

Interview

with

RUSSELL B. SUGARMON, JR.

October 13, 2000

by Elizabeth Gritter

Transcribed by Elizabeth Gritter

The Southern Oral History Program
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Transcript and tape on deposit at
The Southern Historical Collection
Louis Round Wilson Library

Citation of this interview should be as follows:
"Southern Oral History Program,
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of Russell B. Sugarmon by Elizabeth Gritter on
June 19 and July 30, 2004.**

Interview no. U-73

Interview no. U-74

ELIZABETH GRITTER: I just have a few kind of technical questions at first in terms of your education and some dates. I was wondering when were you at Morehouse and--.

RUSSELL B. SUGARMON, JR: Well, I was at Morehouse one year. [Laughs].

EG: Okay.

RS: They probably told you that--Vasco and Maxine [Smith]. Maxine was at Spelman [College] when I was at Morehouse. We both finished Booker T. Washington [High School] in 1945 in three years.¹ I went to Morehouse. She went to Spelman. I was at Morehouse when Dr. King was a sophomore there. I met him, but he was a year ahead of me. Just before the end of the first year, four of us from Memphis had made the dean's list, so we chipped in and got a fifth of Scotch. I think it cost us about \$1.90. Went up in the bell tower in what they called Graves Hall, which was the first building built on that campus. It was condemned, but because of the war, they'd gotten exemptions and all before they could do major stuff to it. The bell tower was off limits, and alcohol was off limits on the campus. We went up in the bell tower and got drunk and got discovered and expelled. [Laughter.] So, I have a story about that later, but I don't know if you want any off-color stories. [Laughter.]

EG: Maybe if we have time. What year was that?

RS: I finished high school [in] '45. That was in June. So in September 1945, I went to Morehouse. So, it would have been May or June of '46 that I got put out.

EG: Who else was expelled?

¹ Booker T. Washington High School was the leading school for blacks in that part of the state. Sugarmon graduated from it when, as he says, "it was a segregated high school with 75 to 78 students in my homeroom and we sat two to the desk." He continues: "Our textbooks were throwaways from (the white)

RS: Oh, well, four people from Memphis: a guy named Robert Franklin, Matthew Nichols, me, and a guy named Collins--I forgot his name. We all found our various futures. [Laughter.]

EG: Did you go to Rutgers from there?

RS: After that. I showed my father the letter expelling me from Morehouse after I showed him the degree I had obtained from Rutgers because I figured priorities were important (). I might not have survived to get to Rutgers if I had done that the other way. I beat the letter home because () out of the mailbox, and I kept it in my very personal affairs until it was safe to let him know what happened.

EG: Yeah, sure. What dates were you at Rutgers?

RS: From well, let's see, '46 to '50.

EG: What did you study there?

RS: History and political science.

EG: Oh, okay. That's what I'm studying.

RS: Yeah, are you planning to go to law school or go to Congress or both?

[Laughs.]

EG: Well, some sort of political activism.

RS: Okay. Well, good.

EG: When and where were you in the U.S. Army?

RS: I finished the law school. What happened was when I finished Morehouse, I went to law school because in high school, our teachers really couldn't encourage us to look across the spectrum of options. You know, this was 1945. If you were an African

Central High School. But we had good teachers." Sugarmon quoted in Shirley Downing, "Desegregation Ruling's Impact Called Monumental," *Commercial Appeal*, 15 May 1994, B1.

American, you were thinking about being a preacher, an undertaker, a doctor with a black practice, a lawyer with divorces and estates and that sort of thing. Blacks [were] limited. Not much else. The guy who designed St. Jude [Hospital] was an architect in California, but he was almost across the country the only one that we were aware of. So my generation, I think, Maxine and Vasco [Smith] and Ben Hooks, A.W. Willis [Jr.]--. There were a lot of us like that in Booker T. Washington, and I think this happened across--. We were looking at options, and that society was like living in a medium that you couldn't quite get a deep breath in. You know, like almost water. You weren't drowning, but you felt like you were suffocating.

So, I figured law was a good tool to try to change things. So, I took the law aptitude test, made a good score. I wrote to Harvard and, four schools, Harvard and Michigan--. I forgot all of them. Anyway, I heard back from Harvard. They had the question, "Why do you want to be a lawyer?" I said, "Because I don't like my hometown and ()." They accepted [me]. I heard from them first. I said, well, you know, "Great." So then, I got information about the price so I wrote--. The University of Tennessee was being sued--desegregation case. So, I wrote to the dean of admissions at U-T, and I said that I'm a graduate of Booker T. Washington. In that case, that's a code for black. I couldn't say to any of them, "I'm a graduate of Booker T. Washington, but I'm not black." [Laughter.] () Okay he's one of them. I said that I'm finishing Rutgers University in May, and I've been admitted to Harvard Law School. I said, "Since my credentials seem to be acceptable to them, I'm sure I'll have no trouble meeting your standards. So, please send me an application." About, oh, a month later, I got a letter from the commissioner of education, congratulating me from Nashville, saying,

"Tennessee wants to see all of its young citizens fulfill their career dreams." He asked me how much the tuition was and all that, and they paid my way to Harvard. Probably I could've gotten into that suit, but I had been student deferred. The Korean War, I think, was underway or getting hotter. I knew if I joined that suit I'd be on the first next levy to go into the Army. So I went to Harvard then and took the--. Let's see, they paid three years--tuition, transportation, and fees. They paid Maxine [Smith's] way through Middlebury [College]. Did she tell you that story?

EG: Yeah.

RS: When I finished law school--that was 1953--I called the draft board and finally asked them when I'd be called up. They said, "Probably next year." I said, "Well, can I get that? Because I don't want to be sitting here [in] limbo." Because I had a friend who was a lawyer in Missouri. Every time he got going, they jerked his chain, put him back in for a little bit. A guy named Estes--J. F. Estes.² They agreed, so I went into the Army. I finished in May and went in August of that year, '53. I finished what did I say, '53. () August of '53. I went to A-G [Adjutant General] school. I could have taken--. The commission had been three years and indefinite reserve. So I just wanted--. I volunteered for the draft because that's two years, and I'm out. () The indefinite reserve could be () adjutant general if you'd been an officer, but you served three years active and indefinite reserve. I wanted it in and out and clear when my obligation ended. I enjoyed it. I finished A-G school and wound up in Fort Lewis, Washington, in a () depot going to Asia. I wound up after a bit in the first cavalry division headquarters in Japan. They had been pulled out of Korea by then. But the Korean War was still underway. () There were peace talks underway. So, I enjoyed it. It was a nice

experience. But since I had to do it, when the time came for me to get out, I wanted out.

I came back, and I got married to a young woman I met who was a freshman at Wellesley [College] in my last year at college.

EG: At Wellesley.

RS: Yeah. In Wellesley, Massachusetts. She was from South Carolina. She was a southerner. Most of the girls I dated--when they found out I was from the South and wanted to go back, it was like I had some measles or something. They sort of backed off a bit. That didn't deter [her], so we got married.

EG: What was her name?

RS: Laurie. Miriam DeCosta.³ She had one more year to get her degree from Wellesley, so I used the G-I Bill and went to graduate school at Boston University. Got some courses in business administration, business cycle theory, stocks and bonds. I figured stuff that I could use when I came back here if we got to where we could have some economic development going on in addition to civil rights stuff.

EG: What year was that you were at Boston University?

RS: That was after the Army. That was, I finished '53 at Harvard. Two years in the Army, got out [in] '55. So, it would've been '55, '56. Then, I came back here--.

EG: Was Laurie, was that her nickname?

RS: Miriam. Miriam Delores DeCosta.

EG: Mirian Delores DeCosta, sure. Yeah.

RS: There's a story about that too. ()

EG: So you used all this education to really prepare you to come back and make

² Estes was also a Memphis NAACP lawyer.

³ Laurie Sugarmon is now known as Miriam DeCosta-Willis.

a difference?

RS: Well, Ben Hooks had come back, A.W. had come back, Maxine had come back. We all had come back because we didn't like Memphis. I think there was a matrix across the nation--but heavily in the South because that's where most of us were--ready when the sit-ins started. It swept the whole thing [South]. Young people started it, but it was something that my generation--. We had been involved in stuff like voter registration and trying to get people elected. Running people, hoping they could get elected but building up our registration because, [as] we saw it, there were two prongs at that point--political action and litigation. The sit-ins added a third leg--direct action. It was like somebody threw a light on material that had been soaked with some kind of inflammable matter because it really spread like mad.

EG: Yeah. If you could talk about your work with the Shelby County Democratic Club. I know you founded that ().

RS: Well, we didn't found it, but there was a club here. We sort of restructured it after a campaign. When I first came back, there was a council of civic clubs.⁴ Bluff City Civic--. Black civic clubs that had been conducting a boycott of the *Commercial Appeal* about issues like courtesy titles and the types of news they carried about blacks--usually criminal news, reinforcing the negative stereotypes and not referring to people they featured in black articles by any kind of courtesy title. Men would be called "boy" and that sort of stuff. I wrote the "why we strike" rationale. When we met with the editor, he had that letter as a basis for our negotiation. We spent a lot (). I have a copy of the proof if you want to read it.

EG: Yeah.

RS: That was about 1956, I guess. In 1957, there were two or three elections before 1959. At the point we started running people, the Shelby County delegation to the state legislature, I think, had eight representatives based--. The number apportioned across, a certain number of legislators () across the state. Shelby's population entitled it to eight. So people ran in the top eight at large. Just they announced for legislature--they ran. So, the top eight were it. So, we decided--. Lani Guinier had discussed the possibility of single-shotting as a way to get somebody elected.

EG: Who was this?

RS: Lani Guinier. She was a whippersnapper by my age. But I mean she's real bright. She was the one that Clinton nominated to be a Supreme Court justice. I read some of her stuff. She was talking about ways you could get people in office single-shotting. Where, if you have a thing like we had, the black vote at that point under Crump--. I'm jumping around because I have to give you little fill-ins.

EG: Sure.

RS: In Shelby County, blacks voted since 1906. Well, voted during Reconstruction and all. It got taken away when the troops had pulled out--Union soldiers pulled out of the South. A lot of states, they started having devices to keep blacks from registering. But in Shelby County, the black vote was a key part of the machine that a guy named Crump, Ed Crump from Mississippi, put together in 1906. He controlled the black vote, and he got about 20 percent of the white vote through patrons--() people who would benefit because he was in power. He headed that machine. It didn't have a blemish on his record until 1948--I mean in terms of losing any elections that the machine got behind.

⁴ The Bluff City and Shelby County Council of Civic Clubs.

The black vote in Memphis was basically maneuvered through control of the school system. Teachers got hired, principals got made because of being responsible citizens in terms of what their districts did in support of the machine. If your student population was caught in an area that did not show a healthy turn out for that machine, then you had a hard time getting stuff for your school. You had a hard time getting good teachers or promotions for teachers and so forth. The teachers would give out lists to people that the Crump machine wanted supported. That was the way it went. In the other areas, he had one or two blacks that sort of were muscle. Like one of them had a whiskey store--the only one in town black-owned. That was his reward for muscle. There were lawyers because the city and the county had contracts and this sort of thing. There were big law firms that the bar association would make a preference for the primary, and they would make sure all their lawyers went to vote. They pretty well determined who got to be judges that way.

That was the system in place, city and county, until 1948 when [Estes] Kefauver ran and some of the anti-machine Democrats because then, it was Solid South, and the Democratic primaries were the election.⁵ If you won that, you were basically in. After we ran in the election where we single-shotted it--to get back to where I was-- the guy almost won. He came close. I [have to] think who was it. I think it was Jimmy Walker-- James T. Walker. He was a labor man. He worked, I believe, at Firestone [Tire Company]. () A the recalls going on with tires. Took them long enough to get them (). He was a rebel worker. He ran--. I think he was the one who ran then. He came close to winning, so what they did was--.

⁵ Sugarmon refers to Estes Kefauver who became U.S. senator from Tennessee in 1948 and served in that position until his death in 1963.

EG: When was this?

RS: This was '57, '58, something like that. He came too close for the comfort as far as the machine was concerned. So in those days, we didn't have home rule. So the state legislature had to amend the city charter. There was a rule in the legislature that if big city's delegations were unanimous in support of this, that, or the other, they would pass it. If there was a split, they wouldn't. They wouldn't vote on it. But anyway, that passed unanimously. They went from at large highest votes to having you have to run by districts--District 1, District 2, District 3, District 4. But they were still at large, they were just pancakes on top of each other, which made it--. In effect, it took us out of play in all but one area. The single-shotting wouldn't work that way with pancake districts. We went through that. We tried to figure out the best way to get around it. They changed the law if we almost got that.

What we did was we picked out races where you had two or three white candidates. The ratio was 1 to 2--one black voter for every two white voters. That was the ratio for a good long while. To get in one where the white vote was split, then you got a mathematical even balance. They split equal, then it's a horse race. So, in 1959, Henry Loeb had won the public works commission seat in 19--what five years before that--so '54. He had run with black support. He had campaigned in Beale Street and went around to preachers and all. He said that he understood he was the minority also, and blah, blah, blah. He understood the problems. As soon as he got elected, he started running as a conservative for mayor, and so we inherited that animosity. Henry Loeb was an SOB. He was obviously campaigning for mayor, so we started watching. When I say "we" I mean there was a group my age. Jesse Turner who was the Tri-State Bank

CEO, I guess.⁶ A. Maceo Walker was one of the co-founders and president of the bank. He was instrumental in raising a lot of money for us during those days. But Jesse Turner who was active in the NAACP--.⁷ H.T. Lockard was the chairman of the legal redress committee. He filed the first lawsuits here. Maxine, Vasco, A.W. Willis, me, several ministers. We had some ministers who were actively in positions, like on the board of the NAACP or active in the precinct clubs. But the ministerial groups, they have a Baptist alliance, a CME, AME.⁸ The Church of God in Christ was started here. It's based here. It had lots of churches. Anyway, they all were actively involved through support and leadership overlapping with the NAACP. So, we had a network city- and county-wide. I think of how ().

In 1959, Hooks ran for juvenile court. I ran for public works commissioner. Reverend Henry Bunton, who was a CME minister, ran for school board, and Reverend Roy Love who was the president of the biggest Baptist, what do they call it, conventions here in Memphis ran.⁹ The two of them ran for school board. I ran. [We ran] as a "Volunteer Ticket."¹⁰ That was the first time Martin Luther King, [Jr.], came up here to

⁶ Tri-State Bank opened in 1946. The bank held over \$2 million from 5,200 depositors in 1952. Tri-State Bank and Universal Life Insurance Company were the two most successful black-owned institutions in Memphis. Both institutions "promoted the philosophy that successful racial enterprises offered the best assurance of black movement toward an integrated society." Gloria Brown Melton, "Blacks in Memphis, Tennessee, 1920-1955: A Historical Study." (Ph.D. diss., Washington State University, 1982), 303-304.

⁷ Founded in 1909 by blacks and whites committed to social justice, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People is a nonpartisan, membership-based organization with the purpose of ensuring the political, educational, social, and economic equality of African Americans and the elimination of racial prejudice. It is the nation's oldest and strongest civil rights organization.

⁸ The Christian Methodist Episcopal and African Methodist Episcopal denominations.

⁹ Rev. Henry Clay Bunton was minister of the largest Christian Methodist Episcopal congregation in Memphis, and Rev. Roy Love headed the Baptist Ministers Alliance.

¹⁰ Sugarmon says they called this black unity slate the "Volunteer Ticket," because Tennessee is known as the "Volunteer State."

talk. He talked at a fund-raiser for us. Daisy Bates talked at a fund-raiser for us.¹¹ We had in those days no computers. The election commission was hard files. We had gotten photos, wet copies, you know, those old Xerox plates--.

EG: Mimeographs?

RS: Yeah, well, not mimeographs, but, yeah, that wet copy stuff. We got the whole list of the black precincts, something like 57,000 names. The secretaries at Universal [Life Insurance Company]--.¹² They allowed the secretaries to stay late and use the equipment there and anybody who wanted to volunteer. They did that. They worked after work at night for maybe six weeks typing canvassing lists () from just an alphabetical list, canvassing lists by precincts. The night we got that done--. It took about six weeks, I think, because we started early. But the day we got that done, it was moved to the headquarters of the Volunteer Ticket down on Beale [Street], and the next morning they were gone. Somebody had broken in and stolen *all* of them. I've got news clippings of that too, I think, in there.

But we ran the campaign. The money was all ready. Everybody in town--. That was a *total* campaign. Everybody in black skin and in a black organization endorsed. The same way for whites--East Memphis Garden Club, the DAR, whatever you have. Everybody endorsed their respective--. So I got in a race where we started out with seven people running for public works [commissioner]. We had decided based on [the] Henry Loeb election--. He got elected with something like 27,000-28,000 votes four years earlier. We figured given the growth in registration and given the heightened reaction to

¹¹ President of the Arkansas NAACP branch, Daisy Bates was an instrumental figure when nine students (the "Little Rock 9") integrated Central High School in Little Rock in 1957. Bates spoke at a fund-raising dinner on August 14.

a major effort by blacks, blah, blah, blah, if we could get 36,000, we'd have a chance.

So as soon as the deadline for qualifying passed, there was a reporter who was regarded as a moderate, so he had access to the black leadership. We talked with him. Well, they ran the same article that he wrote two days in a row: "Black Vote has a Chance to Win." He spelled out the ratios, the seven white candidates. Two white votes for every black. Two to one, so a two-to-one race would be an even race. A seven-to-one race--I got a real good shot at winning. So, I called him and said, "You sound like that peckerwood Paul Revere." [Laughs.] He never interviewed me again. [Laughter.] He had a long and fruitful career after that.

But anyway, to cut that short. When the election came, the law that says if you're in line at the time the polls close, you have the right to vote. You know, if you're in line at seven, they can't close the polls. So, the people in line at seven voted. The police would get behind the last person in line at seven. () A lot of wards here didn't close until ten o'clock or ten-thirty at night. There were lines around the block--black and white. So, we figured, I think it was, 35,[000] votes I needed to win. I got 37,000 votes and lost by 21,000. It was biggest turnout in history--black and white.¹³ So, I told the papers. I said, "We won everything but the election."¹⁴ It was a democratic activity. There were more people expressing themselves than ever. What we won was a

¹² Universal Life Insurance Company opened in September 1923. Located on Beale Street, it ranked as the fourth largest black insurance company in the country in 1952. Its assets increased from \$2 million in 1943 to \$12.5 million in 1955. Melton, "Blacks in Memphis," 80-81, 303-304.

¹³ Sugarmon received 35,237 votes and lost by some 23,000. He came in second place and so did the other Volunteer Ticket candidates. A record 129,870 Memphians cast their ballot -- 69 percent of citizens registered to vote, a 50 percent increase over the previous record established in 1955. Sixty-three percent of eligible blacks voted and at least 90 percent cast their ballot for black-supported candidates. The highest proportion of registered blacks voting prior to 1959 is estimated to be 41 percent. In any previous election, Sugarmon's 35,000 votes would have elected him. Elizabeth Gritter, "Local Leaders and Community Soldiers: The Memphis Desegregation Movement, 1955-1961" (honors senior thesis, American University, 2001), 37.

¹⁴ *Tri-State Defender*, 29 Aug. 1959, p. 1.

politicized group who didn't want to stop.

So, that's when we drew up the--. A.W. [Willis Jr.] and Benny and I, and, I think, Jesse Turner had a lot of input on it. We came up with an article of the bylaws which stated that we had joined to achieve certain goals. The club would be organized by precinct. Anybody who lived in a particular precinct who wished to join could have meetings in their precinct and invite interested people from the precinct to come and find out what it was about and what we planned to do. This would achieve some political power. And then, hold an election and elect a chairman, a secretary, and so forth. If there were ten people, the chairman and the secretary would be on our central committee. If there were more than ten, the chairman, the secretary, and one other person would be on the central committee. The central committee would be responsible for electing county-wide officers of the club, and the central committee would be responsible for determining what issues should be raised in elections and screen candidates to decide and endorse who we supported by vote. That's what we set up.¹⁵

We started, I think we had about thirty-five or forty precincts initially the next election, which was that next year, '59-60. 1960 was a statewide gubernatorial race. Oh, no, we had an election--. My calendar may be off somewhat, but we had had a governor's race, I think. I think we had a governor's race. At the same time, the August primary in '59, I think, is when we had the governor's race. You may check the calendar on this because I may be [wrong]. But Edmund Orgill, who had been a mayor of the city, a moderate, was running for governor. Rudy Ojardie, the mayor of Chattanooga, who was close to the unions in Chattanooga, was running for governor. Clifford Allen, who I

think was the assessor of Nashville, who had black support in Nashville, was running for mayor [governor]. Buford Ellington, who was from West Tennessee, was running for mayor [governor]. So, we endorsed Edmund Orgill. The Nashville black leadership endorsed Clifford Allen. The Chattanooga [black] leadership endorsed Rudy Ojardie. Buford Ellington won the primary, which meant he won the governor's race because you counted our vote out of 80,000-100,000 votes cast by blacks.¹⁶ We had cancelled ourselves out. We had cast an effective 7,000 votes.

So in those days, it was easy to do this. We got a list of all the black barbers and beauticians. We got a list of all the blacks in the state. Any other groups we could locate. A.W. [Willis] basically did this. We mailed out the newspaper clippings of our [votes?] by counties, the big ones. We said, you know, this doesn't make sense. We were fourteen or fifteen or sixteen--whatever percentage it was then of the population of Tennessee. We can't afford just to waste our votes because we don't know--. Nobody in any city knew what people in the other cities were doing in the state. So, if you want to do something about this, we are going to meet at Park Johnson Hall at Fisk. Gave the time, the day, and the place to discuss what we should do. We sent that out. The grandmaster of the Eastern Stars, Charles Williams, lived here, and he sent a copy of that to all of the lodge leadership, Eastern Star and that sort of thing. The black vote in Tennessee is located in the five major cities, Memphis, Nashville, Chattanooga, Knoxville, and Jackson, and west of the Tennessee River in fifty-two counties. There were people from fifty-two counties at that meeting. We set up the Tennessee Voters

¹⁵ See the following thesis for more information on Memphis politics from 1959 to 1961: James Jalenak, "Beale Street Politics: A Study of Negro Political Activity in Memphis, Tennessee," (Honors Senior Thesis, Yale University, 1961).

Council. That was the result of that. So the next statewide election, what happened?

EG: Well, could we move on to a different topic?

RS: Okay. [Laughter.]

EG: I have a bunch of things to discuss. I mean since the time is limited.

RS: I could give you a chronology of it--.

EG: Yeah, I know each of these topics could be a long time. One of my big questions was, as I was reading about Memphis, a lot of the literature made it out to be and said that the desegregation movement was quite peaceful and put a lot of emphasis on the Memphis Committee on Community Relations. I talked to Vasco Smith and he said those are lies.

RS: That's the part--. That aphorism, I guess you call it, "The victors write the history." Well, they had to get lost. The guy who wrote that book. Vasco says he didn't talk to him. He didn't talk to me, [or] Jesse Turner, [or] A.W.-- any of the people who were at the core of the movement here in terms of planning and whatever. [He didn't talk to] Maceo Walker. He talked to the white side. He got whitewashed, I think. It was a strange way of developing--. Well, I just don't think it was scholarly research. It was one-sided.

EG: You're talking about David Tucker's book? Yeah.

RS: Yeah. He's still here.¹⁷ No, but the political group [Shelby County Democratic Club] at its height, we had 101 precinct clubs and about 7,000 members. It was sort of parallel to the NAACP because that leadership and the NAACP leadership

¹⁶ In those days, Democrats dominated Southern politics; whoever won the primary was guaranteed to win the election.

were fungible--the same down to the precinct levels. We met monthly. The NAACP did, and the Democratic club met monthly. Any issue that affected the black vote or the black community we discussed both places. So what it gave us was a cadre, citywide and county-wide, of people who had some sophisticated insight about issues and probably how it affected our folk. We're missing that now. I mean you can tell it from what we've done. It's terrible now. I know at one point the school system needed funds. The only way you could get funds was [to] pass an increase in the sales tax, which we knew was the most regressive. But we said, "Our kids need it," and it passed. The black wards carried it. It failed in the white wards. The black vote passed it. I thought that was enlightened. They were and they followed, they respected that argument, and they passed it. They knew it was going to cost them, but they wanted the money to go for their kids. I felt good about that--that sort of thing.

When the direct action started, the NAACP was negotiating with merchant's associations downtown and so forth. It sort of stalled, so we had a boycott of Main Street. I'm sure Vasco told you about this. We had a picket about every twenty-five feet on both sides of Main Street. The idea being that if some stores were accessible and others weren't, you couldn't tell how effective the boycott was. If you stayed off Main Street--. We had people with cameras. That helped people not want[ing] their pictures taken stay off Main Street. The little stores that didn't have lunch counters, didn't have restrooms, they were hurt, so they were putting pressure on the big--. "Get this thing over with because we want our business." We had a picket line from Beale Street to [Adams

¹⁷ Sugarmon and Gritter refer to David Tucker's book *Memphis Since Crump: Bossism, Blacks, and Civic Reformers 1948-1968* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1980.) At the time of this interview, Tucker was a professor of history at the University of Memphis.

Street] on both sides of the street for something like eighteen months or twenty months.¹⁸

There was a store here named Bry's [Department Store] that went under, that high rise right up here. That's where Bry's was. Across the street ().

EG: Across the street, okay. Sure.

RS: That's where Bry's was. It went under during that period. No, there weren't any rocks thrown, but there was a power struggle, I mean, in terms of the financial community being involved. The *Commercial Appeal* boycott earlier---. The subscriber list dropped so that their circulation ratings, which determined their rates, was affected, because we were a big chunk of the city then. We were a third of the city then.¹⁹

EG: So you boycotted the newspaper?

RS: We boycotted the newspaper. When I said we were striking because of the way they treated news about blacks and this sort of thing.

EG: Yeah.

RS: We were trying to get people [to] cancel the paper. We didn't have a lot of people added, but their circulation was affected.

It may not have seemed like a struggle then, but we had a lot of folk making a lot of sacrifice. "Don't buy on Main Street" and that sort of thing and doing it for a protracted period of time.

Then with sit-ins, I think somebody said we had more sit-ins than anybody in any other city around in the South, I believe, once they got going.²⁰ We didn't start it because

¹⁸ In the interview, he says Auction Street. In subsequent conversations with the interviewee, he said that he was wrong and he thinks that the picket line went to Adams Street.

¹⁹ In 1960, the population of Memphis was 497,524, 37 percent of it black. Gitter, "Local Leaders and Community Soldiers," 5.

²⁰ In his report on Memphis for the Southern Regional Council in 1964, Benjamin Muse reported, "Some say that Memphis had more sit-ins than any other Southern city." The SRC, one of the foremost interracial organizations in the South, sponsored fact-finding missions and statistical surveys throughout the South.

LeMoyne is not a dormitory college, and it started where there were dormitory colleges. These were kids away from home who could incubate in the dorms what they were going to do and getting themselves worked up to a degree where they were willing to go. We didn't know whether or not these kids [would sit-in] because their parents were worried about their kids doing that because the police here were brutal. We had a terrible history of police brutality. They didn't want their kids to get beaten up or maybe shot or something.

So it hung fire for a while, but then one of the kids here-- [Laughs.] You may have heard of him. His name was Marion Barry.²¹ He was a student at Tennessee State, and he was from Memphis. But he came home and got the students at LeMoyne to get involved. Once they got involved, the first sit-ins did it.

What happened was, I think the NAACP was having its annual meeting in Denver--somewhere out West. Lockard was gone. Benny Hooks and I were the only two NAACP-related lawyers in town when they hit. They hit on a Monday. I think it was in the library. We'd go to the police station and find out who was arrested. They processed them. [They] processed and processed. It was about three in the morning before we could get them out. They started requiring cash bonds. The ministers--. They had a double line of police all away around that jail--that building across the street that closed right now. That was the jail. There are two courtrooms on the second floor there.

SRC officials believed that Southerners would conclude segregation was wrong when presented with the "facts." The SRC faced criticism, however, for being too moderate. Benjamin Muse, "Memphis" (Atlanta: Southern Regional Council, 1964), 45.

²¹ Barry was a leader of the Nashville sit-in movement. He later became a leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and mayor of Washington, D.C. Founded in 1960 after the advent of the sit-ins, SNCC adopted a theory of nonviolent direct action. Composed of students, this organization used a grassroots approach, organizing communities throughout the South to press for civil rights.

There must have been 3 or 4000 people--all black people--all around the place with two rings of police keeping them away from the jail.

What happened was, for that first week, we were the two lawyers. They would go somewhere to sit in. Public accommodation places first--the parks, the parks were restricted to whites except one day a week, the museums, the libraries, that sort of thing. We'd be at the police station until two or three in the morning and then be at court at eight, and while we were in the court another wave was going somewhere else. We didn't get home for the whole week. Our wives had to bring clothes (). We were bathing in face bowls. [Laughs.]

EG: Bathing in what?

RS: Face bowls. We didn't have any showers in our office. It was a good way to lose weight, though.

EG: How long did that continue?

RS: That was the first week. After the first week, the other lawyers came who had been in the NAA [meeting] came back--H. T. Lockard and all and A. W.--. That was a pressure cooker. What happened was, when the word got out, they had rallies in the churches. We had to go say something, but anyway. They were raising money in the churches.

EG: Rallies and mass meetings--same thing?

RS: Yeah. To raise money to put up the cash bonds. We couldn't get them out without cash bonds. The bail bond businesses wouldn't write the bonds.

EG: How much were the cash bonds?

RS: I don't know. Maybe \$250. It wasn't [as] much then as it is now, all misdemeanors. It probably was \$50 to \$100, but I'm guessing because that was '61, '62—something like that. Whatever it was, we had to put up cash. My father put a mortgage on his house. Some people posted property so the bank could make loans for the purpose of funding it. People were raising money at church rallies and stuff. They wanted to see a student just out of a jail. They wanted to see a lawyer. You know, just to pump it up. That went on all summer. We had meetings at the NAACP office about negotiations that were going on with opening up the stores, lunch counters, restrooms—that sort of thing. One night—. The NAACP board was essentially mature people, a lot of retirees. The chairman of the board was a minister. I guess he must've been in his 60s.

EG: What was his name?

RS: I'm trying to think of it. Did Vasco [Smith] remember it?

EG: No.

RS: Oh boy. He'll know. Maxine [Smith] will know because this [was] during the period when Maxine became executive director of the NAACP. I can see him. He wore glasses and soft spoken gentle guy and one or two, a retired lady who taught. A guy was a chauffeur. But that board—. They were talking about the railroad station restaurant. This was about halfway through the summer that the sit-ins started. Jim Lawson was here.²² He was the pastor of a church here. He's out in California now.

EG: Did he do training at all for the sit-ins?

RS: Yeah, he went to Vanderbilt. He was a student at Vanderbilt—a church school, divinity school—[and] half of their faculty resigned over an issue involving the

²² James Lawson led nonviolent training workshops for the sit-in movement in Nashville. He was influential in SNCC.

school's attempt to expel him.

EG: Did he conduct training for the sit-ins or what sort of training did you have for the people who were doing sit-ins here?

RS: When they started, I don't know, because the students just *went*.

EG: Oh, they just went.

RS: Yeah. I think the ones from Nashville at LeMoyne, they did some workshops. They didn't let the adults know because they didn't want their parents involved. The first thing we knew they were in jail. [Laughter.] I mean after it got going, there was more coordination. But then, we really weren't interested in knowing too soon because as soon as they went in, some lawyers filed charges against us of barratry and champerty--stirring up litigation. Our bar never did anything about it. It still was filed. But you never knew because some lawyers from the South got disbarred. They got reinstated, but they were in limbo for a good long while. So we didn't want them to be hooking us with a side issue. So we weren't that anxious to be too closely involved with their plans. They had some bright kids doing them--.

EG: With the plans for the sit-ins?

RS: Yeah. They were impressive as a matter of fact.

EG: How did the sit-ins change things? How did it--.

RS: It was like somebody gave a shot of adrenaline to the black population at that time, speed or something. [Laughter.] It was a shot to the system.

EG: Then that spurred the Freedom Movement for the eighteen months and how did--.

RS: Well, what happened was--I was talking about the depth of it--it wound up in

this city not just the students. That NAACP meeting [where] they were talking about the progress with the railroad restaurant. One of these people said, "Well, I move we adjourn." [Someone] said, "May I amend that motion?" He said, "Yes, sir." [Someone said], "I move we adjourn to the railroad and sit down at the restaurant." So, the whole board went down there and sat in. This was, like, ten-thirty at night. So what they did was they called the police, and the police by this point were getting fairly savvy. The lieutenant came, and the squad car came and looked. They saw what was going on, so they got back in their car. They said well you know (). A little bit later here comes the lieutenant. He walked in. He nodded. He nodded. He nodded. He says, "() Now our orders are if you want to arrest them, we will arrest them. But you are going to have to swear out the warrant." He says, "Now you can do that, but that's Maxine Smith. She's so and so. That's Russell Sugarmon. That's Jesse Turner. That's so and so." He said, "That looks like the NAACP leadership. Now, we'll arrest them, but you guys get braced for a suit." [Laughter.] So then they took orders, they served us, and we were all afraid to eat what they served. [Laughter.] "I'm full now, I don't think--." [Laughter.]²³

EG: When was this?

RS: This was in, probably '61, '60—something like that. Whenever our sit ins started first because it went over a couple of summers, I think.

EG: So it was shortly after the sit-ins started?

RS: Yeah. If it started in July--because I think the NAACP [national] meeting

²³ According to Jesse H. Turner [Sr.], after some of the NAACP officials talked with Memphis Police Commissioner Claude Armour, "he decided that they would make the businesses swear out warrants, and of course most of these businesses were hesitant about swearing out warrants. As a result of that, we didn't have as much confrontation on those things, except after the initial shock of the sit-in demonstrations." Jesse H. Turner, Sr., interview by Dr. Anne Trotter and David Yellin, transcript, Memphis, 29 May 1968, Mississippi Valley Collection, Special Collections Department, Ned McWherter Library, University of Memphis, Memphis, Tennessee.

was probably late June or early July out of town, your national meeting--it was a month or so after that, when the people from the convention had come back, and that's when the seniors started. We had seniors sitting in front of the buses, going to libraries, and all kinds of things like that. It wasn't just students. I mean the students ignited it, and the students were involved. They did it, but they had fellow travelers. [Laughs.]

EG: How did you maintain the momentum for those eighteen months? That's a long time.

RS: Well, the momentum--. We had these meetings.

EG: You mean mass meetings?

RS: Well, not eighteen months of mass meetings. The backbone of all of that was the network of ward and precinct people. See we had gotten credibility. The precinct clubs that [we] set up in '59. We got involved in the presidential race in November. Because this was August of '59 that our election [took place], and we got these things organized. We had a cadre in place and around fifty or sixty precincts by November. The black vote in Memphis had gone to Eisenhower two-to-one, he got 66 [percent], four years earlier. The black vote in Memphis went to Kennedy by that same ratio in that election. Robert Kennedy called here election night from Hyannis Port to the Democratic Party headquarters. The party chairman said [Sugarmon whispers], "It's John Kennedy's brother." Everybody got quiet. "Oh," he says, "() things are going. You want some returns?" He said, "No." "Oh, you want certain precincts." He had a list with every black precinct in town--.

EG: Robert F. Kennedy did?

RS: Yeah, from Hyannis Port. He wanted to know about 14-1, 14-2, 25-1, 25-

2.²⁴

EG: Did you talk to him?

RS: No, we were just listening to the party chairman answer Robert Kennedy's questions about our vote.

EG: Wow.

RS: Now what happened was--.

EG: You mean the Shelby County Democratic--.

RS: The Shelby County Democratic Party, yeah.

EG: The party, not--.

RS: This was the Democratic Party headquarters. We were involved in that.

What had happened though was a reporter from the *Tennessean* named John Seigenthaler was covering this part of town, and he had--.²⁵

EG: The one who went on to become--.

RS: His son is the TV, the broadcast network--. Seigenthaler was the publisher of the daily national, *USA Today*.

EG: Did he become? Was that ()

RS: He was Bobby Kennedy's executive--.

EG: Yeah, that went on the Freedom Rides.

RS: Yeah, got hit in the head.

EG: Okay.

RS: I have a story about that too. [Laughter.]

²⁴ These numbers refer to the ward number and precinct number within it. For example, Ward 14, precinct 1.

EG: Okay.

RS: He had been covering Bobby Kennedy's part of the campaign. He had been through here. He was familiar with us through the August election and because of our relationship with Avon Williams and the NAACP in Nashville and--.

EG: Avon Williams. How do you spell that?

RS: Avon Williams. He was a lawyer in Nashville. A-V-O-N. An NAACP lawyer in Nashville. In Nashville, the Fisk University professors--.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

RS: People in the fifty to sixty precincts were working through the Democratic club to get the vote out. They had some credibility because the momentum of that fall campaign, that August campaign.

EG: The '59 one?

RS: Yeah. The August campaign had gotten everybody galvanized, churches and--. We had a huge *depth* of communication ability, because we could get preachers to announce things from their pulpits at that point. Unified. When Kennedy won, Seigenthaler called, and he said they appreciated what we'd done here for his brother-- Robert Kennedy wanted to know if we had any ideas about what they could do to show that appreciation. So, I said, "Most of our folk don't have a lot of money."

EG: You were talking to Robert F. Kennedy?

RS: Talking to Seigenthaler. I said, "But I know everyone of them would love to have an invitation to the inauguration. They could frame that and show it to their kids

²⁵ Robert F. Kennedy, John Kennedy's brother, was his campaign manager. He was John Kennedy's attorney general during his presidency. Seigenthaler was a campaign assistant and later Robert F.

and grandkids. He said, "Oh, we'll see what we can do." So this is one of my favorite stories. [Pause].

EG: Invitations for who?

RS: Our leadership. Our precinct leadership.

EG: Your precinct leadership.

RS: In the precincts out there. [Pause.] When the inauguration came, the newspapers had eight or nine names of people invited, and we had about ninety precinct leaders invited. A lady from the Foote Homes had one leg, Druzy Anderson. She was our precinct captain that headed the tenant association.

EG: What was her name?

RS: Druzy Anderson.

EG: How do you spell Druzy?

RS: D-R-U-Z-Y. Real "up" person all the time. Very positive. That leg didn't slow her down at all. She took her invitation to the tenant association, and they raised the money and sent her.

EG: To where?

RS: The inauguration.

EG: To get to—but ().

RS: The tenant association. The Foote Homes is a public housing project. She was a tenant association president.

EG: Tenant association president.

RS: She was our precinct leader.

EG: And the tenant association funded it.

RS: The tenant association raised the money and sent her. Anyway, that spread. That was an organization with roots in a hurry. So, *those* people across the city and the county were the people who made sure that that boycott stuck because they were going into churches and going to--. It was just a network locked in on that idea.

EG: Wow. So, I talked to Dr. Hooks--I could only talk to him for fifteen minutes--but he had mentioned how that '59 election had galvanized the black--.

RS: Yeah, it put together the cadre that was the heavy infantry for everything we did for twelve or fifteen years.

EG: Wow. And what was your view of the Memphis Committee on Community Relations?

RS: Well, before there was nothing. [Laughs.] So it was better than nothing. [Laughter.] Well, they had some communication with people who wouldn't even bother coming to talk. It was sort of a junction box, but I don't think they had much muscle. I mean they could talk to us.

What happened, I'll tell you, the next election was 1960 because the politics of it is intricately interwoven with the civil rights thing. Because a lot of our folk wouldn't have been in politics if they didn't see it as a lever for civil rights. We looked at three legs--political action, legal action, and direct action--after we got going once the sit-ins started. All that was part of a process, which was the most useful way to go at a given time for a given objective of what was on the table. But in the next year, the county commission, which is similar to the city commission, had three people elected with portfolios, was up for re-election. They were the last elected vestiges of the old Crump organization. What was the name of that thing? Anyway, whatever they were. The

chairman of it was a guy named David Harsh. Rudolf Jones was one of the commissioners, and then Stanley Dillard, I believe, and the old sheriff Mel Hinds, the sheriff. If we had gone with the group that normally, the liberals had always said they wanted to meet behind closed doors because the black vote was the kiss of death. You know, "We got to do this slowly because we can't get too far ahead of our rank and file because we can't bring them with us if we take them too fast." So, we said, "This ain't making sense."

So, Lieutenant [George W.] Lee--he was the Republican leader here--he was conversant with this leadership, the county leadership. He raised the idea, broached it with Turner, Maceo Walker, A.W., me, Hooks, and a few others. Well, they had offered-- So we could go with them. We could consider them. We put some things on them to do before Election Day. That way we can't get double-crossed. Kefauver was up for re-election.

EG: What do you mean you can't get double-crossed?

RS: Agree to do something and don't do it.

EG: Oh Okay.

RS: We wanted them to agree to do something before election and do it before election. So we met with them. We had a list of things. We wanted them to remove the "white only" signs from every public building under their control. Kefauver was running for re-election. He was being challenged by a guy named "Tip" Taylor who had run strongly in the governor's race but lost, but he was still big. He was running as a Citizens Council candidate.²⁶ You know, he was one of those types. We couldn't even get into

²⁶ The White Citizens Council consisted of chapters throughout the South with a largely white-collar membership, including civic and business leaders, that advocated for "states' rights" and segregation.

black precincts in the county because one bank made crop loans for him. It was agricultural then. That was part of the old Crump control. If you buck that bank, you know, that Paul Barret was part of the Crump hierarchy, they have a lenient loan policy, but they could call loans so you know you could be in trouble. So we said, "We want you to take down the signs on every public building under your control. We know you can't get Paul Barret. We wouldn't expect him to endorse Kefauver. What we do want you all to do is stay out of that race. Where we can get our folk out there. Just be neutral in that race. You know, all you've got to do is just say yes on that. Then start hiring before Election Day black people to nontraditional jobs, like sheriff." They did. But before that happened, we were going to release the ticket that we were supporting through the churches by a letter we wanted the preachers to read the Sunday before Election Day. They agreed. So what happened, the *Commercial* came out with a big headline, so it leaked, "Jobs for Votes Deal Exposed."²⁷ So they were interviewing us. We said, "Well, politics is about advancing the interests of your people." They said we met in the basement of the courthouse. We met in the grand jury room of the courthouse. So no basements for us. [Laughter.] Anyway, we said, "Nobody involved in the meeting asked for or is supposed to get a job. These are jobs for people who have *nothing* to do with this process. That's what we intended they do with it." This guy--I'm getting old--he called and said, "One of the things Mr. Crump taught me was that in politics, your word is your bond." He said, "We are prepared to live by our commitment if you are prepared to live by yours." I said, "Yeah, we're prepared." So, they did and we did. So they won.

Members used economic intimidation and public harassment to silence civil rights advocates. They contributed to an atmosphere that tolerated and even encouraged violence against blacks.

²⁷ Sugarmon says the print was as big as the headline announcing the Pearl Harbor attack. Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr., telephone interview by author, 10 Apr. 2001, handwritten notes in author's possession.

So what that did was, from that day forward, we weren't the kiss of death. We had moved to the middle where you couldn't get a viable campaign going in terms of anything unless you had a chance of getting black support. See we were one third of the vote. So from that day forward, it wasn't [Sugarmon has a negative connotation in his voice] "You got black support." It was: "Can you get black support?" That was the question. It just shifted the dynamics of politics from '60 on.

EG: Yeah, do you think the Committee on Community Relations--.

RS: They weren't even involved in that.

EG: No.

RS: They were shocked because we endorsed this group that was the last vestige of the old Crump machine.

EG: They ()

RS: We did it for two or three things. One, Kefauver carried every precinct in Shelby County then. He hadn't been doing that well before. I'm talking about black precincts. He won. He died two years later, but he won. We got black deputy sheriffs hired. I'll tell you, one of them, when he died, was the jury commissioner of Shelby County. This was much later. You know, he went on from his career as sheriff up through the ranks, and then the county commission made him jury commissioner based on his record. But that election was crucial. The '59 election ignited a cadre, and then the Kennedy election sort of legitimated in the eyes of these folks in low-income wards--. You know, so and so got invited--that sort of thing. It legitimated it. The boycott was sustained by that network. Then the election in '59 demonstrated the muscle we had, because these people survived, and they started hiring blacks. The sheriffs were the

visible symbol, but they started pulling people into courthouse offices and stuff. We got these boxes in the county. We were able to get a turnout () over there. So those two or three years, I think, were the keystone years of what went on for a decade or so.

EG: Wow. Yeah. If you could talk too about the legal redress committee and your--.

RS: The lawsuits. Well, after *Brown*, it was a matter of making these states and by court order specifying the particular institution that ought to have been complying-- bringing them into compliance. The city lawsuit was a school desegregation [suit] Lockard filed. It's like Charles Dickens () versus () [It has gone] on and on and on and on. It depends on what part you're talking about, which lawyers were involved, because it's still in court. It's still open.

EG: Yeah, that's what I heard.

RS: The county was a little bit different because, I think--. I don't know whether I filed an injunction with Constance Motley. She was the liaison when I came on. Bob Carter, I think, was the NAACP lawyer in New York with this area's portfolio.

EG: And Motley was the liaison between--.

RS: Motley was the New York lawyer with the NAACP. They specialized in all this--Thurgood Marshall's office. She was the lead lawyer out of New York in the cases, and we were the local lawyers in those cases. The county--that superintendent got on the stand. He said he could do whatever the court ordered him to do in terms of busing. He said, "We bus now." He says, "We bus white children past black schools and white schools and black children past white and black schools. We're busing all you. All you're going to do is change where to get on and get off." He said, "That's no problem.

We can do that. Why don't you tell us not to [deal?] it." The city is still--. The masses of black population were in the city so I guess the county didn't feel like it was that big a--. The people out there, I think, they probably feel like they were that much of a threat. But what went on in the city was different.

When the order for [school] desegregation came, the then-[police] commissioner was Claude Armour. He'd tell us--. He'd say, "I'm a segregationist, but before that I'm a professional. I'm a lawman." He says, "Whatever law comes along, I'm going to enforce it." He called us in. He kept us posted on his planning for desegregation.

EG: You kept him posted?

RS: He kept *us* posted on *his* planning. He called us to let us know what his plans were. He said, "We got a list of everybody who's here--Tipton County, Fayette County, DeSoto [County], all around, who are active in Klans and Citizens [Councils]," whatever.²⁸ He says, "We're calling them all in for a meeting. I'm going to show them exactly where these kids are going. I'm going to show them what schools they're assigned. At what time they're going to be there. And I'm going to let them know that if any of them are anywhere near, they're going to jail. We may not keep them, but they're going to have to get out." [Laughter.] He's says they're going to have to get (). He just called them and said, "This is where we're going to be, so this is where you ain't going to be." That's what he told them. So all we had were reporters.

I went with some twins to one of the inner city schools, and the policeman who was assigned there. I could tell I was in trouble when I got to the door because the mother was terrified. I said () nobody out here but us and some police down the street.

By the time we were supposed to go, she was thinking, you could see, [that] she [didn't] quite want me to walk out there with her little girl. Somebody rang the door. I opened it. It was a police detective. He said, "I live around the corner from you." She recognized him from the grocery store or something. So he said, "We're assigned to your two daughters." He said, "We've been around the neighborhood. There's no problem, nothing, nobody that doesn't belong here here." He said, "Our instructions are that we can be off duty when you feel like it." [Laughs.] So she finally relaxed and let me take them. That was my experience with it. I don't know how it went the other places, but that's what happened to these two little girls.

EG: So generally the police force would you say it was peaceful?

RS: No, it was a rough police force, and a lot of folks--. But Armour ran it with a--. They respected him. But no, you still had flashes of police brutality here and there and around. I'm not saying that they all grew wings and halos. [Laughter.] I'm saying they performed that day the way he told them to perform that day.

EG: If you could talk to about the decision-making process. I know there was that cadre of you and Willis--.

RS: Oh, somebody would have an idea. A.W. would talk with Benny or I would talk with Benny or Maxine or Jesse Turner. It sort of percolated awhile around. Billy Kyles. H. Ralph Jackson was one of the ministers who was very active.

EG: H. Brown Jackson.

RS: H. Ralph Jackson.

EG: H. Ralph Jackson.

²⁴ Founded in May 1866, the Ku Klux Klan sought to deny blacks equal rights through violence and intimidation – lynching, murder, bombings, beatings, and so on. The KKK engaged in violent assaults

RS: He was an, what was he, he was an AME minister who later got the AME church to implement what he called a minimum salary fund. All the churches contributed to a fund which was used to supplement the salaries of ministers in churches with congregations that were not big enough or well off enough to pay a decent salary where they could have ministers with some training. It was designed to sort of upgrade the level of training. Man, he was a hammer. He was an orator of fire. [Laughter.] That tradition also was around. A guy named Northcross--the same way. These ministers who would, you know--. The spoken word felt like a brick sometimes. [Laughter.] The way they could talk. But an idea or maybe there would be an initiative from the Chamber of Commerce or merchant's association or something, and they would broach it with the NAACP. It would be discussed around a circle before we felt like it made or didn't make sense. What about this or that? It would be raised at the NAACP monthly meetings, put on the agenda. () [more investigation information sought and thought not.?] And also with the Democratic club. We had a leadership around the city that came to those meetings because there were legitimate issues being discussed. We weren't trying to push any of us for jobs. We were trying, we felt like that leadership should *not* take the first thing, that we should be the ones that pushed the others because that would send the wrong message.

EG: If you could talk about, like, the individual members and what they brought to this cadre in terms of that inner core--A.W. Willis, Jesse Turner.

RS: Jesse Turner was a man [who] I think deserves--. I wasn't there. So I mean this is what--. A.W. found out about it. But somebody found out about it. When he was

against civil rights workers.

in the Army, he won the Bronze Star.²⁹ He was the commander of a black tank unit in Italy in support of—. Have you heard any of this?

EG: No.

RS: In support of a white regiment, I guess.³⁰ I don't know. It was mixed up some kind of way. He came to a mine field. He was leading his tank or whatever the assignment was. His tanks followed him through. He got up and walked through this minefield. His tanks followed him through the minefield. He got a Bronze Star for it so they could complete that mission.

EG: Wow.

RS: That was the kind of man he was. He was to the point, and there wasn't any frivolity. It was--if you have something to say, say it. Once it was discussed, he wanted to vote. Once the vote was over with (), he went. That was it. Our meetings weren't long, but they were very efficient. This discussion took place before we sat down to have the agenda, and then somebody would raise to have some debate on it then.

EG: This was the board meeting?

RS: This was the board meeting, the NAACP or the Democratic club. The central committee voted on this stuff too.

EG: What do you mean by central committee?

RS: The precinct leaders from across the county.

EG: Oh, the precinct leaders, okay. Yeah. What about A.W. Willis?

RS: A.W. was brilliant. He was conceptually a genius. I think that he conceived the idea of the precincts sort of thing. I went around and explained it to folk, precinct by

²⁹ The Bronze Star Medal is a U.S. military decoration awarded for heroic or meritorious service not involving aerial flights.

precinct. I think that's how come the () split. ().

EG: What about Maxine Smith, what she brought to the movement?

RS: Maxine never let up. I mean, I remember, she would--. Three or four years into this process, it was almost like going to work. You get up and wonder what is going on. Maxine would call. One day she called me, said, "Hey, what's going on?" I said, "Oh, nothing." "Good, there's this guy named Eric Weinberg in jail in Brownsville. You got to go fix it." [Laughter.] *Damn*, Maxine. You know, I'm thinking about a lazy Saturday. Go to hell. She took my alibi before I had a chance to--. [Interruption]. Brownsville was a town where--. If you had to rank the cities a black person would be most likely to enjoy himself on vacation and you're ranking from one to fifty, Brownsville would be number 300. I mean the last lynching in Tennessee occurred in Brownsville. They say they locked up all of the bums so to make sure that everybody knew it was an official action. [Laughs.]

EG: That it was what?

RS: To keep them out the lynching party. They didn't want anybody to misunderstand that this was the leadership of Brownsville.

EG: What about H. T. Lockard? If you could talk about him.

RS: Lockard was from rural West Tennessee. Lockard is a very determined human being too. He worked his way through college and law school. He was one of the people who came *in* to Memphis. Most of the rest of these people were just sort of Memphis rooted, I think. Lockard put down his roots in that process. Have you met him?

EG: Yeah, yeah. I talked with him.

³⁰ The first black tank battalion – the 758th.

RS: He's had a stroke and that hasn't slowed him. He's amazing. That hasn't slowed him down at all. That's part of what I'm talking about. He's got real drive and tenacity I guess you can call it.

EG: What about Vasco Smith?

RS: Vasco is a guy who--. He has a fire, but he can get ignited, [Laughter.] which you don't want to do. [Laughter.] He can make it a weenie roast or a cinder pile, one of the two. He's fiery. Maxine is just persistent. She just never quits, really. It was an interesting mix of personalities involved in this thing.

EG: Ben Hooks.

RS: Hooks. I guess I'm like Benny, but I'm a private person, and Benny is a public person. I mean, I don't think there's anybody Benny hasn't met, doesn't know. He's very articulate. A.W. used to like to go watch to see who would stiffen up and see how many people would get stiff by the time he got through with a speech. Passed out and stiff.

EG: What would you say you brought to the--?

RS: Well, I think I could communicate with people one on one a lot. People weren't put off by me, I guess. They would listen. I think I was conceptually pretty involved too with some of that stuff.

EG: Vasco Smith talked about the kind of mathematics and statistics [component of the movement] and how did that play a role in your work?

RS: Like the stuff I was talking about on the phone, we used to try to figure out how to use our resources so we weren't duplicating ourselves. So we weren't spending time where the return wasn't worth what we could commit to it, that sort of thing.

Political operations and stuff like that. When we organized the Tennessee Voters Council, I had gone through the state county-by-county census to determine which counties did have any significant black populations. So we knew exactly which counties to identify, and we knew exactly what kind of response we hoped to get out in terms of numbers and focused what we did on where people were. (). We did that with our political stuff. We tried to figure out what kind of turnout was going to be and add a few points and then try to figure out how you could get *that* percentage of the vote out your way. Targeting stuff.

EG: Yeah. With the legal redress committee, how did that work in terms of deciding what cases to file?

RS: Well, it was pretty much in line with the case law in terms of where you could make some headway. The sit-ins was just defending the kids once they got in jail where there were charges. We had one case growing out of the sit-ins that we were hoping we would get to the Supreme Court [and be the] first to get our names in the books about grand jury exclusion. We had a sit-in case when the challenges were being made around the country [in regard] to segregated exclusionary jury processes being invalid. We had the case where the students went into Walgreen's Drug Store and sat down and refused to move when ordered. But the people who went in were plainclothesmen. The indictment that they were trying to make the most headway on was the failure to obey the lawful order of a police officer. Well, the grand jury that indicted them had three blacks on the grand jury. Where did they come from? So we put the grand jury commissioner on, and he said, "They told us we needed some Negroes on the grand jury, so there were three in the hall. [I] said, 'You all come on in here.'" So, that

was in our case record. So we said, "We got one." We're going up on systematic inclusion being as faulty as systematic *exclusion*. It's supposed to be random access. You're in a pool. Race shouldn't play a part either in or out of the grand jury. And what happened was--. The other thing was that we moved to dismiss it on the grounds of defective indictment because they didn't allege that they identified themselves as police. They went in and said, "Get out." They didn't know them from Adam. They weren't in uniform, and they didn't sound like police officers. So how could this be. We said the indictment was defective, and a defective indictment can't be cured by proof. It's just dead. You've got to come up with a--. Well, our Supreme Court reversed the conviction on the grounds that the judge didn't properly charge the jury. There's no way--. Then it was said this is not for publication. A case out of New Orleans got to the Supreme Court first on that issue. They had a similar sort of facts circumstances. If we had gotten there first, we would've been the ones that made that case law--that systematic inclusion is as unconstitutional as systematic exclusion. We had the grand jury commissioner's testimony that that's what they did. They were sitting in the halls. You know, "Come on [in] here!"

EG: Was there somebody tracking the different laws that took place?

RS: Well, the NAACP nationally.

EG: Nationally.

RS: We were all part of the local redress committee, but the national office used to have meetings of their lawyers in [Erlich?], Virginia then. I don't know where they do it now. We'd get brought up to speed on what was known on case law in the various courts. They had lawyers out of New York working with local lawyers across the South.

EG: Okay, so they kind of determined what--.

RS: They had a network. Yeah, they had the resources. Everybody else was trying to eat too. They were the paid professionals on the agenda until Kennedy. Then, the Justice Department got involved our way too. So.

EG: And you had your own law firm while practicing [as an NAACP lawyer]?

RS: Law practice, yeah. Well, that's where we're making money, because the NAACP paid you \$750 no matter how many lawyers. We had at one point so many lawyers on a case that our secretary made more. We got about a dollar and a half an hour based on the time spent for that \$750 because for us it was a matter, one, of mattering in something that mattered.

EG: Yeah, definitely. Let's see. What could they charge people under, though, in terms of the segregation? Was that stipulated by--.

RS: You mean with the sit-ins?

EG: Well, yeah, with the sit-ins.

RS: With the sit-ins, they'd say disorderly conduct. I never will forget we had two city court judges. One was named Beverly Boushe. Two things happened. And the other guy, he wasn't really that memorable. I think the second day we had some kids either at the library, one of the libraries, I think--. So, he asked--. He said, "Reverend Hooks, why don't you get this off the record? Why don't you open up this session with a prayer?" Benny prayed about fifteen minutes. "God, please show this honorable judge that what these people did was the exercise of their constitutional rights." [Laughter.] () He's looking, "Oh why did I do this?" By the time he got through, it was like lightning

was going to strike in the courtroom.³¹ [Laughter.] But the other one was the last day, that Friday, we had another sit-in case. They were charged with conspiracy to violate an ordinance about segregation in the parks or something like that. Lockard had just gotten back to town from the NAACP convention. Boushe says—he gets to reading this charge—"How do you plead?" The door swings open, and he strides down. He had flames coming out of his eyes. Boushe says, "Mr. Lockard, do you want to say something?" He says, "I do." He says, "What?" He says, "There can be no conspiracy to commit a legal act!" Boushe says, "Alright." () [Laughter.] He sounded like some god, like Zeus. Vooooom! [Laughter.] The force of his voice and the righteousness of his indignation! Wow.

EG: Wow. Because they had ordinances, then, in terms of?

RS: Segregation?

EG: Yeah. That was all dealing with ordinances?

RS: Yeah, city ordinances.

EG: ().

RS: That's what, and toward the end of that, they got to where a lot of policemen you could see them sort of understanding what the (). I know one or two even today that, I think, changed visibly—I mean in terms of getting exposed to the sit-ins. They started recognizing that these people were human beings. I mean it didn't happen to everybody. I must say that. I know one of them. He's always telling me about my son. He says, "Your son's all right." [Laughs.] He's friends with some of the black cops. I think some of them did go through some kind of conversion, some kind of Gethsemane.

³¹ This incident may have taken place on May 17, 1960. The *Commercial Appeal* reported that Rev. Hooks opened up the court session with prayer at the invitation of Judge Boushe. "Arrested Negroes

EG: Did you find that with other people, like, in the white community that you saw a kind of a change ()?

RS: I know a lot of people who--. I'm not sure because a lot of them I didn't know before. I knew a lot of people through Democratic Party activities that were already just waiting. Like, when we had the picket lines, we had some whites picketing with us. We marched. I know one time, a woman, a lady named Alma Morris, her son--. Our kids are marching in these things.

EG: What was her name?

RS: Alma Morris.

EG: Alma Morris. Like it sounds, okay.

RS: Her son was marching. He was marching right behind the daughter of an editor for the *Commercial*, who resigned his job. But when the desegregation order came out, she wrote a letter to the editor saying that she was relieved to see that the Supreme Court finally had righted a great wrong, and she was looking forward to going to school with her black classmates.

EG: The daughter.

RS: Of this editor. Local paper.

EG: What was the name of this editor?

RS: I'm trying to think. Maxine or Vasco [Smith] can tell you. I can see his face now. Jim something. But anyway, they wanted him to get his daughter to retract that. They didn't want to publish the letter. He said, "We raise our kids to express themselves and ()." They finally said, "Look, you either do that or you resign." He resigned, but he went to work with a civil rights commission, I think, later in Atlanta. I

believe that's what it was. But his daughter--. They were still here then, and she was marching. This was right by Court Square down here. The Citizens Council had decided to do a countermarch. They were going south on this side. The police made them march on the curbside, and the NAACP were marching on the park side all the way up against the building. So they were like this. This one guy passed whatever her name was and saw she was white. So the next person he ran into was young Morris. He said, "Is she white?" He says, "What do you think I am?" and kept marching. [Laughter.] He stopped marching. His mouth opened. [Laughter.] There are lots of stories like that. They're funny.

One of my favorites if you've got time is during the--. This was the Higgs camp, they ran him for mayor. This is a few years down the road.

EG: A what ().

RS: [Otis] Higgs ran for mayor.

EG: Otis Higgs, H-I—

RS: G-G-S. We had Memphis State students working in the Higgs [campaign]-- black and white. So we decided to try to do a blind poll of Parkway Village, and one of the psychology professors drew up some questions which were designed to give us an insight about the attitude about supporting a black mayor and all.³²

EG: When was he running?

RS: Oh God, this was his first campaign. [whispering dates] It's probably around '64, '68. He's now a criminal court judge too.

EG: He's black?

RS: Yeah. Black. So anyway, we had these teams going around in Parkway

Village, and they had these questionnaires. The first series was something like, "Do you plan to vote?" and blah, blah, blah. The fourth or fifth question [was], "What, in your opinion, is the most serious problem facing Memphis today?" [This one group] came back laughing. We had them come back to headquarters. We said, "What happened?" They said, "We knocked on this door." They said, "This guy opens the door. He's in his T-shirt. There's football game on the radio or TV. We could hear it." They said, "We could see there's this kitchen with the pass-through area. You could see his wife in the kitchen doing something."

EG: The kitchen with what area?

RS: The pass-through. You know, where you put things to shove through from the kitchen into the dining room. So they could see that.

EG: This was a white man?

RS: Yeah, white family. So he's asking these questions. They get down to that question. This is a black guy and a white girl--Memphis State students. He says, "In your opinion, what is the most serious problem facing Memphis today?" He says, "Niggers." His wife says, "Bob, you get away from there! That was a student!" So she rushes to the door, pushes him away. She says, "Now I'm sorry. He been drinking beer all day. You start over. You ask me those questions." Well, they go through these questions and get to that question: "Now, in your opinion, what is the most serious problem facing the city today?" She thinks. She says, "You know, he's right about that." [Laughter.] That became sort of a passing [joke]. Kids would pass--"You know he's right about that." [Laughter.] Anyway, it wasn't all grim. There were a lot of touching things and a lot of, some funny things and some terrible things. It was a mix--a full bag.

³² Parkway Village is a section of the city of the Memphis.

EG: Yeah. How much time did you spend on all of these activities?

RS: Oh, God. More than I should have, I mean, in terms of making a living. But that's why I went to law school. I don't think I explained that accurately to my wife at the point. But we set up the first interracial law firm, I think, in the Southeast and had some cash flow that at least got a stable amount of money that I could spend. () to get going.

EG: So there were financial sacrifices that you made, obviously.

RS: Oh, yeah.

EG: Yeah. What can you say--.

RS: I don't how much of a sacrifice it was because, I mean, that period through my law firm up through the 1980s--. That was what I consider the most productive part of my career as a lawyer. I think I got involved in more that mattered than I could have in any other way.

EG: In the early sixties?

RS: Sixties and '70s and the '80s really, I mean, right on. I had a part in retiring four of the state Supreme Court justices. We moved that court into this century in one election. I was involved in that. We came close to the city government in trying to do something different. It didn't quite happen. Martin King's assassination sort of put them in limbo.

EG: Yeah, in what other ways do you see that in terms of it being--. Could you expound on that a little bit more--being the most productive time of your career?

RS: Well, I'm saying that that was a profound change in the commitment of the country. The *Brown* decision and making that decision more than paper.³³ Making it a

³³ In *Brown v. Board of Education*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954), one of the most significant court rulings in history, the Supreme Court declared segregation in public schools unconstitutional.

part of the lives of people all over the country, this region, this city. I don't how long it would've taken but for the litigation, the on-the-ground activism at the local level because a lot of people weren't about to pay attention to that in terms of just because it's the law of the land. So what? () So that sort of thing.

EG: So, let me make sure I have this straight with the functioning of the legal committee. It was the NAACP office, the national branch.

RS: Yeah, all the local branches had relations with the national whatever.

EG: Right. They had ties, and then they would suggest cases--

RS: Well, we would come up with the types of cases that brought the legal system to bear based on what the Supreme Court was doing.

EG: Yeah. Based on that. Then you would have different people, you know, to get plaintiffs for those cases.

RS: Well, the branches got the plaintiffs.

EG: So, you would ask someone [if] they would be a plaintiff and then they would agree and voluntarily--.

RS: The non-lawyers, the local branch people.

EG: Yeah, the non-lawyers, sure. Besides being on the [branch] legal redress committee, did you have an office? Did you have a title with NAACP?

RS: Nope.

EG: Were you involved with--.

RS: Just member.

EG: Yep. --Any other organizations during that time?

RS: Well, the Tennessee Voters Council then and the Democratic club I was

active in. I was active politically. I was on the state executive committee. I was on the Democratic National Committee at various points. During Carter's administration, I was on the Democratic National Committee. The summer of the election when Lyndon Johnson was nominated in Atlantic City to run on his own following the assassination, there was the convention in Atlantic City that took place just after they discovered the bodies of Goodman and Schwerner and Cheney in Mississippi.

Our office in Memphis was the locus for a structure where lawyers from across the nation had--. There was a Lawyer's Committee for Civil Rights or something like that. They had recruited lawyers to take leaves of absence for two weeks or so at a time and come down to Memphis and to Jackson, Mississippi. There was an office in Jackson. The office in Memphis was responsible for legal redress, kids who run afoul of local sheriffs, for everything that happened from the line one hundred miles north of Jackson up to Tennessee. Our office was that office. The office in Jackson would respond from that line down to the Gulf.

EG: Yeah.

RS: A black doctor had built a hospital, [James Terrell?], on Williams Avenue, I think it was. It was a two-story, framed Victorian-looking house, because there weren't any hospitals municipal for blacks in those days. It had been boarded up or closed up and shuttered. But the beds were there, and everything was in there. So we had gotten his widow to let us re-open and clean it up. The kids from this part of that operation, Freedom Summer, would come in, get out of there for a weekend. There were kids from all over the country. They were from every race. I mean it was like getting a whiff of decency--just to be in that atmosphere with them. That's one of the important, the great

memories I have of that era--young Americans.

When the convention started, these kids--. Their bodies had been dug up. The Atlantic City convention hall opened out onto the boardwalk. The convention, I think, was in August. It was a hot summer. You could open that door, and the kids had come up because the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party was challenging the Mississippi regulars under Ross Barnett. The Alabama Freedom Democratic Party was challenging the Alabama regulars who were led by Bull Connor. A woman from Mississippi--. I can see her.

EG: Fannie Lou Hamer.

RS: Fannie Lou Hamer. She was testifying before the Rules Committee, which was chaired by one of Richard Daley's powers from Chicago--you know, hard-nosed powers. She's testifying for about four straight days. When the convention recessed at night, it would be, going out, there was this hubbub inside, and when they got outside, they had a wire fence along the boardwalk, with the students on one side, and there were paths for the delegates to leave both ways on the other. They were five or six deep all away across the front of that convention hall. There were people in Vietnam-era fatigues and shorts and sandals. They had three charcoal faces of Goodman, Schwerner, and Cheney above them. [Emotional pause. Sugarmon chokes up.] It was like somebody turned down the volume. As soon as the people came outside and saw those three faces, it went dead silent. That was my first exposure to guerilla theater. It was, Wham! It hit them. As the result of Fannie Lou Hamer's testimony and, I think, *that* exposure, they adopted, they seated the Mississippi Freedom Party and the Alabama Freedom Party. They decided that they would sit together. So that both regulars went home.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

START OF TAPE 2, SIDE A

RS: These two delegations sent--. I haven't heard myself say that a lot recently. I have to fight my emotions because *that* and that thing about Druzy Anderson. We had another woman like that. She was campaigning--I'm just rambling. Am I supposed to shut up and talk about this Democratic Party reform?

EG: Oh, go ahead with what you were saying.

RS: Oh. I got a call. This was in '59, right after our campaign.³⁴ The next year that was the campaign where we endorsed the old Crump regulars in the county commission provided they do certain things before the election. I got a call in my office saying this lady had been found unconscious in the street outside of a project over there on Crump Boulevard. The only thing she had on was her Democratic club membership card. I recognized her. They described her and all. She was sick. She was out there and passed out in the sun. It was hot--August. So I went over to the hospital to see her. I said, "Weren't you supposed to be in bed?" She said, "I know, but I'm the precinct leader over here, and these people want to know who we're supporting, and I had to get out there to let them know." I mean that kind of commitment.

EG: She was unconscious?

RS: She had passed out.

EG: She had passed out.

³⁴ Nellie Martre, a precinct leader. Sugarmon thinks that this incident took place during the 1960 gubernatorial race. Sugarmon, telephone interview.

RS: They brought her to the hospital. They were trying to find who she was. One of the people--it was the nurse or whatever--saw that Democratic club membership card and knew I was involved in that. They called me to see if I knew her. But, I mean, she was saying that she got up out of her sickbed, trying to get out, endorse, so those people knew who to vote for. So that sort of commitment. We had people who really felt good about it.

But anyway, with Ms. Hamer, she had told them that she--. You've read about her. Haven't you?

EG: Um hmm.

RS: Where she had, they had told her--. They had locked her up and stripped her. And they told her--. The sheriff got tired of her refusing to sign a confession saying that she had been paid by some Communist organizers to encourage blacks to vote. They wanted to discredit the movement. He finally told her, "I'm tired of this. So [on Sunday morning?] in the morning we're going to dump you in the river." At that point in history, she would've been foolish not to have taken that seriously. She said she prayed, she cried. She cried and she prayed. When the sun started coming up, she said, "Well, Fannie Lou, you haven't lived all this time for nothing. If you're going to die, you might as well die for something." When she walked into that room, you know, she didn't die. What happened though was it's rare that you get tested to find out whether you believe what you say you believe. She did. She got tested. You could tell when she was in the room, she wasn't in there long before everybody in the room was looking at her. She had that kind of power, a sense of sureness about her. It was her testimony, I think, that persuaded that committee to come up with the Frasier[?]-McGovern Commission on

Democratic Party Reform. That was the thing that women got launched in terms of political involvement because the Miami Convention was a cross-section of America. It frightened the viewers on television. [Laughs.]

EG: The Atlantic City one?

RS: The Atlantic City convention set up the party reform commission. The convention in Miami, which nominated McGovern to run for president, was the result of that commission's work.

EG: Okay, in 1972?

RS: Yeah.

EG: With McGovern, okay.

RS: That reflected America and when the people at home on [watching] television saw it, it terrified them. [Laughter]. We had Indians in full regalia. We had welfare mothers. We had *all* kinds of ethnic costumes, gay rights, liberation. It was fantastic. [Laughter.] Oh, I loved it.

EG: In '72. You were a delegate to the '64 convention?

RS: Yeah. I was on the rules committee, I think, in Miami. Yeah, I was on the rules committee in Miami because I remember they were trying to get a resolution--. The Vietnam Veterans Against the War had been saying they wanted to get a resolution before the country on primetime TV. The people handling the nominees didn't want that on television because all these radical groupies, all these unkempt ex-GIs and all this. They didn't want the people to see something that would turn them off and that they wanted--. But, anyway, the rules committee was having hearings. For them to get on primetime, they had to suspend the rules. They would've had to suspend the rules. So

we were having this meeting, and the chair was recognizing, I think it might have been Donald Frasier. I think [he] was one of the chairmen recognizing this party and this party and so. He recognized a lady from Connecticut, and she yielded to one of the rules committee. (). He moved that the rules be suspended, so that this resolution could be read--I forget--it was primetime though, and it passed. So when it passed, all these guys, some of them had missing arms and legs and Purple Hearts, they started applauding. [Sugarmon claps his hands.] The committee turned around and applauded. [Sugarmon claps his hands.] [Emotional Pause.] I love that too because they did take their leadership away. The Nixon people arrested their leadership before the convention started. They had to go to a federal court ninety miles away from Miami. They were trying to discredit them. That came out after Watergate--that they had done that.

EG: Wow.

RS: Anyway, I'm saying that in looking back--. [Pause.] I wouldn't want any other experience. I wouldn't want to have any other way. That was a richness you can't buy. That sort of--. [Pause.] All right, ma'am, I'm sorry. You haven't gotten to the good part yet. [Laughter.]

EG: Yeah. Anything else you want to add?

RS: Well, yeah, but--.

EG: You have to go, I know.

RS: Yeah. I thought we'd be—. It's three-thirty. I thought sure—.

EG: Okay, it's--

END OF INTERVIEW