

Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr.  
By Elizabeth Gritter  
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Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr.

EG: This is Elizabeth Gritter

EG: You were showing me this.

EG: [Inaudible.]

RS: Rev. Gladney was the coordinator. This is ward 1, ward 22, house district [Looking at race from 1970s or 1980s.

EG: Rev. Gladney. [Inaudible.] So, he was way back, president of the NAACP

RS: Yeah.

EG: In 1959 campaign, you used Universal Life Insurance

RS: That was volunteer. They let the secretaries stay late and use their equipment. But we had to pay for printing, brochures. Rent for headquarters, rent for telephone banks. We raised that through Martin Luther King, Daisy Bates. We'd take a collection.

EG: And that's how you did the printing?

RS: Telephone banks

EG: And you had that Financing

RS:

EG: A. Maceo Walker – he was president of Universal Life and of the Democratic club. He was president of Democrat club for a couple years.

EG: You were the executive director.

RS: AW Willis was secretary. It rotated.

EG: I was wondering what the telephone committee is (Volunteer ticket sheet)

RS: That's phoning. They would take those precincts. We'd call down the route, try to get somebody to take a route.

EG: For recruiting people? Okay. [Inaudible.]

RS: Yeah. You could do it by passing cards out by speakers or by passing them out at churches or calling them on the phone. You'd have all kinds of approaches to get people signed up for a route wherever they lived.

EG: Okay, so like with the lists of the black barbershops, you knew what precincts they were in, organizational

RS: If we had enough of our materials were printed, we would leave materials at the barbershops too. Like that red brochure – tabloid. Against the sheriff.

EG: You had different committees with the Democratic club. Membership committee. There was, I saw an entertainment committee as well.

RS: That was ad hoc.

EG: I saw they opened with prayer. How much did religiosity play into Democratic club?

RS: It wasn't like preaching, there weren't any sermons. A lot of our folk were serious church goers so they felt better you know – () work.

EG: IN the churches, you would get the ministers to endorse? Sunday

RS: Some of ministers would endorse and encourage their congregations from the pulpit. Some of them would speak and be outspoken in campaign. It depended on minister what role take.

EG: So, people in the churches would get up on Sunday and ask the congregation to vote for certain candidates?

RS: They would ask the chair of the women's or men's group of the church. They'd get up and make a speech about it. They'd introduce the candidates.

EG: Would the candidates speak?

RS: Sometimes the candidates would come. They'd let them be introduced.

EG: Introduce – more effective

EG: You met at Universal Life Insurance Company?

RS: We Met there a long time. Housekeeping getting to be a problem so we moved to Mount Olive CME church on Linden and , where NAACP met.

EG: That's where the NAACP met. The headquarters of the NAACP were in your law office -- rights? A new building was built?

RS: Mutual Federal was open for business the day I came back. AW and Ben Hooks put it together.

EG: That was 588 Vance.

RS:

EG: I saw a lot of things were housed in that office – Tennessee Voters Council

RS: That was all us -- Different hats

EG: What was Volunteer Citizens Association?

RS: Anytime we had a campaign where we were endorsing and some other group was endorsing the same slate, we'd try to have cooperative effort.

EG: Other black political organizations?

RS: Yes.

EG: I wondered too the Dedicated Citizens Association?

RS: Ad hoc

EG: That was Primarily white membership. I've interviewed people who were white who were in the Dedicated Citizens Association and they don't remember anything about it.

RS: At some point it was there. Doesn't remember. Ephemeral, allies of convenience

EG: The Bluff City and Shelby County Civic Clubs?

RS: They were individual organizations and may be some still active. They were boycotting CA. Politics was not the main thrust of what they were doing, rather civic, neighborhood improvement.

EG: Was their headquarters of it?

RS: They meant in their respective neighborhoods, usually in the churches. They might have a meeting at LeMoyne College. Dr. Branch

EG: Vance is by Beale Street?

RS: Vance parallels Beale Street.

EG: [Inaudible.] This document is talking about your relationship/membership with the Executive Committee of Shelby County Democratic Party.

RS: Oh, we're trying to get him [Harry Truman] to speak. We didn't get him.

EG: I saw you write a similar letter to A. Philip Randolph.

RS: We had some black union people come in from time to time. We were notifying.

EG: And then Jesse Turner was elected to the Executive Committee of the Democratic Party and you were too in '62.

RS: Something like that, yeah.

EG: It looks like from there before that it was exclusionary. [Referring to letter.]

RS: Yeah, it opened up. After the 1960 election, everything changed b/c we had come from being pariahs to being the balance of power. Arguing with that idiot about. [Phone rings. Interruption. Recording becomes clearer]

EG: I hate technological things. [Inaudible.] Oh, it looks like it's recording. [Sugarmon has a box.]

RS: Must've thought I was reaching for a small hammer.

EG: [Shows hand-written agenda.]

RS: That was ad hoc meeting. Agenda for a meeting. We tried to have an agenda. Things out of hand if not, rambles all over.

EG: Reorganization in 1958 – this document

RS: Our reorganization was in 1959. There might've been one before that but it wasn't ward and precinct.

EG: You became executive director in 1958?

RS: Well, A. W. 59 was when most of that stuff got restructured, after that campaign. There was a club back in the early fifties but people came from all over city came together in one body and I don't think there were even bylaws.

EG: Some of these documents indicate there were precinct organizations prior to 1959 – loosely precinct structure.

RS: Yes, loosely structured. Really almost no structure.

EG: So, there were a few precinct clubs used in 1959.

RS: Our precinct clubs had membership out of those civic clubs.

EG: Where did you get financing from for the Shelby County Democratic Club?

RS: ON a regular basis, we just--. We had no, ran on ad hoc basis. Some of clubs had it by themselves through fish fries, yes.

EG: Did you get money from the Kennedy campaign?

RS: Yeah. What we got basically was through organized labor that the Kennedy campaign asked to work with us and finance our ward effort and stuff.

EG: How through organized labor?

RS: The CIO --. The Firestone workers, there were two or three locals here. AFL locals didn't work with us. They were mostly not in sympathy.

EG: National office

RS: Until they merged, AFL much more conservative than CIO. The factory production line workers were the ones that were the leaders on desegregation. George Holloway was a shop steward at Firestone here. We had a couple guys who were rebel workers, meatpackers. Those were the ones who worked with us politically here and in Chattanooga too. They had campaign organizers for their locals. Until we came along here, they worked primarily for their locals. When we came along, they worked with us. They had a guy in Washington who () enough money for us to get our literature printed and all that kind of stuff, headquarters rented, phone banks, etc. Yeah, that was Kennedy campaign. Union man came down with the money.

EG: Oh, okay.

RS: The factory production line workers.

EG: Building alliances

RS: Goes on about labor

EG: Okay, so you could share with them campaigns. That was the Kennedy campaign?

RS: It was a union man.

EG: Oh.

RS: The bulk of our people in Memphis at that time were either maids or cooks. Masses of them picked and chopped cotton. We had a few doctors, a few lawyers, and that sort of thing and preachers. But Our folk, if they took a day off of work, that's why we had to pay them.

EG: The membership was largely working class as were black people at the time.

RS: Yeah.

EG: Women were more involved in grassroots level.

RS: Yes.

EG: Men took more of a leadership role.

RS: You could get guys to volunteer to put up signs, to drive, but the detail and I have a feeling -- I'm not sure; I think this is across the South -- that the women were used to doing more handson, like secretary. All the secretaries were women. I don't think the men trusted their writing or what not. Sort of a functional allocation. Women didn't have any limitations. Most of the guys who tured out to be spokesmen were men. But we had some women, some strong women, but I think they mostly expected men to --. That was an interesting part of the culture then.

EG: Who were some of the strong women?

RS: Jennie Betts. Ms. Wheeler -- she and her husband both. She didn't speak a lot but she was to the point when she opened her voice. Willa McWilliams Walker was outspoken. There was another woman you should've met who went down to Mississippi, her husband was a union organizer. He says I should talk to her and doesn't remember her name.

EG: List of precinct clubs.

RS: Yes.

Rev. CF Williams Prince Hall Mason. He was first chair of TN voters Council. I was third degree Mason, as low as you can go. Got masons all over the state. I just joined b/c Benny Hooks thought I should. He's an organizational person. I don't think he ever saw an organization he didn't like except the Klan.

EG: List of black employees, collect that sort of data and press for jobs of blacks in government.

RS: I didn't even know this was something that they could not let us have. Probably trying to get some help getting promotions.

EG: Did he get kicked out?

RS: Regional director for the post office here.

EG: Did you meet a lot with senators?

RS: Yeah. Kefauver, Gore. The one who took Kefauver's place. Bass. Kefauver took me and AW to lunch in the Senate dining room where we had the famous Navy Bean Soup

EG: Volunteer Organization – Volunteer Citizens Association?

RS: Transit authority

EG: Controversial that A. W. Willis was appointed to the transit authority board and then the nomination was rescinded A. Maceo Walker took his place.

RS: He didn't remember this. Wanted it – in house between them. AW was counsel of Universal Life Insurance Company which was I think the third biggest black insurance company in the country.

EG: Work a lot with black business?

RS: There weren't a lot of them to work with. The doctors and lawyers, we had some small shop owners? Most of black businesses well like the ones around Beale there were Barbeque places around there. They stayed out of politics b/c of Crump machine. There was a black pharmacist here. Martin. You got frissed everytime went in there. Went to Chicago. Accused him of dope. With that kind of atmosphere, black businesspeople tried to stay off the radar.

EG: Listing of places where you had precinct clubs?

RS: Grouping by house district. (Here he talks about organization.)

EG: Were there clubs in all black precincts – majority black precincts?

RS: Most of them. There was our club and some other clubs in other ones. OZ Evers had Unity League and they were basically in Binghampton.

They weren't elsewhere.

Centered around Evers and that neighborhood, his church. Some of them were--. Some of them got organized just for elections so they could raise political money for putting up posters. Some were legitimate.

Adhoc?

Yea. I was only countywide. (Talks about something about corruption with money).

Lockard had us so he would have some leverage independent of us. That's in his nature. It's not a one note town, it never has been.

EG: What was Tennessee Federation of League?

RS: Unclear answer. H.A. Gilliam his son hates me to this day. Gilliam was an officer at Universal. Walkers, Olives, Willis owned 85 percent of stock at Universal. I called



his father an "Uncle Tom." One group was trying to get me out of the campaign. I agreed to run, not to-- "I don't want to get damn job." I don't want to

(EG: I was going to interview Art Gilliam but didn't work out.)

RS: City was going to give me a job to get me out of the race, they were going to buy me out of the race. I told Gilliam that I ran for us moving in political power. I said you want to sell out, you sell out. He never forgave me for that.

EG: I saw Ben Hooks railed against the "traitorous Uncle Toms"?

RS: That was people like Gilliam.

EG: Was there also a group of black ministers who endorsed white candidates.

RS: I don't remember any in that election openly, might've been some not openly. Overwhelming, the black preachers were ().

EG: traitorous Uncle Toms.

RS: Sort of steamrolled over those people.

Handwritten precinct instructions.

EG: Were you invited to a lot of political meetings like this (1961 invitation from Ellington)

RS: Yes. I still get them. (Talks about his background, Miss. connection). His father raised by farmer with 900 acres or so.

EG: This too looks like a listing. [four-five page listing of precincts]

RS: Probably right off we got organized. I think first year we started out with about 50 precincts. Got up to 80. We hit a little over one hundred. I would guess around the second Kennedy campaign --

Johnson/Goldwater?

Yes. That was the highwater. Some would come up and go by the wayside but we had a backbone of about 60 strong clubs and rest were varying degrees of continuity.

EG: What was Democratic Voters Council?

RS: It was us under some guise I guess.

EG: How long did Tennessee Voters Council last?

RS: I think it's still in operation, though not as active. Spoke to group.

EG: This looks like an early list too.

RS: Early. In Memphis when Ford got elected, the Ford family sucked the air out of political mood here. Herenton is probably the first one who has run against the Fords or inspite of the Fords. Has sort of loosened it up. This is one of the early -- Avon.

EG: From 1962?

RS: We were statewide.

EG: One of Organize communities with lower levels of political participation, particularly these rural areas

RS: [Nods] Get votes organized statewide. Well the Masonic groups were quite important in some of those rural areas.

EG: Because that was the organization where blacks were. With SCDC you went into Fayette County and Haywood.

RS: Yeah. As a matter of fact there's a guy. "Our Portion of Hell" read, about Fayette and Haywood. Well NAACP went into there? McFerren. (Goes on about how city is a mess. Problems is two legs of money stream for government. We have sales and property.)

EG: Yeah, and targeting the lower teacher-student ratio to lower income areas?

RS: Child support.

(Keeps going on about government now, though mentions disrespect from McCain).

## SIDE TWO

EG: It was that way for a while. But then it changed.

RS: All you can do is trade.

RS You had commission passing run off which they couldn't do. Had to be legislature. At large designed to keep us as a minority from getting anything and run offs guaranteed it.

EG: Going back to an at-large system?

RS: Yes, he'd like it to go back to that instead of parochial district just looking out for district. Those people

EG: Yeah.

RS: Mayor called our school board a disgrace. They are. I don't see how some of the good ones stand it.

EG: Must be frustrating to see the state of elected official are now.

RS: Oh God. Ain't like it used to be.

EG: Decline in public office and quality, I've run across. This looks like an early list too of the Democratic club?

RS: Sawyer owned building we were in. Wife cleaned out the boxes, so what I have is the extent of it. He reads off name on list. George Holloway was our labor leader. Katie Sexton. This has to be early. JF Estes, he died early on in this stuff.

EG: You said some of it was in Wisconsin?

RS: Well, we sent some up there, don't know what they did with it. [He goes through list.]



EG: He was real involved in Fayette County. What do these things mean like D+, 25.

RS: I think it may be dismissed. Loitering.

EG: Are those fines?

RS: That might have been. I think we got all of them dismissed.

EG: Students sitting in front of the bus?

RS: Yeah.

EG: Kept track of where you are, is top number countdown to election.

RS: Days out, yeah. You start election day and you work out. Then you'd have committee functions.

EG: You did that in 1959.

RS: Yeah.

EG: You were involved in '58 as campaign manager for Wilbun?

RS: Yeah, where'd you get that.

EG: Found it in the literature. You decided early in 1959 of politically active to make a coordinated effort for the Volunteer Ticket – as it's described in Eagleton.

RS: Yeah. We had printed a booklet about our precinct leaders, whole thing. David Harsh had one on his desk when we met with him in the grand jury room next summer to back them. He said, "I've looked at this thing. Anybody who can put this kind of organization is going to be hard to stop in this town. We thought that was a compliment. He was an old political pro. He was the legacy of Crump. They were the last surviving members of the old Crump organization."

EG: I saw one page of the bylaws of the Democratic club. No one seems to have it, unfortunately.

RS: Would any remember it?

EG: I was going to ask you if you remember.

RS: I told you how it was set up with precinct clubs who elected countywide offices.

EG: Did you put out brochures like this a lot (ballot for Volunteer Ticket).

RS: Yes. What election was this one.

EG: 1959. There was this Unity Ticket that was formed of white candidates? Jimmy Moore, Loeb, and so forth. Wondered if that would have come out if not for Volunteer Ticket.

RS: That might've been Evers group.

EG: Dedicated Citizens Assn no one remembers

RS: He doesn't remember.

EG: With SCDC and TVC you monitored a lot of national things like legislation, War on Poverty [I show him statement on War on Poverty.]

RS: Yeah.

EG: With TVC local branches would come to Nashville

RS: Nashville was where we met at Fisk. Urban cities were hubs.

EG: You went to the Independence ceremony with Trinidad and Tobago? That must've been cool.

RS: It was cool. Fantastic party. [Goes on about the visit.]

EG: That must've been one of real highlights.

[Interruption, lunch]

EG: Your experiences are so rich it seems like I never run out of questions. [Laughs.] I was wondering what decision making process was?

RS: We would do questionnaires on state and local issues for candidates. They could come in and make a presentation and we would nominate and debate and vote.

EG: Would leadership decide ahead of time who you thought you would endorse?

RS: No, we would prepare info and central committee would vote on it. Present it to central committee.

EG: You set the agenda.

EG: Call the precinct leaders ahead of time to get their input

EG: What was decision making process of TVC?

RS: General meeting in Nashville, questionnaire.

EG: Representatives from throughout the state would come?

RS: Yeah.

EG: You mentioned civil rights gains in 1960, also used your political leverage for improved police treatment of blacks?

RS: Hmmm. I'm not really sure b/c at that point the big issue police brutality had to do with sheriff's contact. Talks about guy with [I'm talking about sheriff tabloid].

When was this?

I don't remember. Had happened with previous term with sheriff.

EG: Improved city services for black neighborhoods?

RS: They paid more attention with X. City followed county with signs, county broke the ice on that - white only..

EG: Public facilities.

RS: Yeah. Sit-ins were happening at same time. Like transit authority case they had started before law. [Interruption]

EG: Do you think if Carl Rowan?

RS: Dobbs House. That national publicity.

EG: Same group of leaders with NAACP, Democrat club, do you think it was healthy?

RS: Different hats. Well most of the people with any kind of commitment and ability were in the. So there was not much outside option. Jesse Turner became a squire -- county commissioner -- and rapidly became finance chairman. After his first term, they expected them to be finance chair. He was so well respected. He was a CPA, banker, and his integrity was beyond touch. He was very respected.

EG: You said with SCDC whites provided financial contributions, were drivers.

RS: Yeah, we had a lot of volunteer drivers and got financial contributions from some of them. We spent every time on elections.

EG: There actually weren't any white members?

RS: IN LeMoyne Gardens, Mrs. Wheeler -- Margaret Valiant was one. Her persona transcended her race.

EG: What was she doing there/in the club/in housing settlemtn?

RS: I have no idea. She ran a charity organization or so. In those days, Ms. Wheeler was in LeMoyne Garden. My first wife and I lived right across from LeMoyune Gardens. We'd get home from dance, get out of car, leave windows down and left wallet, it was still there. It was like that in those days. Everything was there. They never touched it.

EG: That kind of a community?

RS: Yeah. Precinct club was in community and of community. I mean that was with the precinct clubs?

EG: I really liked Mrs. Wheeler.

RS: She's quite a lady.

EG: Did you find that apathy was a problem?

RS: Not in '59 because that wound up the city -- black and white. For a few elections after 50, we had momentum. Like the precinct clubs when we boycotted Main Street we had a picket every I'd say 15 to 20 feet on both sides of Main from Auction to Beale. It went on all day. Vasco said guy used to walk from Florida to picket lines and all the way back. IN 3 or 4 elections following that, we put out our ballot. Lines to vote. Only thing not on the ground was our sample ballot. People had it in their hands. We had that kind of community trust.

EG: What were the biggest challenges of 59 election and SCDC?

RS: "I think we overcame every challenge we had. They stole our first ward and precinct stuff. That was the first time we had done the precinct routes. We did the same thing but we didn't have the voter registration routes. I'm convinced we did all that we could do. It was better than we expected on turn out. The people waited in line till they could vote. That was 10:30 at night some places. The white folk did the same thing. I got about 10,000 more votes than we projected, and I lost by 21,000. That's why I said 'We won everything but the election.' We had a big cadre of people who said, 'I'm not ready to quit.'"

EG: Expect such a strong white reaction.

RS: We thought there'd be a white reaction but I don't think we thought it would be that big. What it did was it moved us into being people you had to deal with elections. Nobody took us lightly after that.

EG: Mentioned apathy as a problem before then

RS: No, elections were regarded as efforts to encourage people to register to vote. Everybody knew that but we still had a pretty good registration. But after that election, it was serious.

EG: You had a viable chance of winning.

RS: "People recognized you could no longer ignore the black vote. Instead of wanting our secret support, they wanted people to know that they had black support. From that election on, it totally moved us center stage.

EG: Model for other communities

RS: Voter registration first and then some of the campaigning. Rodney Strong in Atlanta, I remember most. He was at Morehouse. He worked in Maynard Jackson's campaign and he took our format or ward and precinct. He should be still practicing law in Atlanta.

EG: He took precinct organizations down?

RS: Yeah. He worked in ward and precinct while he was here in school with us in our format. He understood it and they adapted it in Atlanta. They had more resources. If you could locate him, he probably could tell you. He can check with me.

EG: I saw same techniques – poll workers, etc. used with TVC?

RS: Yeah.

EG: [inaudible]

EG: I saw they had black councilman

RS: Yeah. Avon Williams was a senator. There was a woman, a doctor, who was in the legislature.

EG: Who were Invaders?

RS: Coby Smith.

EG: What role had in '59?

RS: Nothing.

EG: '72.

RS: welfare mama, Indians in regalia

EG: Was it prevalent charges it was an NAACP effort in 1959?

RS: Leadership was fungible

EG: Inaudible.]

EG: Did you get that a lot too that you were Communist?

RS: No, but I used it. Bar association was segregated. When they finally decided to adopt racial exclusion or something, I never joined. Lucius Burch we worked hard, why not got involved. I said the big attack on us not getting in is that we were communist inspired. We don't want to infiltrate the bar.

EG: Did you end up joining the bar association?

RS: When I became a judge.

EG: Was there youth involved with Democratic Club?

RS: Youth were involved. We didn't have structured sections in precinct clubs. D'Army and Walter Bailey would participate and give us hell.

EG: Why?

RS: Being young militant. They thought, "Let's tear down the castle."

EG: Were there a lot of generational differences?

RS: Not that interfered with anything. The Sit-ins started in communities where you had dormitory colleges where incubate ideas without. A lot of them, I knew, their parents were sitting on them. We wondered if it would ever happen here. Rough police force here.

EG: Were there people who did the first sit-ins also involved with the 1959?

RS: I think some of them were, a lot of them were. Rec. talking to Meachum, Coby Smith, and Jesse Turner Jr.

EG: Judge Lockard a lot of corruption. Little Rock, Memphis State University – any effect or impact?

RS: My wife and Maxine two complainants with Memphis State. Laurie wound up teaching there for a while.

EG: I spent time with Maxine Smith and on board of regents. A Maceo Walker was president and not as dedicated?

RS: He helped raise money. When businesspeople marched, he marched. It wasn't his main thing.

EG: Went to negotiate with Loeb

RS: Armour was one who saved meeting. We were ready to walk out. He said Henry they deserve more than that. I respected him.

EG: Elected in 1959. You were saying Jimmy Moore wasn't effective

RS: He was nice. I think he was shallow. He couldn't if he wanted to help somebody.

EG: Seemed more progressive.

RS: Well, yeah, some were not progressive.

EG: Farris

RS: Farris was a very astute politician. We became pretty good friends.

EG: And Loeb?

RS: Loeb was a horse's ass. He told somebody, newspaper that unpopular minority. I said if that's the way he thinks he should get out b/c he's a member of an unpopular minority too.

EG: I read that in newspaper coverage. [Inaudible.] Telling me you were shot at? Was that voter registration?

RS: Yeah, I was shot at. No, it was sit-in. A lot of our folk had rural connections.