest was known.

JM: Exactly.

TG: But I think we had had hundreds of students arrested, uh, in the early, in the early 1960s, uh, after the, the sit-in movement started up in, uh, Greensboro. And we, we had a context for the Friendship Nine, and I think it was being in the strategic place at the strategic time and it still merits a significant note historically because there were certainly other groups that could have done the same thing, but ours was the group that *did* the critical thing.

JM: I’m, I’m absolutely of that view, absolutely. [1:05:00] I’m, I’m trying to trace kind of how you, because you go to Miami in August of ‘60 and earlier in recounting that arrest there, you made it seem and, and I want to, I want to make sure I’m, I’m clear on this, the arrest there was intentional or kind of surprised you in a –

TG: Well, it, this was an Action Institute.

JM: Yeah.

TG: And in the Action Institute, we would very often have, uh, for example, we would have a white and a black sitting at a lunch counter, and we would have observers that were white and black, and we were trying to sense the sentiment of, or the position of the management. And so if the white and black who were the test group were served, then the white or the black who were the observers would say, "Well, I'm going to not patronize this place anymore. You're letting a black person eat down at the end of the counter." So you have no way, when you go in to do that, you have no way of knowing how the police are going to perceive it. They might just come in and arrest both of the groups, and so the arrest in Miami was really sort of accidental. We were not planning to be arrested, but we realized that we might be arrested. And in fact, in some of the proceedings of the Action Institute, there were some people whose level of commitment to what we were doing was not quite up to the level of being arrested, they wound up being arrested and they actually were, uh, uh, somewhat, uh, sore about the fact that they were arrested. But you had to realize that if you were in this particular game, that was all a part of the territory.

JM: You spent time, as you mentioned, in the Dade County Jail.

TG: Yes.

JM: That would have been your first extended stay.

TG: Yes, yes, not a, not a nice place to spend time at all. Um, we were in a, uh, cell block that may have had thirty-five men or so, including murderers. Um, for the most part, the prisoners were very respectful, uh, to us, but to anybody else who came in the, uh, cell block, uh, there were certain, uh, expectations that were enforced by the cell block person who was at the top of the hierarchy and by that, I mean the person who was the strongest and who wielded enough power to make other underlings carry out his orders. I remember one night, uh, an

elderly man was put into the cell block and, uh, one of the, uh, underlings, uh, went over to him and said, “Uh, Pops, you have to take a shower.” And, uh, this man said, “Well, who the hell do you think you are? I’m, I’m not taking a shower. I just got arrested for being drunk out on the streets. I’m clean.” And he said, uh, the underling went back and told the, the guy who was the sort of head of the cell block and he said, “Well, either he takes a shower now or I’m going to beat the hell out of you.” And so this underling goes back and tells the man, “You’ve got to take a shower.” And he gave him the same argument before and, uh, within a matter of moments, this guy’s being beaten by this underling and he’s thrown into the shower and he takes a shower. So it was that sort of, uh, environment, not a good environment at all [laughs].

The first time I saw guys, uh, make, uh, hot chocolate, uh, in a cell block and, uh, there were these metal cups. Uh, and, uh, they would take a Mars candy bar or a Milky Way and they would put it right up next to the incandescent lamp or light. They could find enough to attach it there and the chocolate would melt into the water, stir it around, and that was hot chocolate.
[laughs]

JM: Um, when, when, uh, CORE invites you to become a field secretary, right, kind of on the other side of the Miami, uh, experience, what, what was your thought about that opportunity and, and what you might be doing and –

TG: I was delighted at the opportunity to be able to go, uh, and work full time, uh, in the, uh, in the movement. Um, my background had been, uh, in the NAACP, of, uh, course, but I did not agree with the philosophy of the NAACP in terms of about, of how you go about promoting social change, um, but I was pleased that I had the contacts with the NAACP. So when I went to Jackson, Mississippi, to work, uh, the only person that I really knew in Jackson was Medgar

Evers and I had met Medgar Evers at these regional meetings [70:00] of the NAACP when I was a student at Claflin.

JM: So you actually went immediately then to Mississippi in '60 or in South Carolina?

TG: Uh, no, no, I had a, I had a variety of assignments for CORE.

JM: Okay.

TG: Uh, I remember working in Kentucky. Uh, I remember working in California. I remember working in Arizona. Wherever there were – people would, would write CORE and they would express an interest in addressing a problem of discrimination in their communities where nonviolent direct action could be used. And, uh, CORE would then send out a person to train them, to advise them, so forth and so on. So that's how I got to work in some of these, uh, these other communities.

JM: Right.

TG: No, I got the Jackson assignment because I had been key in coming up with the idea of a Freedom Ride in the first place and because I had made all of these contacts along the route, that made it sort of a natural kind of thing for me to be the scout for the ride.

JM: Right. It, it's just amazing to me as we go through this conversation, you're so thick in so much of this history that, that every time I, every, there's just more and more and more.

TG: [laughs]

JM: So I have to slow you down again because we certainly will come on the Freedom Rides, um, here pretty soon, but, but through the fall of 1960, one of the things then that you're very heavily involved with is beginning to do the training with the folks from Rock Hill.

TG: Mm-hmm.

JM: And can you describe that because that's going to obviously build up to January thirty-one?

TG: Okay, um, the training with the folks from Rock Hill was done at Claflin College and I think that Gordon Cary was there and, uh, Jim McCain may have been in and out of, uh, there and the primary emphasis was on the socio-dramas. The amazing thing about the Friendship Nine was that we took essentially a group of college students who had no knowledge at all of tactical nonviolence and we pulled off one of the most important protest, uh, events of the movement. I mean, I, I look back at that now. Normally, to do this kind of thing, if you expect people to be arrested and to spend thirty days on a road gang, you go find some guys who've studied nonviolence and who have been involved in protests like we did for the Freedom Rides. The first riders were not randomly chosen people. They were people, you had to submit an application. Everybody had to feel comfortable with everybody else in terms of their ability to behave in a nonviolent way or fashion. That's not what we had with the Friendship Nine, but we were able to pull it off.

JM: Yeah.

TG: Great.

[Laughter]

TG: Because those, those are really a great bunch of guys.

JM: Yeah.

TG: Yeah.

JM: One, one question I'm curious about: why, why January thirty-one and not February one? Why didn't you wait one more day?

TG: Well, uh, there were, the students were, um, uh, interested in being able to register for the next semester of classes and so our, uh, choice of the date that wasn't exactly opposite the starting date of February first, uh, 1960, February first, 1961, was to accommodate that. So the guys could get registered [chimes in background] so that if things went well and they spent their thirty days, they might be able to be in enough contact with their teachers to not lose a whole semester of, of schooling. So that's the reason for that.

JM: Let's pause for just a sec.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

TG: Yeah, so that the –

JM: Okay. We're back on, yeah.

TG: So that the Friendship, uh, college students could register and, uh, have the potential for completing a semester, uh, even though they were going to be on the road gang in Rock Hill. Uh, we decided to have them do that on the, we decided to have the arrest on the thirty-first where they could accomplish that rather than putting it so that it was February first anniversary. February, uh, first, 1960, was the original date; '61 would have been the anniversary date.

JM: Yeah, forgive me. I'm, I'm not, I'm missing the point. The one day difference mattered because of a date you had to go register on the college?

TG: The, the students had to register at the college.

JM: Okay, okay, gotcha.

TG: So that they could, uh, stand the possibility of, uh, of, of not losing a whole semester.

JM: Got it, got it, right. Um, there's much, I'm sure, to, to say [1:15:00] about the experience of being, uh, on the road gang.

TG: Oh yes.

JM: And you've written beautifully about that and at some length really detailing your experience there. Um, so just for sake of time, I, obviously I'd be very interested if you wanted to share any thoughts or perspective on that, but I want too to ask about, um, it seems that already you are, you personally are extremely alert to what this might mean in the moment to the wider movement, to, to the fortunes, the prospects of the wider movement. You make a call to SNCC and you say, "This could be something that we could really begin to exploit." So can you talk about that?

TG: Well, I, I guess I, I, I, just looking at, uh, what had happened previously and looking at what, at where there was the possibility of expanding it to, uh, something as we knew more about the potential use of nonviolence, I think that that's what, uh, would have led to the, uh, uh, let's try this "jail in strategy" again kind of thing. I made the point about, uh, the jail in and this particular one being pivotal. I remember going to the NAACP national convention in 1960 and, uh, there was a lady there named Clara Luper from –

JM: Oklahoma City.

TG: Oklahoma City and she spent all of her time talking about sit-ins that had been done by the NAACP youth chapter in Tulsa?

JM: Oklahoma City.

TG: Oklahoma City, in Oklahoma City. And I remember going away from that saying yes, but no one knew about them other than Clara Luper and a couple of other people. So that's again that thing that in history sometimes, it's when you do something, when you have a context, that accords significance rather than whether you've done it [laughs] or not. I don't doubt that Clara Luper and her group had done sit-ins because she kept saying, well, the, the North Carolina people are, but we know about the North Carolina people. They had an impact. We know about

the Friendship Nine. I think they had an impact. And historically that's what we look for as we look at the social string that pushes this string, that pushes that one, that pushes that one.

JM: Well, I, that, that, that's the key point. I think you're, I, I think I see it the way you do, that, that because you were able to set in motion very quickly sort of a turning of attention to Rock Hill and many things happened. Can you describe it? Because you're inside. You're on the chain gang, but you know that many of these things are happening.

TG: But you know the, the, one of the things about being on the chain gang is that we were coping with the, the situation, uh, of adjusting and being able to fit in and to do what we had to do to survive and to provide a, uh, witness, uh, on the chain gang. What we didn't realize and couldn't possibly realize was the impact that was going on out there. On Sundays when there were a thousand people coming to see us, the only people that we could see would be a line of perhaps a hundred people that were coming straight into the, uh, dormitories where we were housed. We couldn't see all of those other people, and we did not have a communications network that enabled us to know that so that one of the things that has been tremendously gratifying to me is to read what was going on on the outside.

JM: So you didn't, you didn't have that information flow?

TG: Oh no, we did not have an information flow that told us.

JM: I thought you would have gotten it through those prison visits, but no.

TG: Uh, no. I mean, if somebody told you, uh, I don't recall anybody saying, uh, "I'm just one of about a thousand people –

JM: I see.

TG: Who, uh, who are out here." And it was deliberate on the part of the authorities to limit the number of people that we saw so as to not break us, but certainly not [laughs] to

encourage us because one of the times we wound up in solitary confinement was because they wanted us to erect a fence to sort of corral the people who were coming to see us. And so if you're looking only at a straight line, I see twenty-five people, I don't know how many people are along the laterals there.

JM: Yeah. [laughs] Now—

JB: Joe, we have to, we have to stop for a second.

JM: Sure, okay.

TG: Okay.

JB: I have to change the, uh –

JM: Okay, yeah.

TG: Yeah, if you want to stop for awhile, that's fine with me.

JM: Yeah, take a little break. No, I'm, I'm good. Are you okay?

JB: I think we should keep going. I think we should keep going.

TM: Yeah, I'm okay. You want some –

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay. We're back.

JM: Okay. We're back after a short break.

TG: [clears throat]

JM: Dr. Gaither, let me ask, um, again, I have to pull back just a bit on the calendar.

TG: [laughs]

JM: Um, in December, um, [1:20:00] probably I'm guessing just after, the training at Claflin –

TG: Mm-hmm.

JM: Was, I think, the ninth through the eleventh of December 1960.

TG: Okay.

JM: Very close on those dates. Um, and then you were on a bus with Gordon Cary.

TG: Yes.

JM: Where you and he do, do some, do some thinking and planning that will have a, just a very tremendous impact. So take me back to that ride and its purpose and what you talked about.

TG: Uh, okay. We were going from South Carolina after a training session back to New York. Uh, I think Gordon had a copy of Louis Fischer's book, uh, about Gandhi and, uh, we may have even talked about Gandhi's famous march to the sea, uh, sort of, uh, uh, thing. And, uh, I came up with the idea or broached the idea of, um, a Freedom Ride and, uh, the Freedom Riders would, uh, essentially copy some of the basic pattern of a 1947 journey that had been staged by the Fellowship of Reconciliation and CORE jointly. That's the ride that, uh, George Houser was the, uh, was the scout on. So at some point in the journey, uh, just chit chatting about, uh, one thing or another, the idea of a Freedom Ride comes up. We said, "Well, what are we going to call this thing?" And I don't really know whether Gordon said "Freedom Ride" or I said "Freedom Ride." It's, it's not critical to me, uh, in terms of who said what at the time.

But we went on to, uh, suggest that, uh, well, uh, how are we going to, uh, do, do with this thing in terms of the mechanics of the, uh, project. Well, we said we're going to have to have people who are very well-trained in, uh, nonviolence and, uh, we're going to have to have somebody who will go down the route of the ride to send back very specific information about the, uh, town, the community, the bus schedules, the layout of the bus stations, the mass meetings, and all of that sort of thing. And so eventually I would become the person who would

assume that, uh, particular function so that I could say that I was the scout for the, for the Freedom Ride.

JM: In April.

TG: And the choice of places was, uh, determined by the location of historically black colleges and universities going southward that we had relationships with where we could house the riders and also where we could have meetings to inform the local community because we didn't want to just take a trip through a community without making some connections with the local people who would follow up to make sure that whatever happened with us would be a springboard for them continuing to protest or taking advantage of any kinds of changes that had, would have occurred.

JM: Yeah. This, this was, you've just there described some of the close particulars, but pulling back one level, this is audacious.

TG: [laughs] Well, yeah.

JM: This is, you're going to take, you're going to, you have this notion of pushing all the way through the deep South.

TG: Through the deep South.

JM: And of course, this –

TG: The original ride had not gone into the deep South because of the, uh, the danger, uh, element, but we were going to go through, uh, Mississippi. We were going through Alabama, Mississippi and end up in Louisiana and we knew that the resistance there would be considerable. In fact, I think my suggestion was that, uh, if we get through the state of Alabama, we're going to have to have federal protection because Alabama was, uh, along with Mississippi, the most resistant places that I thought we would encounter. And remember the NAACP had

been outlawed in, uh, in Alabama. So that's how you got, uh, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Dr. King's, uh, organization and group going there because it was illegal to be a member of the NAACP.

JM: Exactly, yeah.

TG: So those three states, we realized were going to be toughies. Now we also realized that, uh, there were places in South Carolina like Rock Hill where the possibility was imminent and of course, in any of the small towns in any one of those states, you could encounter all kinds of difficulties. You could lose your life.

JM: Yeah. Um, yeah. Tell me about the, so you and Cary, uh, communicate this idea to the folks at, at the CORE national office when you arrive.

TG: This is about the time that James Farmer became the executive secretary of CORE.

JM: That's exactly, and that's exactly right. And, and, and forgive me, but let me just add one more thing to contextualize, to set up. You're right. [1:25:00] This is right in the late 1960, early 1961 when Jimmy Robinson's tenure is in question. There's uncertainty. He's after all white, not black.

TG: That's right.

JM: And so, yeah.

TG: Yeah. And so, uh, Jim Farmer was, uh, looking for a project and, uh, this is one that had the potential to be very successful and, uh, I don't think that we estimated how big it would become because I think it ultimately was one of the signature protests of the entire Civil Rights Movement. I mean, it involved all kinds of people. There were all kinds of inputs and all kinds of, uh, positive, uh, things that were brought together to address an issue that got national attention. And, uh, I don't think that, uh, we had that in mind and, uh, evidence to the fact that

we didn't have it in mind is that we had just a dozen or so, uh, very well-trained nonviolent soldiers who were going to *do* this thing and you know you're not going to get a dozen people, no matter how well-trained they are, through Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana. So I don't think that, uh, we had estimated the potential, and I think it's difficult to do that anyway.

JM: Did you think Dr. King might join?

TG: [sighs]

JM: Was that something you were involved in calculating?

TG: It was not something that I was, um, um, anticipating, um, and it's something that given the magnitude of Dr. King's contributions, I do not hold one reserve in terms of my respect for Dr. King that he didn't become a Freedom Rider. Uh, he was on the, uh, advisory board, national advisory board for CORE. He had been perhaps the primary influence in fleshing out nonviolence as a strategy for promoting social change and to me, that was, that's enough of a contribution. I, I don't care that he did not become a Freedom Rider.

JM: Um, maybe the question is too obvious, but I don't know the answer. Why weren't you a Freedom Rider in, in the early stage –

TG: Why wasn't I a Freedom Rider?

JM: Because you were later.

TG: Okay.

JM: But, but you did all the scouting.

TG: I did all the scouting.

JM: You set the whole thing up.

TG: And then after setting the whole thing up, I drew the assignment of being the person in Jackson who would, uh, take, uh care of, uh, all of the riders when they were, uh, released. I had an assignment before that, though.

JM: Which was?

TG: My assignment, uh, right after the, uh, bus was burned in Anniston [Alabama] was in Montgomery, Alabama. And in Montgomery, I lived in the home of Ralph Abernathy. This is when [coughs] after the event in the church, um, Montgomery was under martial law.

JM: The event in the church was thousands of whites, angry whites massing outside the rally at Rev. Abernathy's church, yeah?

TG: Yeah, okay. So, um, um, the town is under martial law and, uh, Freedom Riders start to trickle in. I was training riders there. Uh, I'd have to go to the, uh, Trailways or the Greyhound station to pick up riders. Uh, we would know how many riders were coming in, but we wouldn't, we would know their names, but we didn't match names with people. So, the, the question was, you know, how are you going to get down there? Well, first of all, uh, right outside of Ralph Abernathy's house about a half a block up, there was a Jeep with a National Guardsman driving and another National Guardsman in the back seat with a rifle across. So these guys would, uh, give us an escort to within a block of the bus station, Trailways or Greyhound. They'd disappear.

We got to [laughs] get with, uh, a local guy who was my, uh, driver. We got to get from there past all of the, uh, rednecks to pick up the riders. We know there are five, but we don't know them. So this is what I would do. I would stand [laughs] in an area near a, uh, telephone booth. I would know the gender of the people. As soon as I saw them dial Ralph Abernathy's number, I would go over and rap on, "Come on, come on." And, uh, that worked for a number of times, uh, and we'd go back with those, uh, people past the mob incidentally. [1:30:00] We'd go

back past the mob. We would, uh, get in our vehicle. The Jeep would intercept us again, take us back to Abernathy's house.

Now this was the protection that we are getting. When we needed the National Guard, it wasn't there. We were on our own when we got back to a safe neighborhood. Ralph Abernathy lived in a black neighborhood. There was not a lot of chance that there was going to be somebody who was going to come in and do us harm, uh, there. And it's from there that I was assigned, uh, to Jackson.

JM: Yeah, yeah. What, what, thinking back as best you can, to, to watch this whole ride unfold, maybe especially, especially from Rock Hill forward, Rock Hill on down to Atlanta and then across.

TG: [clears throat]

JM: I mean, really, watching your vision unfold in the spectacular really fashion that it did and all of that tumult and violence and chaos, the federal government's involvement, how did, I mean, you're not a, you're not very, you're a young man. You're in your early twenties.

TG: That's right, yeah.

JM: I'm interested in the response and your sense of what's happening.

TG: Um.

JM: As best you can.

TG: It was a sense of, uh, gratification. It was also a sense of, uh, responsibility for people who would, uh, be injured, uh, who might carry those injuries for the rest of their, rest of their lives. Uh, it's one thing to ask me to do that as a person. It's another thing – But I also thought that, uh, uh, we were in this together and what happened to any one of us could have happened to any others of, uh, us. And I would have been willing to do and, uh, I was gratified

that there were brothers and sisters, white, black, who were similarly minded. So I, I think we had grown up to the point here of the level of sacrifice that might be expected, always hoping that that would not be the case, but, uh, realizing that, uh, it, it certainly could be the case.

JM: Right. Um, obviously, the, the, the experience of violence by that point was not entirely new to the movement, but it was pretty ferocious.

TG: Yes.

JM: And I wonder about your reaction to that. Did that change any part of your perspective in any way to see that unfolding?

TG: Uh, no, because I, I think that the, the idea was that we can't let violence intimidate us into doing, uh, any less than what we think we should be doing and that would be insisting that we be treated just like any other citizens.

JM: How about, um, how about your perspective about the federal government and the Kennedy administration in particular after what happened?

TG: [clears throat] Well, the federal government was, uh, not our ally. I think that, uh, they were sort of annoyed that there were all these critical international issues and then you've got this bunch of blacks and whites who want to ride through the South challenging the culture of, uh, of segregation. Uh, I'd be particularly critical of the FBI because there was no community that I worked in where I could, uh, talk to an FBI agent. I did once think on a sort of intuitive quirk that there was an FBI guy that I could, uh, say something, uh, to. This was when I was working in Jackson. Uh, about two months later, I wound up in, uh, federal court. Uh, the agent had, uh, hoped that he could implicate me in a conspiracy. Well, it turns out I had been tactful enough that when I testified, it really didn't [laughs] didn't help their case. So the, uh, the Justice

Department, uh, presence, uh, with people like John Doar was, uh, often welcomed and, ah, was sincere.

[Sound of bell ringing]

TG: That's one of –

JB: Why don't you just pause?

JM: Excuse for a sec.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay.

JM: We're back on. Let me have you recount that, that last point one more time.

TG: Well, I think the, uh, the, the Justice, we were talking about the Justice Department.

JM: And John Doar, yeah.

TG: Yeah, the Justice Department and Joan Doar. Uh, John Doar did a lot of, uh, very good work, I think in, in Mississippi and voter registration protections and so forth, but the, uh, sincere involvement and the, uh, uh, by the federal bureaucracy in protecting rights and so forth was, uh, grossly negligent. Uh, I think to the Kennedys, this was all about politics. [1:35:00] It wasn't about a moral commitment to protect, uh, citizens who were being disenfranchised by the local political culture.

JM: Yeah, yeah. Um, um, I'm asking some of these things because I, later in our conversation, I'll ask you some kind of reflective things and these are part of the ground, I think, that, that you go across in this terrain. Um, it must have been, it must have been, and you yourself will get on a bus, of course, later in the course of this and it must have been very interesting to watch everything turn toward Jackson, toward Parchman, um, and it became really a national event.

TG: It did, yes, it did. Yeah, we had, um, people coming in from, uh, various parts of the country. We had, uh, various religious groups. I remember the, uh, Episcopalians, the, uh, Church of Latter Day Saints, uh, groups. Uh, yeah, it was a, it was a good cross-section of America and, uh, that's the situation where the Freedom Rides started out as a specific protest involving a very small group and they wound up being a national movement essentially and, uh, I, I don't think we could have predicted that.

JM: Yeah. How did you, what was your broad sense of the prospects of the movement, say, as that summer of '61 wound down and the civil rights community is looking for the best choices about how to move forward? What was your sense of what the Freedom Rides at that point meant and what, what opportunities seemed ahead of you?

TG: Well, I, I saw nonviolent direct action as being a, uh, possible, um, um, root to promoting some of the kinds of changes that we wanted to promote. But at the same time, I was aware of the impatience of, uh, people who had been tactically nonviolent, who were starting to listen to what is a dominant cultural theme, which is violence. And so, uh, there was a kind of innocence, there was a kind of moral focus to the early part of the movement, but to be, uh, a nonviolent movement, if you go back to Gandhi, it requires a lot of discipline, a lot of training. And to ask people in a society that is predominately violent through its core to continue to maintain that, I think that that is the, uh, the sad thing about what, uh, happened, uh, with the, uh, with the death of Dr. King. I mean, I think that Dr. King's star, by the time he was, uh, assassinated had really started to wane because the violent elements were so ever present until they were becoming considerable in terms of how we go about promoting the change that we want to promote.

JM: You would move, um, from, from the Freedom Ride into the COFO experience in Mississippi.

TG: Uh, yes. Now I didn't do a lot with the COFO, uh –

JM: Yeah.

TG: Experience. Uh, I, I was there when COFO was founded.

JM: Exactly. Can you, that, that –

TG: And, uh, it seemed to be a natural, uh, kind of thing. Uh, to the segregationists and the culture of segregation in Mississippi, there would be no difference between CORE, NAACP, SNCC, SCLC. I mean, they, to the segregationists, those were all the same and, uh, we had different strengths in terms of what organizations could contribute to the struggle. So I have always ascribed to the notion that there were some people who would be active in the NAACP, who would never be active in CORE, who would never be active in SCLC, but we need their push as a thrust for this movement forward. And so I, I don't go back and, uh, belabor any negative points about the organizations that were involved because I think there were enough niches for all of us to put our shoulders to the plow to move this wretched animal of segregation out of the way.

JM: Exactly, yeah. Tell me about Bob Moses because you worked with him briefly.

TG: Uh, Bob Moses, uh, a brilliant, uh, guy, um, a visionary. Uh, when we were focused on, um, taking care of Freedom Riders, uh, in Jackson, which is when I first, Bob, met Bob Moses, [1:40:00] Bob Moses was, uh, uh, involved in managing the campaigns of some of the local ministers who were running for Congress. He was looking ahead to the potential for, uh, political, uh, status, solidifying some of the gains that we were trying to get to happen or to occur. Uh, his, uh, book is on that, uh, the Algebra Project. Uh, he and Dave Dennis, uh, worked

together. I have high respect for Bob Moses. One of the things I respect about Bob Moses is that, uh, there were people involved in this movement who, in my opinion, were, uh, quite a bit centered around themselves and their significance. I think Bob Moses saw the larger picture and I think his very low-key manner is to push the issues and the important things as opposed to pushing the individual.

JM: Yeah. Um, in '62, I guess, you reached the point where because of reasons related to your deferment status, you will, certain choices are very stark in front of you. Can you talk about what they were and how you –

TG: Okay. Uh, after college, I had, uh, received a number of deferments and, uh, I'd gotten to the point of being classified, I think it was 1-A. And so actually I received, when I was still right in the midst of working in Jack – in Jackson, I received a, uh, notice that I had to report to, uh, Fort Jackson for induction into the army. Now I had been negligent to, uh, make the argument that I would object to military service on the basis of conscience because that philosophy of nonviolence had, uh, uh, convinced me that I was, would not be a very, very good soldier, but I would be willing to serve my country in an alternate, uh, capacity. So not being a C.O. [conscientious objector], I get to Fort Jackson. We take all of these, uh, preliminary tests the first day. Uh, the sergeant says, "Looks good." Uh, the next day, uh, he says, "Well, uh, I see you have an arrest record here." I said, "Indeed, I do." "Um, well, you're not morally fit to serve in the military, except we'll think about this." And when he said that, he said, "We're going to let you go for a few days."

And I went very quickly to, uh, resurrect the interest that I had shown in a couple of graduate schools. One was, uh, Atlanta University in Atlanta, Georgia. The other one that I'd been admitted to was, uh, the University of Washington, um, on the West Coast, and, uh, the

University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana [Urbana-Champaign]. So I had those choices, but I checked to see when sessions were starting and so the sessions were starting for summer school at, uh, Atlanta University. So I found myself in graduate school, [laughs] uh, rather quickly and, uh, that, of course, staved off the business of having to, uh, to try to resurrect conscientious objector status.

JM: And, and you would spend a final summer of '63, I think –

TG: Yes.

JM: In Mississippi, right?

TG: In Mississippi, uh, one year of work on my masters degree. That's another interesting story to this, by the way. Right after the, uh, bus had been burned in Anniston and I had been doing some short assignments, I went to the University of Wisconsin at Madison to work for CORE, and they were asking questions about the Freedom Rides, uh, so forth and so on.

JM: So this was a field secretary assignment to go up there, yeah, yeah.

TG: Field secretary assignment. And so I met a, uh, professor whose last name, I think, was Rice [University of Wisconsin law professor William G. Rice Jr.] and he said, "You haven't taken the, uh, Law School Aptitude Test." He said, "But I'm going to recommend you to law school." Now after Claflin and being involved in the movement, I had actually thought of how I could get into a profession that would enable me to continue to contribute to the movement, and I had decided that law would be that rather than biology. But one year after I had worked on my masters degree in biology, I went home to Great Falls and I'm thumbing through this mail and I come across this letter admitting me to law school [laughs] at the University of Wisconsin. So he said, "You're, you're admitted. You will have to take the Law School Aptitude Test as a matter

of, uh, record.” [laughs] So that’s how, I, uh, that’s how I, I wound up, uh, [1:45:00] going into biology or continuing to work to biology. And, uh, I was successful in biology. So I actually wound up getting a couple of graduate teaching assistantships and I chose the one at the University of Iowa.

JM: Tell me about the –

JB: So you didn’t go to law school.

JM: We’ll come back to –

TG: No, I didn’t go to law school. I, I was already halfway through a masters degree in biology and I’d always liked biology. So rather than changing to something that was entirely different, even though it was closer to the movement, I decided to keep going in biology.

JM: Well, as you had mentioned, you had earlier met Ernest Finney and Matthew Perry.

TG: Mm-hmm.

JM: These were –

TG: Lawyers, yeah, yeah.

JM: Superb role models on the, on the lawyering side.

TG: Bill Kunstler, Carl Rachlin.

JM: Yeah, yeah.

TG: I’d met, you know, a whole variety of, uh, of lawyers who were favorable influences.

JM: Tell me about, um –

TG: Let me tell you about my –

JM: Please.

TG: My, my, my, my couple of lawyers that, uh, uh, are not very well-known. Um, when the riders were, Freedom Riders, were being tried in Jackson, Mississippi, uh, there were perhaps

five or six lawyers in Jackson, Mississippi, black lawyers. Uh, there was, uh, Sidney Thorpe was the only lawyer who had been trained, well, he'd been trained in a Big Ten university, I think, but he would not take Freedom Rider cases. There was Jack Young, who started out as a postal clerk and had taken law as a correspondence, who was our chief legal contact. There was, uh, R. Jess Brown, who used to be a, uh, social studies teacher at one of the high schools, who had graduated from Texas Southern. And there was another man named Carsie Hall, who was also a mail clerk. And so those were our core lawyers, R. Jess Brown, uh, Jack Young, and Carsie Hall. And, uh, if it was a federal case, we would get people like Derrick Bell and Constance Baker Motley or Bill Kunstler or Carl Rachlin. We would get, you know, some other, uh, reinforcements, but it was always a nucleus of local guys that sort of coordinated things and tried most of the Freedom Rider, uh, cases.

JM: Yeah, yeah. Tell me about the, the summer of '63, going to Mississippi.

TG: The –

JM: The summer of '63, you did a final three month –

TG: Oh, yes.

JM: Yeah.

TG: The final three months, uh, I worked with Aaron Henry in Clarksdale, Mississippi, and, uh, Aaron Henry and the, uh, Clarksdale NAACP were involved in a, uh, selective buying program, uh, actually a boycott of downtown, uh, Clarksdale. And so, uh, being there for just three months, I was just fitting into and augmenting an existing program, uh, having to do with, uh, issues of police brutality, uh, issues of discriminating against, uh, uh, black people in the downtown area in the stores, so forth and so on. But the other thing I did there was to be the, uh, focus of a Freedom School, uh, that was just a block or so away from Aaron Henry's, uh,

drugstore and we would have coming into the center, I'd say, twenty, twenty-five young people every day and we taught freedom songs, uh, history of, uh, blacks in America, so forth and so on.

And it was there, uh, when, uh, the March on Washington was to, uh, take place and so my choice was to stay in Clarksdale or to go to the March on Washington. And I opted to stay in, in Clarksdale. I remember as I, uh, told you there helping to put together the sign, "March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom," and then with, uh, SCLC, uh, SNCC, CORE, NAACP, and COFO, which was the Council of Federated Organizations, sort of pulling them all together on that sign, which the young people from Clarksdale took to the March on Washington.

JM: Yeah. Then you went back, I guess, to Atlanta for a second year at Atlanta University.

TG: And then, uh, to the University of Iowa.

JM: Yeah, yeah.

TG: For the Ph.D.

JM: Let me propose that we pause here and take a break, yeah? We're, we're really putting you to hard work.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay, we're on.

JM: We are back after a, a, a break for some refreshment and, um, thank you for that, Dr. Gaither.

TG: You're welcome.

JM: Um, I'd like to, I'd like to ask, um, just, just a few things. [1:50:00] Let me start, just, just for the tape record, John thought it'd be good if we, can you just say recap just in a

simple descriptive way the member organizations inside COFO and say once more what that was?

TG: Okay. Uh, COFO was the Council of Federated Organizations and, uh, the representative organizations were SNCC, or the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the SCLC, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, or the NAACP, and CORE, the Congress of Racial Equality.

JM: Yeah, yeah, thank you.

TG: Those together constituted COFO.

JM: And you had earlier talked about how from the perspective of the average white Mississippi segregationist, they would have all been one broad mix of –

TG: All, all one.

JM: Outside agitators.

TG: That's right.

JM: As they would have been known.

TG: That is true.

JM: Yeah. Um, let me have you, I'm very interested in, uh, we can't do it justice because we'll, we'll just here have time for a summary, but talk about first your experience in graduate school, particularly say in Iowa, and then, um, move to the, to the broader question of your work as a scientist.

TG: Uh, first year at Iowa, I was, of course, the only African American student [laughs] in the department. There were a couple of Asian, Indian students, uh, in the department. Um, I did well academically. I was assigned to be a, uh, graduate teaching assistant in a very large course. It was called "Life Science." It was actually the introductory level, uh, biology course.

And, uh, we had two responsibilities for the sections that we were assigned. We had the students for, uh, laboratory, for a couple of hours a week, and we had them for an hour or so in a discussion group. Uh, the discussion group we could deal with, um, uh, points of information that students had questions about based on the lecture. Because of the very large number of people in the class, uh, the lecturers were just given the time to present the information. To embellish or to clarify or something, that was up to the, uh, up to the TA.

Um, as the only, uh, African American student, there had been previously an African American student, uh, from, uh, Louisiana who had graduated and indeed, my mentor or one of the persons that was influential in sending me to Iowa actually compared me to his previous student that had been there and that was a, sort of an automatic niche for me to be in. Um, there were, of course, the usual cross-section of, uh, people, some of whom became close friends, uh, until today, but there were also the people who just sort of tolerated you because you were there and to them, they would have been just as happy [laughs] if you weren't there. But, um, the professors were, uh, across the spectrum, too. Some very conservative ones were particularly standoffish, but I found, uh, enough, uh, favor in professors and they respected me enough as a student. And so I didn't have any major problems, uh, with, with graduate work at Iowa.

I had decided to go to Iowa because I felt that, uh, if not a, uh, a neutral, uh, place to go, uh, it might be, uh, at least a place where I could, uh, find some direction to do something that was a potential passion for me. The leader in the field at the time had left Iowa and gone to Austin, Texas, and even though Austin, Texas, has a reputation of being, uh, a bit more enlightened than some other cities in Texas, I didn't, coming out of a movement where I was fighting discrimination in its most blatant form day in and day out, want to take that same mantle to do graduate work at Texas, even though the preeminent scholar in the field was at Texas. So

that was sort of one of the things [laughs] that compelled me to go to Iowa. Now I'd mentioned that I could have gone to, uh, uh, Washington, Seattle, or Champaign-Urbana [Urbana-Champaign]. Uh, Champaign-Urbana [Urbana-Champaign] actually did not have the fit program that I was primarily interested in and I wasn't quite sure I wanted to go way out on the West Coast. So I wound up going to Iowa.

JM: Tell me about, um, tell me about the things that have been most important to you, um, as a scholar and a researcher over the years.

TG: Uh, okay. As a researcher, uh, eventually I got into an area of biology that's called electron microscopy, and my specific interest in electron microscopy was to start with the very small structures that are inside [1:55:00] of a living system and to see what happens when some of those structures transform into, uh, entities that are important for the reproduction of the organism. So there was, uh, something that's called, um, uh, capillitium, or from Latin, capillus, meaning a thread. I actually studied how these threads came to be and in the mature reproductive structure of the organisms that I studied, the threads have a function because they prevent the organism from putting all of its reproductive structures out at once. So they're out over a longer time period, increasing the possibility that some of those reproductive structures will then propagate the organism.

The other interest that I had was using the electron microscope to answer certain questions that you couldn't answer given the limitations of a regular microscope. So you can see things with a regular microscope that are only so close to each other. With an electron microscope, you can see them much closer. That's something we call resolution. So with improved resolution, a question that might be subjective with a light microscope suddenly becomes objective with an electron microscope because you can see more clearly what is there.

So that was my interest in using the electron microscope to answer those kinds of questions, which were then involved in defining how one species of organism was different from another species that was closely related.

JM: Sure, yeah.

TG: So it was, uh, speciation or, uh, using electron microscopy to resolve the questions.

JM: Yeah. Let, let me turn, uh, uh, forgive me because I know that is just the barest summary, but for, for, um, our work today, I, I want to turn to, um, civil rights and, and the struggle and maybe [someone coughs] to a few retrospective kinds of, of questions. Um, I know that in, uh, we've just passed the fiftieth anniversary, obviously, of, of the Freedom Ride, uh, Freedom Rides. And, um, there are many different ways that people approach that memory and, and so I'm, I'm interested in your question of, of different interpretations of the ride and its impact and, and how you see the significance of, of the Freedom Rides from this distance.

TG: Well, I see them as being one of the most important, the most inclusive, the most integrative protests as a part of the total civil rights structure. Uh, we were talking about attribution of, uh, who did this and who did that. Uh, there is no question that the rides were conceived by and, uh, executed primarily by the Congress of Racial Equality. After the bus was burned in Anniston, when the riders were no longer capable of continuing, we received a very nice contribution from the students in Nashville and the Nashville movement. Now that contribution is to be given a great deal of credit, but its credit should not extend to the suggestion that CORE was incapable of continuing. In any kind of movement, there are strategic times that you move and obviously, you can't move if you're physically incapable at that moment. That does not mean that you're not in charge of the sequence of events that is part of an ongoing process. So my disappointment was those who would rewrite the history as if the Congress of

Racial Equality, the people who originated and for the most part sponsored, uh, the, uh, rides, that these were sort of like rookies who didn't know what, uh, they were doing. We appreciate the contribution of the Nashville people, but it was simply a, uh, contribution that was a part of an ongoing process, not a contribution that should consume the, uh, origin of the process and the propagation of the events that we label with the term, "Freedom Ride."

JM: Sure, yeah. Did you, after you departed for Iowa and then had your, the, the, the long run of your career as an academic here in, in Pennsylvania, did you ever live again in the South?

TG: Uh, no, with the exception of going back for visits. No question, the South has changed tremendously, but the fundamental infrastructure [2:00:00] of racism and segregation that called the shots in the South in 1960 are still in place. They have slightly different labels, uh, they accomplish their goals by slightly different means, but there has been no real fundamental, uh, shift in who really calls the signals. Uh, we can have black public officials, but sometimes the strength of what those people can do is actually called by shots from the same people who were calling [laughs] the shots fifty years ago. So there has been change. A lot of it's surface, uh, change and there's still an awful lot of work to do.

JM: Yeah.

TG: And in this recent thing of a society that is color blind, much of the legal weight for making some meaningful changes is continually eroded, and if you're talking about making changes in the southern context, ultimately, that has to come down to the, uh, administrators of federal programs and so forth. And very often these are very obviously discriminatory. Witness [Hurricane] Katrina [an allusion to the racially discriminatory character of the federal government's response to the disaster]. Witness G. I. Bill, uh, availability and so forth. Uh, if we go back to the '60s and, uh, we still haven't, [laughs] uh, pushed the bad guy out of the way yet.

JM: Um, from the, from the nearer, the nearer distance in, in terms of time, when you were, say, in Iowa and beginning your work as an academic, did you ever, did you ever have occasion to, I'm sure the, the question came to your mind, did you ever have occasion to doubt nonviolence as a, as a, as a tactical means? Did you ever think that it won't work here in the United, in the American context or –

TG: Uh, no. I've always had faith that it would, uh, work. I think there is a residual, uh, moral conscious in, uh, a significant number of Americans that makes it possible for, uh, nonviolent tactics to work. They must, however, be waged within a context of people who are well-trained and who can, uh, articulate, uh, what it is that they are doing and why are they doing it. Uh, one is heartened by some of the, uh, nonviolent-type things that have occurred in the Middle East. Uh, so I, I think that there, you know, there is still the possibility for, uh, nonviolent direct action being a positive social, positively, uh, promoting a change, uh, process.

JM: Yeah, yeah. Um, in, in having to, in having to hold the view for all of the many reasons that, that support it, that things have not changed so much, does it, has it had the effect of, um, well, how, what, what have been the, what have been the, uh, implications for your sense of, you know, the American project over the longer term? Do you think that this is a place that, that might find its way one day to a more just social order?

TG: Uh, I hope so and, uh, if one looks at, for example, the, uh, recent, uh, election of, uh, Barack Obama, I, I think what we had happening there, uh, and by the way, I was immensely surprised that Barack Obama was elected because my mind was clicking back to what I know the situation to have been in the '50s, '60s, and '70s. It was the young people who went out and rallied for the first time for change. The unfortunate thing is that many of those young people have not, uh, persisted with insisting that the change was there. So what we see now in the

inability of Barack Obama to govern is the kinds of factors that, if they had been dominant, would not have permitted him to be elected in the first place. Because everything he decides to do, the idea is to obstruct him and to prevent positive change from occurring or taking place. If the young people were just as involved in making sure that we are sending to people, people to Congress who are going to cooperate and who are going to be collegial and who are going to be bipartisan, there'd be hope. And I, I have to think that, uh, the young people hold that hope.

JM: Yeah. Do you, um, look, looking back, the, the, the movement was your passion and your work [2:05:00] and you've struggled in very difficult contexts for, for years there at the opening of the decade of the '60s. Are there ways in which, as you think about that, are, are there costs that were born by you in an ongoing fashion? Was there a legacy of cost or complication in any way for you personally?

TG: [sighs]

JM: Because it's kind of a heavy burden.

TG: Well, this is [laughs] an interesting, uh, question because when I think back to the time, the energy, and the passion that I put into a movement to be, uh, accepted as a citizen, as a human being, there are times when I wonder what could I have done with that time to do something else that is automatically forthcoming if you happen to be born in this country and your skin happens to be white instead of brown. That, that galls me on occasion because I think we have lost as a nation a lot of potential and we still lose, uh, that potential when, uh, all you have to do is to be born white. You have all these privileges, but if you are black, you're going to have to fight for them. We need all of us on the same page playing the, uh, same tune in order to be competitive internationally at this point.

JM: What, I'll, I'll, I'll ask one final question and then invite any further comments you might want to make. What would Great Falls, um, South Carolina, look like if you went back today?

TG: Oh, uh, Great Falls, South Carolina, um, a fundamental disconnect with the mainstream of American society in terms of almost every aspect of, uh, life. Uh, when I drive through Great Falls, uh, I see, uh, a number of men my age, uh, sitting out under a, uh, tree just biding the time away and but for the grace of God, there go I sitting, uh, there. These are people without hope, for whom the current century has passed, and, uh, quite honestly, I, I, I don't know what, uh, will happen to them. But the tragedy is that they have been lost, but the, uh, tragedy that's even worse is that their children, in many instances, have been lost, too. And, uh, that's downright depressing. I can't think of, uh, any reason why an industry would go to Great Falls. You don't have a, uh, well-trained labor force. Uh, you don't have the kinds of, uh, amenities that are necessary to run a business, uh, ethically for profit, so forth and so on. So I, I really don't know. It's one of those questions my parents would say, "I'll leave it God," because I, I don't really have a solution for, for Great Falls, except to say that it, uh, it, it hurts me, uh, that, uh, that there is not hope, uh, for a future that is bright for Great Falls.

And what I'm saying might be interpreted to be from a black perspective. I'm a black man. But, uh, the South in its, uh, effort to keep black people down has also cheated white people, especially poor white people because they're in the same boat. The white people should get together with the black people and move the monkey off the back, but many of them are holding onto the fact, "Well, at least I'm white."

JM: Are there things we haven't talked about that you'd like to spend some time on, themes we haven't touched on, other issues, episodes?

TG: Uh, I would mention one other, uh, thing. Uh, I think that scholars are frequently misunderstood, and I think that they are, uh, especially misunderstood in the African American community because we've had so few models on which to, uh, generate a, uh, an idea as to their importance or to their significance so that when I tell people I have a Ph.D. in botany, they could identify if I had a Ph.D. in agriculture or something that they have a life experience that they can connect to it, but to them, my whole contribution to the total of my being and the being of my nation, my country, and my race is not comprehensible at all. And, uh, couple that with the fact [2:10:00] that, uh, uh, even my parents, uh, I couldn't understand, I couldn't explain to them exactly what it is that's my passion I, I do. Uh, in the majority society, usually there is at least some way of making a connection that rings clear, but that's a sort of lonely feeling [laughs] being, being out there. But I see my contribution as being more than to, uh, to, to black people, but being to the, the nation as a whole.

JM: Thank you for welcoming us here to Prospect today.

TG: My pleasure.

JM: And into your home. It's just been a real honor and privilege to talk with you.

JM: Thank you.

TG: Thank you.

JM: Thank you so much.

TG: Uh huh.

JM: It was a wonderful –

[Recording ends at 2:10:47]

END OF INTERVIEW