

SPEAK NOW: MEMORIES OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS ERA
RECORDING SESSIONS

John Luther Dolan

Moderated by LeAnna Welch-Dawson

Thursday, May 26, 2011

William Winter Archives and History Building

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Scope Note: The Mississippi Department of Archives and History in conjunction with the 50th Anniversary of the Freedom Rides and to complement the Department's exhibit "*Freedom Rides: Journey for Change*" conducted recording sessions with local citizens to gather oral memories of the Civil Rights Era. The participants were also given the opportunity to have their photograph taken in front of the exhibit. The recordings were conducted in the spring and summer of 2011 at the William F. Winter Archives and History Building in Jackson, Mississippi.

WELCH: Ok Speak Now recording number 006. This is LeAnna Welch with the Mississippi Department of Archives and History. Today's date is Thursday, May 26, 2011. Now sharing his Civil Rights Era memories is Mr. John Dolan. Welcome.

DOLAN: Thank you here. At the, the time of the Freedom Rides, I was a junior at Berkley, and Berkley CORE opened a chapter in 1960 and my girlfriend and I joined in December of 1960, so I was already active as a local civil rights activist, we were testing realty companies and Hick's department store and we had picket lines and so on, so I was already active in the movement, and then when the original group of Freedom Riders were arrested in Jackson, thereby preventing them from finishing their tour all the way to New Orleans, James Farmer asked everyone in CORE to come and flood the jails. So I thought it was a good idea, I was in the second group that left from CORE, Ed Blankenheim, one of the original Freedom Riders, had come out and organized this. I got on the train, went down past L.A., picked up another group there, went through...all the way to New Orleans by train. One little incident there: around midnight, going through Texas...the train slowed and came to a stop, and somebody, I don't know who, spread the rumor that the Ku Klux Klan had stopped the train and was gonna come in and kill all the Freedom Riders, and I was thinking to myself, "Oh, rats, I don't even get started on this and I'm already in trouble," and so I was thinking, "How, how should we do this?" you know, "Should we fight—get together in a group and fight?—Or should we just run?" "Or should we take off our CORE badges, segregate ourselves and say, 'We don't know any Freedom Riders,'" and, fortunately the train started again and the Ku Klux Klan didn't burst through the door trying to kill us, but I'll never forget that and the thought processes I was going through at the time. So we get to New Orleans and there New Orleans CORE takes us in, houses us, and then trains us in non-violence and I don't remember that part too well, I do remember the first night we stayed with Reverend Alexander and his family and I remember the food was just really good, that's my first memory of New Orleans. Then we got on the train, a group of about 20 of us, on June 25th and went to...Jackson where we got off and we were immediately arrested, so I never got to see the city of Jackson. We were then taken for a day or two in the city and then the county jail and within about three or four days, we were then transferred to Parchman Farm. And then I remember, there were, well three white males—we were segregated by gender and race—so I became very close friends with Frank Nelson and George Blevins, 'cause we were the three—well actually—there were actually four white males but, Gordon Harris—I don't know where he was—but we didn't see too much of him. So the three of us palled around a lot and on the way up to Jackson—I mean, excuse me, up to Parchman—George had read a book about some pacifist in World War II who had gotten his way in prison by just simply going limp every time he wanted to protest or something. So we get off and

they have us lined up to get us ready to go into the maximum security unit and I forgot exactly what happened, they were—they weren't—treating us very nice, so Frank decides to go limp and so did I, and, and again I don't remember exactly what happened, but we decided, "OK, they'll be nicer to us now," so we walked in. But because of that, even though it was a relatively minor incidents where we were, we were threatening their authority, they took our mattresses. So we had to sleep on the steel, each—in the maximum security unit—there were I don't know how many cells 15 or 20 on one side and then the same on the other side, each cell I think it was six by nine had, had two bunks, and that was it—about it—it had a toilet and running water and you had a tooth brush and underwear, and so it was pretty minimal. But there was a lotta comradery and people were singing a lot. I think 'cause we felt a little guilty, we had really sustained no violence and everything was really kind of going along well, we decided we were—Frank and I decided—we needed to protest more, that it was kind of our duty, so we, we made the demand that we should get more time walking up and down the hall because we only got like once a week you got to walk down the hall to take a shower. Okay so we decided to make a demand, more time out of the cell, so the only way you could protest was to refuse to hand your tray back—food tray—so we did that a couple of times and then they threw us in solitary which was a rather small...hole, actually, there was—there was—no light, there was some running water, and there was a little hole in the middle where you could, you know, urinate when you needed to and they didn't feed us, but Frank and I had also decided to go on a hunger fast, okay, we were gonna prove ourselves. So we spent three days there and then, actually, after a week or so, we had flooded the maximum security unit, so they took the white males into a first-offenders camp which is a huge room with about 40 cots on, on the floor and, and showers nearby, it was sheer heaven compared to the maximum security. But one of the guys realized that we, we were—they were—treating the white males better than the others so he complained, and he complained enough that they threw him into solitary well, about 20 of us lined up behind him, figuring they couldn't throw us all into solitary, but they did. Fortunately, in the maximum security unit, solitary was a little better, it was a, a, a cell with bars, but at least they had some light, and actually, we were kinda crowded in there, but we could talk to each other and we could play verbal games. And there were a lotta memories of the first-offenders camp because we were face to face. There were a lotta very talented people on the Ride, and so we were able to amuse ourselves, there was a, chess sets were made. You could take cornbread and chew it up a little bit and then you could mold it and that would be the dark piece and then the biscuit chewed up and molded into the piece and there were some people who were very good sculptors and so we got nice little chess sets. George Blevins was, was a very artistic and we were able to take—they gave us—envelopes and letters to write, and a pencil to write with and we just stole that and we could cut that up into little cards, we made a deck of cards, we made a clue game, and we made a monopoly

game, and I remember George was the artist, he did the clue game and one thing I'll never forget, is the bludgeon weapon he drew, a bowl of cold grits. Now George was from Natchitoches, Louisiana so he knew about grits okay, but the grits they gave us in jail were all tightly congealed little missiles you could use to throw at the guards, I guess I don't know.

So, those are the main things oh, there were, what else? There was a fellow named Fritz [Frederick] Muntean who also was from Berkeley, he was a very good singer and he had memorized the Pirates of Penzance, he had performed it, so he, by himself—actually he had help from one guy that he coached—performed one night the entire Pirates of Penzance. What else? Bob Martinson had done a lot of acting and he gave acting classes, we could do little skits, we could pass our time that way. We had a chess tournament and I came in second, I was very proud of that. What else? Oh, people who had, had special knowledge could—would—give lectures and actually, I gave a lecture on jazz 'cause that's—I'm a real jazz buff—and one of the fellows here, Al Gordon, remembered me giving that lecture. I was very surprised; I didn't think anybody would remember that. Let's see what else, we had the games we did, we got to write some letters. And of course we were from all over the United States, so you got to meet a lot of other people, and I found that quite interesting. So looking back, I have very pleasant, mellow memories. But, I remember, at the time, I wasn't...exactly happy, I wanted to get out, I mean, jail is not much fun, but, six weeks, I could tolerate six weeks.

After we got out, we—the three of us George, Frank, and myself—stayed over in New Orleans and that's not the Freedom Ride bus. Do you want me to talk a little bit about that, because that's where most of the things happened.

WELCH: You can talk a little bit about it. Yeah.

DOLAN: Ok. We thought we'd save CORE a little money because we had to come back in about a month for an arraignment in Jackson, so we said well we'll stay over and we'll help New Orleans CORE and so, the one thing I remember was the very generous hospitality. The Castle family took in a lot of Freedom Riders, I remember Mr. and Mrs. Castle took me in and fed me and gave me a place to sleep and we stayed other, other places with Father Hall, who's Episcopal priest, and I forgot who else. And there we sat-in and did some picketing and that's where I, I sustained a beating by the New Orleans police. Frank, George, and I had been invited over to the Smith sisters, Pat and Carline Smith who were two black sisters who were CORE members. And so the three of us whites and two black women, and somehow the police found out about it, and it so offended them—the idea of an integrated chicken dinner—that they came and arrested us, they arrested three us white males on vagrancy, which was—fortunately we had CORE

lawyers and they threatened lawsuits and got us out—but that took a couple days, in the meantime, they just womped on us, but you don't have any visual here, a picture was taken of us when we got out. And actually my wife has it, it's on the web, and it shows me with a very large abrasion on the side of my face, and George has four stitches in head, and Frank had all these abrasions and that picture made the front page of the Black Press. So I was actually recognizable because—the big abrasion on my face was recognizable in the black community—and that was my warmest memories, because the black community knew who we were. And I, I remember going in to get my, my laundry and there was this young black woman behind the counter. First of all, probably not too many white guys would go in and get their laundry, but she looks at me, and then she kinda smiles and looks at me again and says, “Oh, I know you,” and ‘cause she recognized me from the picture and we got free laundry. And that was very heart-warming, I'll never forget that. The people in New Orleans were very generous to us, and I've, I've always been very thankful for that. Anything else? That's the picture there, see yes.

MRS. DOLAN: How do you feel returning 40 years later and 50 years later?

DOLAN: Well, we came back 40 years later for the 40 year reunion, which it wasn't nearly as big as this. The guys who—you know, Eric and Hank and the people who put this on—have done a great job. But I told my kids when I got back after the 40 year reunion that I'd been to Jackson twice. I said, in 1961 I went there by train and when I got off the train, I was immediately arrested and spent the next six weeks in jail, I said the second time I went down I flew in, went to a nice hotel, where the Mayor, who was black, greeted us and thanked us for all the nice things we'd done for his fair city, the chief of police gave us a tour of the jail and thanked us for all the nice things we had done for the city; the people who were driving us around, when they found out who we were, wanted our autograph. So I told my kids that definitely was not a déjà vu phenomenon...Ok?

WELCH: Uh huh.

END OF RECORDING

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