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Interviewee: Shelton Stromquist

Interviewer: John Dittmer

Title: An interview with Shelton Stromquist, October 15, 1980
/ interviewed by John Dittmer

Scope Note:

Items in this collection were selected to be digitally remastered through the National Endowment for the Humanities Civil Rights Era Recordings Grant in 2004.

John Dittmer interview of Shelton Stromquist, in October, 1980, Madison, Wisconsin.

The interview began with Stromquist briefly describing his dropping out of Yale in May, 1963 to travel to India for the summer with the Experiment in International Living and spending the following academic year, 1963-64, in Germany-- working and studying in Heidelberg and Berlin. Stromquist returned to the United States in May, 1964, went to Mississippi in June, and reentered Yale in the fall.

STROMQUIST:

I traveled around for that year and found myself, well, I was, of course, very aware of the Birmingham Public Accommodations and the King efforts in the spring before I left, but I guess it was the Birmingham bombings in September which, I had just arrived in Europe and was, it just grabbed my conscience. For the rest of that year I found myself increasingly attentive to what was going on in the United States. I was a frequenter of the American House in Germany, so that I could read the New York Times and find out what was happening. I became aware of the attempts to begin to plan for Freedom Summer. I came back in May of 1964, having worked my way back on a Norwegian freighter that left me in Baton Rouge, Louisiana of all places. By that time I had pretty much decided that, if possible, that I was going to come to Mississippi that summer, but I had the interesting experience of then hitchhiking through Mississippi anonymously on my way North and getting a little ^{taste} ~~case~~ of what was in store. It was a pretty sobering experience. The whites who picked me up, in pickup trucks with guns very prominently displayed, were very aware of what was coming

and talked very openly about it. I was circumspect in my discussion of what I knew about it. We went through Greenwood, and the guy who was in the pickup truck who was driving me at that time pointed out the high point^s in terms of what Civil Rights stuff was going on, and a lot of hatred in his voice. I was left in a gas station overnight and spent time sitting around talking to the "good old boys" about what was going on.

DITTMER:

Would they talk about violence, killings?

STROMQUIST:

There were a lot of sort of veiled threats. There was nothing specific. You know, "We're going to get those people when they come down. We're not going to let them do that to us," that kind of thing. I got out of there on a semi, and with some relief got up North, and settled briefly back with my family near Chicago. Then I forget exactly how I made the contact, but there was a SNCC field representative in the Chicago area who was interviewing people, ^{prospective} ~~perspective~~ volunteers for the summer project. So, I went to one of those meetings, and was interviewed, and was accepted to go on that first Voter

Registration FDP wave, as opposed to Freedom Schools. I created a good deal of tension between my family, not only because I had been away for a whole year and then suddenly I was gone again, but more specifically because of their views on what all of this could mean.

DITTMER: But no opposition?

STROMQUIST: Yes, my father was opposed, but he was either not in the position or not willing to try to put himself in a position to actually prevent me from doing it.

DITTMER: By opposition, I mean ideological opposition.

STROMQUIST: No, my mother was a liberal, in fact, Park Forest, which was the community I grew up in, was a very white suburb and there were some attempts of black families to buy homes, and there were some pretty nasty things that went on in that community too, some crosses burned on lawns and so forth. I can remember very vividly that my mother was coming home in a car - this was when I was in high school - and a news report on the radio, a local

report, that one of our neighbors was organizing a group to try to purchase the homes of people who had indicated they were interested in selling to blacks. I can just remember that sort of vivid control, but still deep anger that she felt, when she stormed in the house and got on the phone with the guy, and then went down to talk to him. So, she was a Unitarian and I had grown up in a very liberal community within that suburb. So, from her side this was not a problem. My father was not particularly political. He was a decent, humane person, except his instincts were conservative, and it was more a kind of personal fear that motivated his opposition.

DITTMER:

You went to Oxford the first week there?

STROMQUIST:

Right. The family drove me down. It was like going off to college in some ways, but there was another edge to it. I was recently back in the country and I think that contributed to some of my sense of disorientation at first. I found that even the people from Yale who had come were people whom I didn't really directly know. They

were a handful, and they were people who had gotten active during that year that I had been away. So, I didn't really have any personal ties to people there, nor did I really know any of the SNCC people; by name and reputation, certainly, but not in a personal ^{manner} ~~matter~~. So, I felt a little disoriented and it took me awhile to kind of get my bearings, you know. I remember the group sessions - the very moving speeches by Bob Moses, of course, and Jim Travis and Jim Forman - stressing that this was not going to be a picnic and the role playing. I didn't, having not been to Mississippi before and not having ^{a lot} ~~all~~ of the specific knowledge about the Movement there, I didn't really know where I wanted to go. As I recall, it was a kind of an informal process by which people got assigned to particular locations. Some people had personal contacts and knew people, or wanted to go to a certain area, and they pursue that kind of aggressively. The project director for each area kind of interviewed people and made some selection. As I recall, there was a preliminary selection and then there was a final selection, but it was very much a two way

kind of thing. There were clearly certain areas of the state that were going to be very tough. In fact, a couple of areas where no whites were going to go at all. As I recall, Liberty, McComb, and Natchez, southwest. I think it was sort of by default really that I got connected to the Vicksburg project, and I remember meeting Andy Barnes, the project director, and talking with him briefly, but it wasn't a sort of decisive choice. It was pretty clear that Vicksburg was a different kind of place than a lot of other communities. The expectations were going to be different. The people weren't expecting the same kind of resistance and violence and all, not that there had been a lot of preparation, but just given the kind of community that it was, a sort of aspiring river town and [it] had an interest in maintaining its good name in Northern circles as ^{well} ~~one~~. To some extent that proved to be true.

DITTMER:

I wonder if I could interrupt right here for a second. Before we leave Oxford, one of the things that I've been reading a lot about, either in the letters or in other kinds of

sources, is that a number of the whites really felt that blacks were working out on them that first week, that accusations of racism, the whole thing with Travis' emotional speech. I believe it was the first week, wasn't it, where the film was shown of Theron Lind, the registrar, or was that the second?

STROMQUIST: I think it was the second. I don't recall it.

DITTMER: But it was, I know, the first week where a lot of people were saying they really felt, for the first time, that the black people they were working with may not want them or may not like them. Did you get any sense of that?

STROMQUIST: I don't have any real clear memories of that. Again, it may have been a function of my being somewhat more on the periphery, kind of trying to get myself oriented, you know, coming into it with certain blinders of my own of not wanting to, you know, perhaps not wanting to deal with certain issues. My impression, however, is that the atmosphere

between the first and second training sessions changed pretty dramatically, and largely because of Schwerner, Chaney, and Goodman disappearing. I felt that I was made very aware that I was a white, that I was coming from a different background, and that I needed to understand what my role in this thing was and I better not try to pretend that it was anything more. I think there was a need to define what the role of these white kids was going to be, and for them not to have any illusions or pretensions about grander things. But basically the feeling I had in that first training session was of a group of seasoned SNCC veterans, with surprising openness in some ways, welcoming some pretty innocent, naive, but well intentioned white kids into their world; and trying to build enough bridges so that the two could work together. I mean there were practical and pragmatic reasons for doing that too. SNCC workers didn't want to get themselves in hot water because of a lot of stupid things that white volunteers did. They also recognized very pragmatically, and I think were pretty open about that, that they needed the white volunteers, not because

they couldn't do the job and so forth, but because Mississippi was a closed world and they needed the light of day to shine on what was going on there, and one way to do it was to get some white bodies in there with them; whose mothers and fathers in the communities were concerned about their welfare. That was pretty open, but my recollection anyway is that didn't bother them. Certainly, in some of the accounts of the second session that I've read things changed quite a bit.

DITTMER:

It's interesting, I don't know and I'm not really asking you, but perhaps the difference, I wonder if there was a difference in those who wanted to do the organizing, I mean the voter registration work and those who were teaching in Freedom Schools.

STROMQUIST:

I don't know. It would be an interesting question to see how people sorted themselves out in making those choices and whether there was some clear differences in the ~~the~~ groups. I think there was a problem as I look back on it. I think that the Voter Registration and organizing the FDP was a very concrete kind

of task that people could sink their teeth into. It was clear what you needed to do; from day to day it was clear what you needed to do. In a month and a half there had to be a statewide political organization built and it had to be built from precincts ^{to} and ^{to} counties, then the state. That meant a lot of canvassing. It meant in some places a parallel voter registration drive, in other places less emphasis on voter registration and just more emphasis on political organization. In contrast to that, I think people who were running Freedom Schools and trying to organize community centers were in a much more amorphous kind of situation. It was much less clear what they should be doing from day to day. They had to go out and recruit students, and the whole business of white kids teaching black kids about their own culture was a much stickier kind of problem. Particularly in the context of everything that the disappearance of Schwerner, Chaney, Goodman stirred up. I think that that second group of people were left in a kind of quagmire. At least that was my view in Vicksburg for a period of time. They tried with varying success to

sort that out. So, that what I'm saying, I guess, is I'm not sure how much a difference [there] is between the groups of people and how much is...

DITTMER: That's an interesting point. I haven't thought of it that way before. Well, tell me a little about your work in Vicksburg.

STROMQUIST: We left Oxford Saturday. Let's see, as I recall, there was a group of people who left early Friday evening. Among them were Schwerner, Chaney, and Goodman in cars. There were also buses that left then Saturday morning, and some of the rest of us left at the same time in cars. We drove straight through arriving early Sunday morning and then falling asleep. We avoided Mississippi as much as we could. We went through Memphis, and then down through Arkansas and Louisiana and then just crossed over into Vicksburg. You know, at that time, paranoia was rampant and with some good reason and we decided that... We didn't know whether we were going to be met by the state police right at the border and turned away or what. So, we decided to increase our chances of

getting in by going down through Louisiana and crossing the bridge - had no problem. We went to the Freedom House, which was an old kind of rambling structure on a hill on a large lot that was surrounded by woods. Well, you know, it was a wooded lot, on ^{the} ~~a~~ sort of periphery, as I recall, between the white and black community, in the black community but close to the white community, not too far from downtown. We fell asleep and we woke up to the news that three Civil Rights workers had disappeared. I had gotten to know Andy Goodman some in orientation, not well, but suddenly things became very sober and very serious. We sat around watching television, basically, for a couple of days trying to let what was happening sink in. Our project director was in and out, and as I recall, we sort of made some tentative steps into the community that first week. We got to know a few of the leaders in the black community, a doctor particularly, a barber; and these were sort of the active black middle class in the community with whom we fully expected to work closely to build this political structure. It gets harder now to ~~sort of~~ give a running chronological

narrative of what happened because I got very deeply involved in organizing the FDP and in some way^s this separated me from the rest of the project. The numbers of us who came in that first group were very small. There were five or six. Our project director was in and out of town, ~~and~~ did not provide a great deal of guidance and leadership. The other volunteers that came, the second wave, were really into other things and didn't show that much interest in doing the Voter Registration work. We held some initial meetings, around the city initially, and then basically Harold Ickes and I, who came to be the two primary people from the white volunteers who were involved in FDP work, divided responsibilities between the city and the county; and much of the summer, my time during the summer then was spent in the county. What increasingly came to be the absence of a project director, two black college students from the community who had shown an interest in the project from the outset stepped into the FDP work and with Harold and I, we were- sort of the four of us who basically organized the thing.

DITTMER: Do you remember the students' names?

STROMQUIST: Yes, Willy Johnson and Johnny Ferguson. They had not been involved in SNCC before. They were home from college, a black college in Mississippi, not Tougaloo, one of the state colleges, but very early on were drawn to the summer work, and got involved in Voter Registration and FDP organizing. My recollection is that Johnny and Harold, again, worked in the city. Harold grew up with politics.

DITTMER: Wasn't he the grandson...

STROMQUIST: No, he's the son of the...

DITTMER: ... of the Secretary of Interior [in Franklin D. Roosevelt's Administration.]

STROMQUIST: And, in fact, he's stayed in politics. He was Kennedy's platform floor manager at the Democratic Convention, and he's deeply involved in New York City politics running campaigns. So, he knew what he was doing. (laughter) You know, it was basically a question of making contacts for him in

various wards, trying to set up meetings in churches in those wards at which some spokesman from that segment of the black community would speak, some city wide spokesman usually Dr. Shirley or Pink Taylor or one of the other black leaders in the community. Then the Civil Rights workers would talk about FDP and voter registration. We did some voter registration training, you know, preparing people to go down to the courthouse. There was still plenty of fear about doing that. Voter registration was not all that high in Vicksburg, but there weren't the same impediments that there were in other communities. In fact, I think that helped us in some way because we could have some success in actually getting people registered to vote. The rural areas of Warren County had not been worked at all, and there was very little connection, as I recall between the city leadership in Vicksburg and the black community. There was a wide range of kinds of black communities. There were certain areas of the county where there was some black land ownership. There were small businessmen who were doing logging operations and that kind of thing. There were other

areas of the county that were very much like the Delta where there were large plantations and people lived on, were tenants on whites' land, and it was very difficult to work in those areas. We operated basically on the same organizing principle, making a few contacts. Generally, it was Willie and I that worked in the county. We'd go out in the car having heard about somebody in a certain area and go visit them in their homes, and ask them the names of some other people, and visit those people. Maybe get together a small meeting of two or three people and try to contact the minister about using a church for a public meeting, and had some success. We had some good meetings. There were some very painful incidents as well.

DITTMER: Church burning, as I recall.

STROMQUIST: There was a community center that was burned, Bovina. The most painful for me was in the northern part of the county, just outside the plantation areas. We had learned about an older couple. He was the deacon of a nearby church whom people thought might be willing

to step forward and take some leadership in that area. So, we went out there and we realized we were being followed. Johnny was with us that time, Johnny Ferguson and Willie Johnson and me. We realized we were being followed. Their house sat at a T, and we made a split second decision about whether to go into their driveway or not. From what appeared to us it looked like we might be able to get in without them seeing that we had actually gone there because there was a hill in the driveway, and then we could drive behind the house, and we'd be out of sight. So, we tried that. We arrived at their home rather abruptly and got into the house rather quickly, hoping that we hadn't been seen. We watched from the house as the truck that had been following us then turned around and came back past the house, and then it appeared that we had been seen. So, we went ahead with our business. We made plans for a meeting. They seemed to be interested and willing to take leadership. Their church was ~~not but~~ just a mile down the road. We left, and I don't recall whether it was that night or the night after, we heard later from a black man who was on his way home from work

that he had passed three truckloads of people down the road from their house who were putting on the Klan garb. They then drove up to the house, pulled the older man and woman out on the lawn and beat them up and burned a cross in their yard. We immediately contacted the F.B.I., and it was one of those situations where nothing was done, and added to the growing list of incidents that we felt had not been adequately followed up on. It was clearly a case where we had gotten these folks in deep trouble, and it was really hard. Toward the end of the organizing period, before we actually had precinct meetings to really get the FDP formally organized and elect delegates to the county convention, we had a series of meetings that Jim Forman came [to] on a Sunday afternoon. One of them was in that church. Another, which was our first meeting inside the plantation area, and we had worked very circumspectly there, partly because of his previous experience with violence, and because we were scared for ourselves too, and it was difficult. We had no idea what to expect and whether people would turn out. The church was on plantation land. The

people that we had contacted and had spoken with about it seemed willing to pass the word, and to see the meeting happen, and to attend themselves, but you just never knew under those circumstances. They were under enormous pressures. So, we had this series of meetings on a Sunday afternoon, and we had an advance group that would arrive at each meeting hall early and get things ready, and then once the meeting was started they would take off to the next meeting, and so we sort of leapfrogged across that part of the county. I was in the advance group, and when we arrived at this church, and we were already running behind schedule by an hour, so that what would have been an hour in advance of the meeting was really time for the meeting. We got there to this church in a plantation area, and there was nobody there, not a soul. You know, it was understandable. We figured what the heck. It saddened us, but we knew why. We weren't there more than about five minutes and suddenly people began appearing, coming across the field, driving up in their cars. By the time Forman got there, there was a full house. That, I guess for me, in many

ways, was the high point of the summer, because it was in an area where we had no reason to believe that things were really going to take off.

DITTMER: Obviously, your work, but were there key local people involved in getting that turnout?

STROMQUIST: Oh, yes. I think Willie Johnson and Johnny Ferguson were the key people in that project. They were local, they were known, not known so much in the county, but they were known to be local or they quickly made it known that they were local.

DITTMER: I was thinking in terms of people outside of the project. I've been trying to think of the names. I met these people for the first time this summer. They are a small black couple, in a small suburb right outside of Vicksburg. Bill Melish stayed with them when he was there. In fact, I was going home...

STROMQUIST: Is it on the fringes of the park?

DITTMER: Yes, yes.

STROMQUIST: I know who you mean.

DITTMER: She was dynamite, you know.

STROMQUIST: Yes.

DITTMER: Really dynamic.

STROMQUIST: Had been a schoolteacher?

DITTMER: I'm not sure. They are both in their sixties now, but Ed was telling me that they were very instrumental. I don't know if this was after the Freedom Summer or not, but we were taking Bill's son out to stay with us for a week. Obviously, they had kept up their ties both ways. For a long time after that.

STROMQUIST: There are a couple of people that occur to me that it might have been...

(TAPE INTERRUPTION)

STROMQUIST: It was more in terms of the work in the city that the local leadership of the community was more decisive. I don't recall clearly

that Dr. Shirley, who was one of the key people and who was very visible when he worked in the city, I can't recall that he attended any of the county meetings. He may have. He stuck his neck out, you know. He was a medical doctor in private practice who had obviously a certain ~~more~~ ^{amount of} ^{more} autonomy than people in other jobs might have had, but there's no question that he stuck his neck out and went a long way in making this effort credible. Things happened later that caused some very serious splits in the community, and you know, people like him came to be criticized.

DITTMER:

What was the nature of that criticism?

STROMQUIST:

I don't really recall the criticism surfacing that much during the first summer. I certainly didn't sense any reservation on his part or on the part of other leaders in the black community in supporting the Freedom Democratic Party. They were visible. They organized the county convention. They were the spokespeople. They attended the state convention. Sometime during the following year, in my view anyway, this split

developed. I wasn't on the scene, it's difficult for me to say with any certainty how it developed. I'm sure that they had some reservations.

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STROMQUIST: ...developed, and I wasn't on the scene. It's difficult for me to say with any certainty how it developed. I'm sure that they had some reservations from the beginning about the style as well as, perhaps, the content that developed of the work that was being done. I'm sure there was some pragmatism on their part, in terms of maintaining their leadership in the community, not being bypassed by what initially appeared to be, you know, a potentially very important organizing effort in that community.

DITTMER: [Paul Cowan] says that when you people went in there one of your first intentions was to overthrow this middle class black leadership. Is he exaggerating?

STROMQUIST: I think he's exaggerating. I think he's

looking at what happened later. Paul's situation was very different. He's very honest about it in the book [The Making of An Unamerican.] He was locked in the Freedom House. He was preoccupied with the problems of people who were hanging around the Freedom House. He saw himself in a very key position as the communications link to Jackson. He was the conduit for the politics of what was going on in the state wide level. Likewise would conduit to the state level of what was going on in Vicksburg. I think he developed a kind of rarefied view of what was happening. We worked very closely with that leadership in the black community during the first summer. It couldn't have been done without them, and there may have been some uncomfortableness on both sides, but it certainly was not that first summer an effort to overthrow their leadership, at least in terms of the FDP organizing. People may have been talking about that in the Freedom House, but that was not what I saw, and I don't think that's what happened. I mean, Dr. Shirley and Eddie Johnson and Pink Taylor, they were the delegation that went to the state convention, and they represented that

community. We felt very proud of what had been done in Vicksburg, in terms of just organizing, the numbers of people that had gotten out to precinct meetings, the strength of the organization. Now, I think Paul's account of the state convention is true in part. I think there was some disappointment felt by both the volunteers, and I think by this leadership, this middle class black leadership that came from Vicksburg, over the lack of openness in the convention, but it was a managed convention. I think we were political, the volunteers were political innocents. I think that the black leadership in the community may have seen it in somewhat more ideological sense, but it was a real sense of disappointment, you know, that Vicksburg was not represented, that in our mind the slate of delegates was selected that had been pretty much hand selected. I think in retrospect there were good reasons for that happening. I think Paul acknowledges that too, but at the time there were some disappointments. That didn't lead me, in a fundamental sense, to question SNCC's politics and what it was doing in this state. I felt a sense of personal disappointment, I

guess, and disappointment for the people that had come from the district. It didn't really go beyond that; but in the succeeding year there developed a very serious division within the community. Those volunteers who stayed - it was complicated, and a lot of it was told to me second hand. ^{Willie} ~~Greer~~ Johnson was made project director after this summer, was named by SNCC to be project director and I was delighted at that choice. He was a tremendous person and he, you know, for someone who had not been involved, really, before the summer began, he had grown tremendously. He was kind of a basically shy and somewhat retiring person, but he was solid. You know, when he spoke, he spoke with conviction and he was honest. He was the right person for that job. The volunteers who stayed during the winter were basically among the people who had been involved in the Freedom Schools and community center work. I don't think any of those of us who were involved in FDP organizing stayed on. The Freedom House was bombed in late September. We had had some forewarnings of that during the summer. In fact, it was kind of an interesting commentary on the relations

with the white community. In other words, all of this attempt initially to have a white community project parallel to the black community project. In fact, we had a guy from Georgia, a white fellow, volunteer, whose job was to work parallel to us. He made his way around the bars.

DITTMER: Oh, really? I wasn't aware that was tried in Vicksburg.

STROMQUIST: Oh, yes, he had minimal contact with us, only a kind of occasional contact. We didn't want to blow his cover. You know how terribly frustrating it was. He tried, and there really wasn't a lot he could do. He and others helped to set up an interesting meeting one night at a Catholic church with white young people in the community who were back home for the summer from college and who had been hearing all of these terrible rumors about summer volunteers; but were distant enough from their own community in some sense to be willing to take certain personal risks and meet with us. So, under the auspices of the local Catholic priest we had a meeting. They were very cautious about how they

arrived, and who might have seen them, and where they parked their car, but it was a very interesting exchange and not without some acrimony, but there was some basis for communication. Now, that was one contact, but the one I was getting around to was that some time later in the summer, in the evening, a couple of young, white, working class kids showed up all of a sudden at the Freedom House, kind of unexpected, and we didn't know them. They were obviously there ^{out of} with a mixture of motivations. They were curious, there was sort of a certain amount of bravado. You know, they are going to actually walk up to this place where these creatures were living; but they also as we talked had some things to tell us - and we weren't sure at the time how seriously to take them - but they had heard talk, and they were willing to tell us the talk that they had heard about plans to bomb the Freedom House. They weren't real specific, and it may very well have been that what they overheard was not real specific, or at least... But in retrospect, particularly after the summer, the place was bombed in September. I attribute some good faith to

that afternoon. I think simplistically they were outcasts in some sense in their own community, and for whatever other reasons they made a contact with us and gave us some information. Late September the place was bombed. It was bombed in a very serious way that only sheer accident prevented somebody from being killed. It was a big bomb. It was placed under the house towards the middle of the house. It just happened that people were sleeping, and there were a lot of people in the house. There was a family at that point, Bessie Brown and her seven kids, were sleeping on the first floor towards the front of the house; and the volunteers who were still there were sleeping on the second floor. There were several people who were still awake, and it just blew a hole right up through the house and a huge hole in middle of the second floor. One of Bessie's kids was thrown out of the crib and was cut by some flying glass, but that was the only injury. It was just incredible. The bedrooms were sort of on the perimeter of the house and the bomb was right in the middle of the house. There were a lot of books on the first floor. That was the library, the

Freedom Library, and in some ways I think that may have absorbed the impact of the blast to some extent, but it was a very serious thing. Suddenly, the project was homeless. They had to cope with all kinds of things that were going on. They had to find a new place. A distance developed, a growing distance between the summer volunteers who stayed and the black leadership in the community. I don't really know how it happened. I'm not sure, in some measure it was something that had been there all along, but because of, out of pragmatic reasons on both sides, it had been worked around during the summer. I'm sure it was in some sense on ^{the} ~~a~~ part of the black leadership in the community disappointment over their experience with the Freedom Democratic Party state convention. It may very well have been a recognition on their part that this thing wasn't going anywhere, not anywhere in that sense, but it wasn't going to pose any serious threats to their leadership in the community, and that they were free, in a way, to cut themselves loose from it and to work on another basis. It probably was in some measure ideological. I think it was caught

up in a lot of personal stuff that was going on too.

DITTMER:

Aaron Shirley was there after that too?

STROMQUIST:

Yes, yes. In fact, he really the second summer came to... My recollection again is that he was one of the leading people in the NAACP voter registration drive, but was by that time very separate from what remained of the COFO workers. I kept in touch. We had a group at Yale that was doing support work for SNCC, the Yale Civil Rights Council. I went down to Selma, well, we came down after the bombing to sort of make contact again and this was November. ^{Willie} ~~Greer~~ Johnson appeared very suddenly in New Haven. He had come up for a SNCC meeting in Washington, and then I had been urging him to come up and do some speaking in November. He appeared, as I recall, very suddenly, unexpectedly and spent about a week with me in New Haven. It was clear that he was having real trouble with the whites who had stayed, that they were not following his leadership, and that he was just going through a lot of trouble. You know, it was sobering in a sense for him

after the summer. I'm not sure he was prepared for that, for that kind of work with the white volunteers, and it was difficult.

DITTMER:

As a whole, from what I've seen of records and talking with people, that whole fall was just so chaotic just everywhere, in terms of communications, in terms of resources, and of course, the letdown after Atlantic City, and all this interoffice bickering. That was probably a piece of all that.

STROMQUIST:

Yes, well, I'm sure it was. I think it was particularly difficult because there hadn't been a continuity of leadership from the beginning of the summer through the end. Andy Barnes just had gradually disappeared as project director, and in the absence of his leadership we had had, again from my view in terms of the FDP work, a kind of collaborated^{ive} leadership. It was basically four people. I'm sure that Harold and I played more of a role, made more decisions in retrospect than we should have, but I don't think it was the same thing that Paul described from the perspective of the project office.

DITTMER: There seems to be an awful lot of guilt in his account.

STROMQUIST: Oh, a tremendous amount. You know, if you've read, if you've followed his writings in the Village Voice, he's still working through a lot of that.

DITTMER: He was at the Freedom Summer conference in Jackson last year on a panel, and one of the things that he said was his experience was so shattering over ten years later that for the first time he could have a conversation with a black person without being very nervous. (laughter) Of course, I'm using this incident or this confrontation with "Pappa Doc" in my paper as an example of the kinds of things the blacks were saying were widespread, in terms of whites trying to take over. Now, I sort of dig myself into a hole and try to climb out of it at the end, but I was wondering if in its essentials, is his narrative correct there in terms of the meeting with Bob Moses, wanting to start the paper, wanting to have some sort of independent show from SNCC? Were you involved in that part of it at all?

STROMQUIST:

No, John, I think from my view, the project really had two elements. One was the FDP organizing, but there came to be, in terms of the white volunteers, my recollection is that, in terms of the white volunteers' participation, was basically Harold and I. Other people would come out and canvass when we needed them. Other people were involved, you know, when called upon, but it was not their thing. Being as deeply involved in that as I was, took me out of the office a good bit. It took me out of that world that Paul was describing and that he was sort of the center of. It takes me back to the difference between the first and the second waves. I think that the second; Paul's guilt is accountable in part by the experience of that orientation the second week in the context of the disappearance of Schwerner, Chaney and Goodman, the sort of tensions that that produced between SNCC workers - guilt on both sides. Bob Moses certainly had lots of guilt about whether this whole project was just going to come apart and that they were going to be ^{lots of deaths} ~~lost again~~, but this was just the beginning. I think that group were more

immobile, by being outside of Mississippi when all of that was going on, by talking about it in sessions, were more immobilized by fear than those of us who were there. We could look at the television. We could talk among each other, but then we walked out in the black community, we walked down the street, we got gas at white gas stations. Nobody was beating us over the head, nobody was dragging us to the river and throwing us in. When that second group came, because of the lack of definition of what their job was, because of the lack of leadership in our particular project of anybody saying, "Go do this. This needs to be done. This is how you do this." They were groping around for what to do, and for whatever reasons they didn't get as deeply involved in the political organizing as we were. I think the paper grew out of that frustration of what do we do? Well, here's something we can do. Here's something we know how to do. We know how to write, a lot of us have worked on newspapers; on the face of it, it seems to be something that's needed. You know, "Let's do this." You know, putting a tremendous amount of energy in the newspaper.

DITTMER: It's a terrific looking paper.

STROMQUIST: Yes. It was a product of a lot of people who have done that sort of thing, and with a lot of resources and knowhow to find the resources to do it. I felt very distant from the paper. I think, maybe, and there are a lot of dimensions to it, I can remember feeling shut out of the paper, just being sort of personal things, and if I felt shut out, I think there must have been a lot of people who did. It really took off, and it became in the background, I think it was... What was the paper in Alabama that was selling?

DITTMER: The Southern Courier?

STROMQUIST: Maybe I'm confusing the first and the second summer, but my impression is that the people who were doing the Vicksburg Citizens' Appeal very much had the Southern Courier in their mind, and they sort of saw the Citizens' Appeal becoming the Southern Courier of Mississippi or whatever. I mean I think there were a lot of very grand ambitions that got

^{Hochschild}
poured into that. Adam ~~Hokehutz~~, you know,
was involved. People whose commitment to
journalism and to writing were pretty deep
anyway. When the meeting with Bob Moses took
place, I don't have the kind of clear memory
of it that Paul does. I'm not even sure that
I was there for all of it. I certainly
didn't feel the same kind of letdown that
Paul did as a result of this. In some ways,
the person that I recall much more clearly
attempting to mediate this thing that was
going on with Andy Barnes, is Jesse Harris.
Jesse was an incredible person. I haven't
kept track of him and where he...

DITTMER: He's still in Mississippi.

STROMQUIST: Is he?

DITTMER: Wait, I'm thinking of Jesse Morris.

STROMQUIST: You've heard of Jesse Harris?

DITTMER: I have not met him. I have read and I'm
reading quite a bit about him.

STROMQUIST: Incredible guy. He had some of the qualities

that Bob Moses did, in terms of his strength in speech, but tough and good sense and able to work with people. He knew Andy Barnes. As I recall, he was project director in Natchez until that project, basically, was closed down. So, he was up to Vicksburg periodically and kind of knew the situation. I don't remember anything specifically, but I remember, what I look back on as kind of a mediating role of trying to get this thing to work, and trying to inject, episodically, some leadership that the project needed. I felt a great deal of support from Jessie for the work that we were doing with the FDP. He came to some of the meetings. He spoke with us. He seemed genuinely pleased at the fairness of the organization. So, the personal contact had a lot of support and gratification from him. Somehow, I think, the meeting with Bob Moses must have revolved around as part of the account of it implied, that the other sort of initiative was going on - the Citizens' Appeal and the Freedom School stuff and not so much the FDP. I certainly didn't come away with the same kind of sense of disappointment.

DITTMER: How was Moses' answer to what Paul said?
Paul said that he was angry at the time. I'm not so much interested in specifics of that meeting, but your impressions.

We didn't see Bob Moses a whole lot. I think to some extent, I think Paul communicated this too, ^{we} ~~he~~ had a sense of not being at the center of things, you know, and I think that some people felt some guilt about that.

DITTMER: Relatively safe, but...

Yes, and you know... You people aren't going through the same kinds of things that we're going through. It was that sort of a macho thing. I think that there probably was some concern on the part of - and I think, Paul's recollection of that is correct - some concern on the part of SNCC workers that the FDP organization in Vicksburg was middle class. There was some fear of that element dominating the statewide organization. So we didn't get a lot of attention, and I think that contributed to the sort of rudderless kind of course that the project... Again, outside of what I perceived to have been a

successful FDP organizing effort going -
 aside from Jesse Harris - I don't recall us
 seeing anybody follow us regularly. People
 came through, but there was not the kind of
 direct connection to Jackson.

D: Hmer:

Was Andy Barnes driven off, or how do you
 account for his long absences from the
 project?

I don't know what happened. I don't know
 what was happening with Andy. I think Paul's
 account overstates the extent to which it was
 a conflict with the volunteers. I think they
 were just pulling him off ^{too,} for some personal
 things. I think the more he was gone the
 more difficult it was for him to be there
 because things didn't stop. All of this pent
 up energy and guilt and whatever else had to
 have an outlet, had to ^{do} something; and
 decisions were being made in his absence.
 Then he came back into a situation where he
 felt that, "Well, look I'm project director,
 I ought to have been consulted about this,"
 and ~~Ren Pearce~~ ^{the volunteers} said, "Well, look, you know,
 you weren't here. What are we suppose to
 do?" So, then that gradually built on

itself. At the time, I recall being convinced that there were things pulling him away. I have no idea what they were.

DITTMER: He was about your age at the time?

STROMQUIST: I guess he was.

DITTMER: Had he gone to school?

STROMQUIST: He had been in college in one of the state black colleges. He had dropped out and had worked, my impression is, kind of on the periphery of SNCC during that previous winter. I think he had demonstrated some qualities that SNCC people appreciated, a lot of courage, but I think that Vicksburg was also not a place where they would want to put somebody that was real important to them as a key organizer. Andy was available. He was from, you know, "down the river." What's the town...

DITTMER: Port Gibson?

STROMQUIST: Yes, from Port Gibson, which was a tough place at that time. I mean, you know, Port

Gibson was worse than Natchez or the southwest as far as we were concerned. You just didn't go beyond the Warren County line. Anybody who comes out of Port Gibson has to have lived through hell and have a lot of courage, but I think it's true, that given Vicksburg's low priority, in terms of the state wide picture, that Andy Barnes is not one of the better and more together leaders that SNCC had to put in as project director. They had a lot of offices to fill. I'm not tearing him down, I just think that he, for whatever combination of personal reasons, he wasn't prepared initially to assume really decisive leadership. He didn't have the quality, and then it became only more difficult as the summer progressed. The whole "Pappa Doc" business and the whole sort of preoccupation with that sort of rudderless direction of the project was very much centered in the office, and around Paul, and in my view, among the Freedom School and Community Center ^{people.} I can remember countless meetings that we came to, and eventually I think what we developed was a kind of project structure that had representatives of the leaders of each of the project components

that would get together and try to make decisions. I'm not sure we, even with basically white volunteers and Johnny Ferguson and Willie Johnson, did much better in terms of developing any project wide direction and ~~being~~ ^{being} coherent. I think Harold and I didn't have a lot of patience for that, and we sort of drifted more exclusively into strictly FDP. The pressures were building, and it was a short time to organize a county wide political structure, and it was easy enough to focus your energies just on that.

DITTMER:

I sounds as though you're saying that you were just really wanting to disassociate yourself from that.

STROMQUIST:

Increasingly so, increasingly so. Paul was in a position where he couldn't. His job was to be in that... ^{office} Somebody had to be in the office. Somebody had to be the sort of communications link within the project and between us and Jackson. For all of the sort of tameness of Vicksburg, there were enough incidents to make people jumpy and scary and to need to be concerned about working.

DITTMER:

When you said that you were from Yale, the first thing that came into my mind is that you were one of Al Lowenstein's people. Did you know Al at Yale? It doesn't seem that you came down through that stream.

STROMQUIST:

No, I didn't know Al until after the summer project. I did get to know Al then, but I was not involved in the fall of 1963 campaign in Mississippi that Al was so instrumental in recruiting people for from Stanford and Yale and Harvard. My contact with Al was after the Democratic Convention and back in New Haven a ^{few} ~~few~~ ^{he} came through. I never felt real comfortable with Al. You know, he was an overpowering kind of personality, and I always felt a little intimidated by him. In fact, I think a lot of people did.

END OF SIDE 2

STROMQUIST:

For whatever other reasons, he didn't push as hard with me as he did with other people about SNCC. The Yale Civil Rights Council, those of us who were active, were clearly committed to supporting SNCC, and to raising funds for SNCC, and to getting SNCC speakers

through. We were not getting drawn into the baiting business. I'm not sure how conscious we were even of all of that, or whether it was just a kind of loyalty to SNCC, having been through the fire of the summer and not prepared to cut loose from those ties, but for whatever reasons, I didn't feel a great deal of pressure from Al until the spring when he began recruiting for the Encampment for Citizenship. I believe that was what it was called.

DITTMER:

Yes, I'm familiar with that.

STROMQUIST:

Okay. Well, this is an interesting episode, and I think a very important one. The Encampment for Citizenship, I think it was originally called the Encampment for Youth, was a kind of world youth conference that was designed to be a counter conference to the Soviet bloc dominated World Youth Conference that occurred - I don't think it occurred every year, maybe every other year, every five years or something - anyway, there was one coming up. Al got involved through ADA, or whoever, in being the director of this project. So, he made the rounds recruiting

people to come to what was then called the Encampment for Citizenship. At one time it was going to occur in Finland, and then they decided to hold it in the United States in Long Island, as I recall. But, he very much went to people who had been involved in the Civil Rights Movement, who had been in Mississippi. It became clear^{er and clearer} that he was trying to, to me anyway, that he was trying to recruit people away from continuing in the involvement, going back to Mississippi with SNCC and into the Encampment for Citizenship. You know, he had a kind of low keyed anti-Communist ^{aura} ~~forum~~. I don't recall him railing against SNCC in those terms, but there was certainly a lot of pressure to look at other alternatives and to not to continue to be involved with SNCC. There were a lot of people who were on the fence, who were very drawn to Al in personal terms, and who perhaps had some personal doubts about SNCC themselves. I think it was Al's magnetism as much as anything and his ability to sort of get people to believe in what he was talking about that did it more than any negative. I decided that I wasn't going to go to the Encampment for Citizenship - though he put a

great deal of pressure on me to go - and that I was going to go back South. A couple of other people at Yale decided they would go to the Encampment for Citizenship, but then would go South. Al eventually got around to proposing that people who wanted to go to Mississippi, go to the Encampment first, which was going to last about a month, and then go work for NAACP in the Voter Registration drives in Mississippi. So, it became clearer and clearer that this was really a kind of alternative social activism that he was proposing and that it was steering people out of SNCC.

DITTMER: Well, where were the funds for the Encampment coming from?

STROMQUIST: I don't know. I don't know. My recollection is that ADA was involved and that Joe Rauh was prominent in it, but I really don't know.

DITTMER: Now, would you have been paying your own expenses for this? Would there have been scholarships?

STROMQUIST: No. I think there were scholarships. I

don't recall if that was a factor in deciding whether to do it or not. I don't recall if it was going to cost anything.

DITTMER: But you know it's in the back of my mind, all these CIA accusations...

STROMQUIST: Oh, yes. I think it's quite possible...

DITTMER: ...but I've never seen anything hard. You know, there have always been speculations, "Well, he had all this money to fly around on airplanes." Well, it could have been Nelson Rockefeller.

STROMQUIST: Yes. I have no idea who was subsidizing it. He made the program sound very appealing. You know, it was really going to be issue oriented. They were going to have lots of high powered people coming in and he dropped all these high political contacts, as far as people coming to speak, and he included an occasional SNCC person who had agreed to come and spend a day. It sounded like it was going to be an Al Lowenstein pressure cooker kind of thing and that had a certain attraction to it. For whatever combination

of reasons, it didn't appeal to me, and I decided to go back to Mississippi and back to Vicksburg.

DITTMER: Now, this Encampment did come off as you ✓ recollection, or do you know that Al was going to the people who had been in Mississippi and trying to...

STROMQUIST: Oh, yes. Bruce ^{Detwiler} ~~Tutwiler~~, who is my closest colleague at Yale in the Yale Civil Rights Council, and who had worked in Holmes County; went to the Encampment, and then he arrived in like mid or late July as I recall. So, it would be interesting to talk to him about what actually happened there. I'm sure at the time I had, you know, people told me, but I don't really recall.

DITTMER: Do you know where he is now?

STROMQUIST: My last contact with him was several years ago, and he was living on a farm in Vermont. I could probably dig up the name and address ^{of} ~~from~~ his mother, who lives on Long Island.

DITTMER: Well, you know, without much trouble if you

can do that I would appreciate it because I'm not that far from Vermont.

STROMQUIST: Yes. It's interesting to me, you know, I haven't kept track of how much of that side of what Al Lowenstein was doing has come up, but I think it's an important part of the story.

DITTMER: This is the first I've ever ran across it and none of these articles that have come out recently about SNCC have ^{al}cluded to it. So, I think what it is...

STROMQUIST: And to the extent that he was still linked to what was going on in the South, it was clearly with the NAACP and their parallel of the voter registration drive.

DITTMER: You said you first met him in the fall of 1964 when what, friends of SNCC and Yale that you...

STROMQUIST: Yes, like a friend of SNCC group, right.

DITTMER: ...and he was speaking to you as a group then or as individuals?

STROMQUIST: No, mainly as individuals. My clearest memory of him is him showing up like at ten o'clock at night and dragging people off to a local restaurant; you know, a handful of people, and sitting there for hours on end just shooting the bull.

DITTMER: He was the same way up until the very end. I didn't meet him until a year before his death. He came to Millsaps and Tougaloo for a week under a Woodrow Wilson internship, and it was just that way, calling up people at two or two thirty in the morning, you know, "Come on over for coffee." Just absolutely...

STROMQUIST: It was always a mystery what if any personal life he had was like, not that he didn't talk about it. I mean his personal life was in turmoil, and then he was in some cases quite open about that, but that was the clearest memory I have for how he operated with the veterans who were at Yale ^f on the summer project work.

DITTMER: But he did, then in the fall, individually

would tell you of his misgivings about SNCC.

STROMQUIST: Yes, I think so. I think so. Again, what I've heard later sort of blurs with what I experienced. I don't recall him giving me the real hard sell. I think if it was done, and I'm sure it was, it was done more subtly than that. I think he was disturbed about the convention and he certainly communicated that to us.

DITTMER: Did you go to the convention?

STROMQUIST: No. No. I was back home.

DITTMER: What was your reaction to it?

STROMQUIST: I was outraged at the way the FDP had been treated, and I supported the rejection of the ~~company~~ ^{compromise}. I was moved by Fannie Lou's testimony and all that, but I don't recall being tugged in the direction of going around, "No, this is pretty reasonable. This is a step." I think I was prepared to support that view that, you know, we haven't worked this hard to begin to -token seats and things like that.

DITTMER: What was the mood you sensed in Mississippi building up to this? I mean did people in charge really think, really think that FDP had a chance?

STROMQUIST: Yes, I think so.

DITTMER: There's a lot of retrospect. You know, Forman writes, "Well, we knew all along that this wasn't going to work."

STROMQUIST: Well, no. I have to be careful to try to sort out my political innocence and, you know, the sort of limited world that I was seeing, but I certainly felt a sense of hope, and if there was the view that this was all just a kind of an exercise, it certainly wasn't in the air. I didn't feel it at the state convention. I didn't feel it in things building up to the state convention. I mean, I think there was a sense of, "Look what's been done. Look what's been done in a month and a half to mobilize people all across the state into a political organization." You know, they can't turn their back on this. This is just too impressive of a phenomenon

not to be taken seriously. That was my feeling, and again, we were very impressed with what we had done in Warren County, and came to the state convention believing that this was just going to build on our efforts and the efforts of people around the state. As I said, I felt some disappointment at the way the ^[state] convention was managed, but I don't recall that sense of disappointment lasting all that long. It certainly didn't intrude in my support for the FDP or SNCC and whatever fund raising and support we could do in the North.

DITTMER: Then, you did come back in 1965?

STROMQUIST: Yes, I came back in 1965. I didn't go through the orientation again, which I guess technically people were supposed to do, and it was just outside of Jackson, people were arrested. There was a whole lot of confusion at the beginning of the second summer too.

DITTMER: Oh, this was at Edwards.

STROMQUIST: Yes, it was from highway 4 toward Vicksburg. What is there? I'm trying to remember. It

was some kind of a institution. Was it a college?

DITTMER: Well, it used to be Southern Christian College before it merged with Tougaloo. So, that campus was then abandoned eventually. I think they sold it. So, it was used for awhile for Civil Rights kinds of retreats and activities.

Stromquist: Well, I didn't go to that orientation, and as it was, the whole summer project was delayed because the whole new class got put in jail.

DITTMER: In Jackson?

STROMQUIST: Yes, there was a demonstration in Jackson, right...

DITTMER: That was over Paul Johnson, calling the Legislature back to repeal a lot of the voting rights, the voting laws. I think he realized that the Voting Rights Act was going to come in and they were going to have all these laws on the books for whites.

(laughter)

STROMQUIST:

Right. Right. Right. Yes, but in any case, we found the few who had stayed on through the winter and were still there in the summer, and I'm sure that Willie and Johnny were still in the community, though they had been burned pretty badly- Willie more than Johnny - Johnny was not in as exposed a position, in terms of his relations with the white volunteers. His personality was different too, and Johnny worked more that second summer with the project than Willie did. Willie really kind of kept to himself and would do things occasionally. I always felt that I had a good relationship with him, but he didn't want to put himself in a position to get burned again. So, for awhile anyway, we were kind of working in a vacuum because we were expecting all these other volunteers to come in and there was a delay of a week or two, at least. The NAACP project was already up and moving. The split in the community appeared by that time to be pretty irreparable. My own political development - I had changed. I was seeing things more in class terms than I had the summer before. I was somewhat more critical of Dr. Shirley,

and I think I saw somewhat more clearly what the leadership of the black community was and what their interests were. It was not a sort of rigid class analysis, but it was a sense that there is a whole segment of this community that is still unrepresented; and that if we have anything to do here, you know, it's really that segment of the community that we've got to somehow get moving and get involved. It's still continuing under the offices of the FDP basically, but without the clear direction of preparing for a convention. A handful of us, again, hit the streets and started organizing, and this time it was much more in terms of community issues. It was more community organizing. It was the Alinsky kind of style of what are the things that really matter to people the most, in terms of their lives? What's making a real difference in their lives? The lack of a stop sign, the poor garbage pickup, you know, services that they should be getting and they're not getting from this city. It was those kinds of issues that we tried to begin to focus meetings on with some limited success. I guess the high point was over garbage pickup

in one bottom part of the community where usually using the same organizing model of church meeting and, you know, contacting key people in that community, but this time, I think, at least in that community, there were poor people. There were people who certainly hadn't been leaders, but maybe even hadn't participated in the FDP work the summer before. We had some pretty good turnouts. Eventually, in that community it led to a delegation being appointed by this sort of ad hoc meeting to go and meet with the mayor, and try to confront him over this issue over garbage collection, and they even sat in his office briefly. We were much more conscious that summer of what our role was and how visible we were. The summer before, either out of a need to prove ourselves or whatever, just being unselfconscious about the whole thing, we didn't hesitate to sort of walk in the registrar's office ^{with} ~~to~~ somebody and sort of be very visible. The second summer we were sort of holding back more. We were being influenced by this SDS style of community organizing that was done in New Jersey. You know, that the liberals are there to just kind of get things in motion

and step back and let other people take over. So, we didn't accompany the group that went to meet with the mayor, but you know we couldn't wait for them to get back to hear about what had happened. Things were sort of, in some ways, there was not the same kind of high pitched tension, and in some ways the second summer was more enjoyable. It was more relaxed. We felt some good things were happening, but the staff that was there, and it was a very small staff, as I recall, even when people came after the orientation and being in jail and all of that, the numbers were relatively fewer. It was easier to kind of integrate them. We had one woman who was a real problem, who was on a tremendous guilt trip, and went flying off doing crazy things. We got the Freedom School going again, and the Freedom School was, again, I think somewhat more successful that summer, but she mobilized a group of kids to go down on the spur of the moment and try to integrate the swimming pool. It was without any preparation. It was without letting anybody in the community know this was coming. She just took off with these kids. There was something that got fouled up and

the action didn't come off as I recall, but when she got back, you know, she was just so verbally torn^{limb from limb} for doing this kind of crazy thing. I mean she was a constant problem during the summer. Well, Harold was over in Louisiana. He had gone with CORE that summer, and actually suffered a very serious beating that he still has physical ^e affects of. We went over to see him a couple of times, Willie, I think, and Johnny and I.

DITTMER: Was he over in Tallulah?

STROMQUIST: He wasn't all that far from Vicksburg. I don't remember the town. It was kind of a smallish town.

DITTMER: Yes. That's sort of right across. That's Madison Parish, I think.

STROMQUIST: Yes, it could well have been. It was not far, but we didn't have a whole lot of contact with him during the summer. I don't recall what his reasons for not coming back to Mississippi were. I think he may have felt that he wanted to see more action. We had a few tense moments during the summer,

but it was typical of the way the community was changing. The bombing had scared the daylights, not only out of the black community, but out of the white community too, and the people who wanted to see that community grow and develop were concerned about it's image.

DITTMER:

And you're talking about Chamber of Commerce?

STROMQUIST:

Yes, that kind of stuff, yes, yes. There were a few northern businesses that were there, and in fact, after the bombing there was some evidence that they had made their concern known to the political leaders in the community. Sometime during the second summer the FBI and the local police showed up at the door of our Freedom House and said that they'd been tipped off that there was going to be some action that night, and would we mind their staking the place out? We said, "No." So, they got in the bushes all night with their guns ready, and we sat in the Freedom House with our heads very low, not knowing quite what to expect, but thinking that it was probably going to be a car coming through and shooting the place up. It never

happened. If it was a real threat the people who were proposing to do it were probably tipped off that the place was staked out.

Dittmer:

Well, there's certainly a difference between one summer and the next, isn't it?

STROMQUIST:

Yes, yes, but I mean that was the sort of, and you know, we moved much more freely in the community. We, in fact, got to know some of the white families that were working for the, I think, there was a federal project, a federal reseach center near there - Waterways Research Station, and there were a couple of people, white families who worked there who were sympathetic and had people come in.

Dittmer:

What sort of sense did you have of the state FDP effort that year?

STROMQUIST:

That summer - fragmented. As I recall, it was different in each area, and the people were kind of digging in, as we were, and focusing much more on local issues, but it was really, in a sense, two different organizations. At least, that was true of

Vicksburg. The organization of the previous summer that had been focused so much on the convention, had really come apart at the seams. The leadership had gone over, for the most part. Too much can't be made of that because, while Aaron Shirley did and a few other people did, there were other people who still were kind of bridges to the project and to the FDP, who would go to both meetings, you know, who would lend their names to both efforts. There was some more grassroots involvement the second summer, in terms of another strata in the community. It didn't last, as so often happens with that kind of organizing around specific issues. It's difficult to hold it together.

DITTMER:

You didn't have much contact then with Jackson, with Guyot

STROMQUIST:

No, not as I recall, but it was even less than the summer before.

DITTMER

Relations, characterize the relations between FDP and NAACP in Vicksburg, Natchez, that whole area?

STROMQUIST:

Well, I think, Vicksburg, there were two distinct projects. The NAACP had volunteers who were working, and they were going door to door and cranking out the numbers, in terms of getting people down to the courthouse. We were not trying to ^{compete with them} ~~get people~~ on those terms. I think we did some voter registration that summer, but my recollection of what, I was at least, oriented to, and I think that fairly well characterized the project; we were looking more at economic and community issues, and trying to organize on that basis. Oh, I think, there was a lot of sort of fading back and forth, but there were no... There was a lot of talk, and I think Aaron Shirley and other blacks in the community who lent their names to and supported the NAACP project came in for a lot of Freedom House criticism; but they were really two separate things that were going on and I don't recall any serious attempt to bridge the two.

DITTMER:

I'm sorry to get into that now, but I've heard so much about Evers and his role and impact, and I sort of looked forward to trying to peel off a couple of layers.

STROMQUIST: Yes, again, my perspective is one as a very local perspective. I tended to kind of dig in where I was and was busy with what I was involved in day to day.

DITTMER: It was probably the best way...

STROMQUIST: Well, I came out of the whole experience feeling pretty good about what had happened, and certainly not the kind of remorse and whatever that Paul seemed to have. I think I handled whatever guilt I had about being a white person working in a black movement reasonably well. By the third summer, Bruce ^{Detwiler} Tutwiler and I had - we graduated in 1966 from Yale, and that spring, May particularly, we were running a clothing drive. We got an old truck donated and drove this truckload of clothes and books down to Vicksburg, and then basically what I call, abandoned the truck where the Meredith March was at that point. We joined it somewhere in the Delta. We were certainly there for the camping episode, and then stayed with the march to the outskirts of Jackson, and then went home. We experienced firsthand that sort of growing split, you know. I mean it was almost

laughable in the march. You know, there would be chants and counterchants, "Black Power" and "Freedom Now," and whites - particularly whites who were sort of new to all of this, this was the first thing that they were doing, they didn't know what to do. They felt guilty chanting "Black Power," but they just didn't know what to do. It was almost humorous.

DITTMER:

But for two veterans, I mean did you have any chargin or misgivings about what you saw happening or...

STROMQUIST:

Well, not as I recall. See, we were sort of, as I look back on it there was a kind of, brief though our involvement was we were sort of easing out gradually. We were already looking then. Bruce and I, in fact, both went to Africa. We had become concerned about the war. We were both, actually, increasingly concerned about what was happening in southern Africa. We were trying to find a way to make, you know, in our thinking at the time, to make some links between the liberation movements from southern Africa and the Civil Rights Movement

in the states. So, we both ended up going to Tanzania - I working with the American Friends Service Committee, and initially hoping to work in refugee centers in the southern part of the country. Through that I had gotten to know Edwardo ^oMy^endal~~a~~ani, and that didn't work out. It was too complicated for an American white to work in that situation.

DITTMER: How long were you there?

STROMQUIST: Two years.

DITTMER: Did you see Moses there?

STROMQUIST: No.

DITTMER: Or did he come later?

STROMQUIST: But Stokely Carmichael was there. Stokely Carmichael who Edwardo ^oMy^endal~~a~~ani, whom I got to know fairly well on personal terms, and went to supper at his house, and would meet him when I'd come back to town, because I was then...

cut off; [Stokely Carmichael had come to Dar es Salaam and on arriving held a press conference at which he criticized liberation movement leaders who stayed in the safety of Tanzania, away from the front lines.]

END OF SIDE 3

STROMQUIST:

And ^o ~~Myndal~~ ^elani was absolutely furious. He was just livid and just had no patience for somebody coming in that didn't know what they were talking about, in terms of the liberation struggle. But, I began talking about that, because, to say that by the time we got involved in the Meredith March both of us were already looking beyond that. It was clearer and clearer in our support work during the winters at Yale that the role for us was diminishing, and we could look at that with a certain amount of regret, but I think with a certain amount of understanding too. I certainly didn't harbor bitterness for being pushed out of the Movement. It seemed a natural course, and I didn't feel uncomfortable with the ^{sense} ~~defense~~ of black consciousness, and autonomy was taking hold. The Meredith March was in some way a kind of nice exit.

DITTMER:

Yes, it was almost like a film script.

STROMQUIST:

Yes, right. We stopped in Vicksburg, and saw a lot of old friends, and came to terms with

the fact that all that we had done was not making all that much difference in the community in one sense. The things that were changing the community were changing the community because they^{ir} were larger forces than ours.

DITTMER:

I think you were part of a large force.

STROMQUIST:

Yes, but no, Aaron Shirley and Eddie Johnson and Pink Taylor were still there, you know, and they were going to be there and they were going to be the leaders of that community in all likelihood. I think in some ways, I think we made a point of going back to see Aaron Shirley that summer in that brief time we were there, and I think that whatever sense of division we had felt with him the previous summer, I recall an amicable meeting and good-bye. I know the Meredith March itself was spirited, there was a sense of real, inspite of the obvious division, there was a sense of real movement still.

Certainly, the confrontation at Canton and the march through Philadelphia, it was something that everybody had to do in a sense, and it brought it full circle. I mean

that's an outsider talking. It was a full circle experience for me.

DITTMER: It was time to leave.

STROMQUIST: Yes, right, right.

Dittmer: Did you get to the Tougaloo campus...

Stromquist: I believe we did, actually, yes.

Dittmer: ...where they marched and camped?

STROMQUIST: Yes.

DITTMER: I was wondering if you have any recollections of that hospitality there?

STROMQUIST: No, I had forgotten even that that's where we had ended up and now the campus comes back vividly. I think we were there only briefly, maybe overnight. You know, my recollection now is there were workshops getting organized. It was kind of a festive atmosphere almost.

DITTMER: Because I've learned that there was a strong

debate in the administration at Tougaloo College as to whether or not you would be permitted on the campus. That showed how things had changed.

STROMQUIST: Yes, right, right. Yes, I don't really...

DITTMER: Well, that was all behind the scene.

STROMQUIST: Yes, it had already happened, yes..

DITTMER: Well, I'm going to turn this thing off, unless you have...

STROMQUIST: No. I think we've...

DITTMER: That should have been my question earlier. Are there things that I haven't mentioned that stand out in your mind from this experience?

STROMQUIST: No, except that things that I've already
alluded to ^{or} ~~are~~ said in one way or another, and that I felt that inspite of Paul's account of what happened in Vicksburg that there were some important things that happened there, and there was some movement in the community.

The divisions weren't as sharply drawn as he might have perceived. In very personal terms, I left it with a very positive feeling for most of the SNCC people that I had been involved with and as well for the leaders of the black community who at various times had been made the target of people's opposition.

DITTMER: So, it sounds like you had positive feelings about it then and have remained that way.

STROMQUIST: Yes, perhaps become more positive with the years. There's a certain tendency, I think, in that direction. I haven't really talked about the experience all that often and find that my memory for details is fading, but certainly the sense of the feeling that is associated with it still comes through as a very positive one all in all.

DITTMER: You know, that's what I'm trying to talk about.

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