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Interview

with

VIRGINIA DURR

February 6, 1991

By John Egerton

Transcribed by Jovita Flynn

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The Southern Oral History Program
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START OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

February 6, 1990

VIRGINIA DURR: . . . John L. Lewis as his PR man. So she [Lucy Randolph Mason] was also a great friend of Mrs. Roosevelt. Then, at the same time, Joe Gelders, who was at the University of Alabama, a professor of science of some kind, he got interested in the labor union movement too, and he got to be head of something called the Southern something. Anyway, the two of them met over in Mississippi. They were having terrible strife over there, labor strife, and the unions. And old Rankin was raising hell and high water, and Jim Eastland, and that awful [Theodore] Bilbo. So there was a terrific lot of bad labor going on over in Mississippi. So Joe Gelders and Miss Lucy were, you know, together. So Miss Lucy, who is. . . .

JOHN EGERTON: How old was she at that time?

VD: Oh, Miss Lucy, I reckon, was in her fifties.

JE: You describe her in your book as already being a white haired lady.

VD: Well, she was, but I would say fifties. They lived right down the road from me. Her brother-in-law was the head of the bank, and her sister was the leader of the, [laughter] what fashionable set there was in Alexandria, Virginia. She had the biggest parties and biggest luncheons. But Miss Lucy had gone into good works early, you know, and tried to help the little girls who worked in the tobacco factory. But anyway, the gist of the matter is that she got hold of Mrs. Roosevelt, and she got a promise out of Mrs. Roosevelt that the President of the United States, Mr. Roosevelt, would see them. So Joe and Miss Lucy went

up to Hyde Park or whatever and had tea or dinner or something with them. See, the thing about Miss Lucy was that she was a lady par excellence, if you know what I mean.

JE: Yes, she was a real Virginia lady, wasn't she?

VD: She was a lady if there ever was one. So they talked a great deal. So the idea was conceived of having this--the president already was furious at the southern senators because they were kicking in the teeth everything he was trying to do. So they got the idea of forming a South-wide group of people. He was all for it. It was right after he had tried to get rid of [Senator Walter] George of Georgia, you know, and they had beaten him. So he was still fuming about it. So anyway, sure enough, they got it going, and all the labor unions went into it. Bill Mitch, particularly, of the Miners was very active. See, it was in Birmingham. And then Joe Gelders, of course, was stationed there, and he had been beat up there, you know. That awful beating. Then there was one communist, I remember, his name was Rob Hall. Boy, you should see him now. He's married to this rich girl up in New York and he has a Caddy. [Laughter]

JE: Ain't no revolution, is there?

VD: Revolution, he didn't want to speak about it. He called me up, said he wanted to see how I was.

JE: There were some sisters, too, you mentioned in your book, a couple of women who were communists, and they passed out literature and stuff. I'm trying to call up their names.

VD: Jane and Dolly Speed. There were very few, only two or three communists in the whole South. And it really was a

tremendous undertaking because, you see, it was the beginning of Roosevelt's anger. Very few realize, maybe they do realize it, Roosevelt was a man of great, strong anger.

JE: He had a hot temper, didn't he?

WD: Not only that, he wanted to get back at you. If you'd done him wrong, boy, he wanted to get you back.

JE: He was vindictive.

WD: Yes, he really was. And thought those southerners had just really hurt him in every possible way, you know, by ruining all the things that he wanted to get done. So Frank Graham got to be the president of it [the Southern Conference for Human Welfare]. Then, of course, it really went along for several years very well until they began to red bait it. Then it got to be just a mess after that because of this continuous series of red baiting. It continued really up until the war. Then after that it. . . .

JE: Let me back you up to the time before that big meeting. You tell in your book about the group of young southerners, New Deal Southerners, around Washington while you all were living in Alexandria. They called themselves the Southern Policy Committee, and they would meet occasionally at people's houses just to talk about problems and whatnot.

WD: The Southern Policy Committee, it met on a regular basis. It met downtown. That was Lister Hill and Jonathan Daniels. They were all strictly male, and they all met downtown. They were the ones that started that pamphlet about the South, you know.

JE: The number one economic problem.

VD: Now, the other group was a group of young southerners who were working on the Hill mostly.

JE: Like Clark Foreman?

VD: Who were trying to get rid of the poll tax, and who were politicking.

JE: Ted Goldschmidt. Who was he?

VD: He was with the Committee of. . . .

JE: What state was he from?

VD: He was from Illinois. But he was one of those big-- Secretary of the Interior, connected to them. That's how I met Lyndon Johnson. If you'd been reading about us in the. . . .

JE: I've heard about it, but I haven't been reading that.

VD: Well, he's got all this stuff about us, and people we knew. Well, we met them all through Lyndon Johnson, and we met Lyndon Johnson through Ted Goldschmidt. He was with the Interior Department, and he and Clark Foreman were in the Interior Department. They were in charge of the dams, you know, and water. Of course, Lyndon lived for nothing in the world but the rural Colorado River.

JE: Now, Goldschmidt was not from the South, though?

VD: Yeah, from Texas.

JE: Oh, Goldschmidt was from Texas, and Abe Fortus was from Memphis, and Clark Foreman was from. . . .

VD: His uncle was the editor of the Constitution, Clark Howell.

JE: And Arthur Raper was from Virginia, wasn't he?

VD: No, he was from North Carolina.

JE: And Cliff Durr was from here, and Hugo Black was from Alabama. All of these people were, in one way or another. . . .

VD: Lister Hill.

JE: Part of that Southern Policy Committee group. Including Lyndon Johnson?

VD: No, I don't think Lyndon was really part of that. Lyndon never was a person who'd go to regular meetings, [laughter] unless he ran them.

JE: Aubrey Williams, was he in there?

VD: Yeah, Aubrey would go sometimes. But it was a lot of southerners, and they all got together and they all were responsible for getting that pamphlet out.

JE: That was in '38. It came out in June, I think, of that year.

VD: And the Southern Conference [for Human Welfare], it--I think what people have never understood and taken seriously enough is the fact that it was backed by the president of United States and it was his idea actually to begin with. He did it because he was mad as hell, to use the expression, at the way they had been treated by the southern senators. He really was angry with them.

JE: To make matters worse, not only did they give him a hard time in the 1936 election and right on past there, but after that pamphlet came out in June, they had the off-year elections in '38 and the Republicans made big gains that fall. So just about three weeks before this meeting in Birmingham, there had

been an election at which several senators were defeated and a whole bunch of House seats were lost. So it was like rubbing salt in the wound, you know.

VD: Well, it was rubbing salt in the wound. I'm not just saying this because he's my brother-in-law, but I always felt Roosevelt used Hugo [Black] as one method of getting back at them.

JE: Now, he was in the Senate, wasn't he?

VD: He was in the Senate but he had stood by Roosevelt all the way. But he had particularly stood by him in that court packing. So that was the thing that I think probably made Roosevelt more grateful.

JE: When was he appointed to the court?

VD: He was appointed to the court, it seems to me, in '38.

JE: Could it have been '37? I can check this.

VD: He was about to run for the Senate, and we were down in Alabama. My little sister was being insulted all the time. I remember that. Then all that big to-do came about the Ku Klux Klan. I think that was, when was the first meeting of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare?

JE: It was in the fall of '38.

VD: Well, this was '37, the year before.

JE: And when he went on the court, is that when John Sparkman was appointed to take his place, or how did Sparkman get in the Senate? Who took Hugo's place as a senator?

VD: I thought it was John Bankhead, wasn't it?

JE: Did they move Bankhead from the House? Did he get appointed to the Senate?

VD: Well, I have to think way back. Let's see. Lister took his old place.

JE: Well, who was the other senator then?

VD: John Bankhead.

JE: I thought he was in the House.

VD: That was Bill Bankhead, you're thinking about. This is John Bankhead. Bill Bankhead was the Speaker of the House, but John Bankhead was the brother. Rather crooked people, too.

JE: And which one was Tallulah's father?

VD: Bill Bankhead. Tallulah and Eugenia.

JE: And he was the Speaker of the House?

VD: Yes. And they used to always say, "You can always tell Eugenia and Tallulah apart. Eugenia is the one that marries and Tallulah doesn't." [Laughter] Eugenia married five or six times.

JE: So John Bankhead was a senator, and Hugo was a senator, and Hugo went to the Supreme Court, and Lister Hill was. . . .

VD: And that's just as much as I remember. You know, you ought to check.

JE: Yeah, I will.

[Interruption]

So the report came out, the pamphlet, about the number one economic condition in the summer of '38. Was it already determined at that time, had the Southern Conference for Human Welfare actually been organized by then?

VD: We organized it at the meeting in Birmingham. Frank Graham was elected president.

JE: And that was the first time that anybody had ever come together?

VD: Yeah.

JE: Who planned all that?

VD: I just told you, Mrs. Roosevelt and Lucy Randolph and Joe Gelders, and the president of the United States.

JE: Yeah, but, I mean, those are the people who had the big idea. I mean, who were the people who made all those plans.

VD: Oh, Joe Gelders was one. He was right there, and Miss Lucy. But I think that largely it was supported by the Miner's Union and Bill Mitch.

JE: The CIO and all of that?

VD: Yeah. Because, you see, the unions were just coming south, if you remember, and they were being fought pretty hard. And John L. Lewis was extremely generous as far as helping was concerned, any way he could. And Bill Mitch is dead now, but he was very active and very supportive. And another person that was very active was Myles Horton, who just died.

JE: Right. He was there, wasn't it, that November?

VD: Yes, and he was very active. And Maury Maverick was there. He got to be the head of the anti-poll tax committee.

JE: I went to that auditorium not long ago. You know, it's still there just exactly like it was then. The building's been remodeled and all that, but you can walk inside there and it looks exactly like it must have looked right then. That long

center aisle that comes right up from the street level. You go down some steps, and right down the center of the thing to the stage. They must have had seats down on the floor, did they not?

VD: Well, there were black on one side and white on the other. That's the main thing I remember. Sunday night, as you walked in, and Frank Graham made the first speech, it was integrated. It was mixed on both sides. The next morning, as we came in, it was segregated, and they had police all around.

JE: Was Bull Conner there?

VD: Yeah.

JE: Did you know who he was at that time? Was he a notorious figure then, as he came to be later?

VD: No, he was just police. But we realized that we were surrounded by the police, and they got up and they said, you know, if anybody crossed the aisle that they would be taken to jail, and they had the black mariahs outside waiting for us.

JE: That was the name that they gave to their secret police?

VD: No, black mariahs were the police vans to take you to jail, the vehicles. I don't know why they called them black mariahs. And that was when Mrs. Roosevelt took the chair and put it in the middle of the aisle, you know.

JE: Do you remember that? You have a vivid mental picture of her doing that?

VD: Yes. She just took an old folding chair and just plunked it right in the middle of the aisle.

JE: And sat down there.

VD: And nobody dared to arrest her either. She was a remarkable woman.

JE: Miss Modjeska Simkins told me, when I talked to her up at Birmingham when they had the homecoming reunion group, she had a recollection that--let me see if I can find it here. She was not at that meeting, so this is hearsay, and I'm a little skeptical of this, but this is what she said. "Mrs. Roosevelt asked for some chalk and a ruler, and that she marked the mid-line in the line, and sat her chair right astraddle the line."

VD: I don't remember that. She just put the chair there. She didn't mark it. The thing was that she was daring them to arrest her, and they didn't arrest her. See, there were police all around the meeting hall.

JE: Do you have a picture in your mind of that meeting hall itself?

VD: Very vivid, it was a long time ago, but I can remember. The thing about it was that Sunday night had been extremely pleasant. Frank Graham had made a very fine speech. It had been unsegregated. It was about the first unsegregated meeting I'd ever been to in the South. Then the next morning, we walked in, we were surrounded by police, and the black mariahs were all around the building, and we were told that if broke the segregation law in any way, shape, or form, we'd be taken to jail. They announced that from the podium. So that changed the whole atmosphere, and the atmosphere after that got very tense. It meant that there was segregation, and the people could go up on the platform. Like Mrs. Bethume could go up on the platform,

and they couldn't segregate her from the white people on the platform. She was glad to say what she had to say. She had plenty to say too [laughter].

JE: You said in your book, I'm quoting you, "This meeting was full of love and hope. It was thrilling. The whole South seemed to be coming together to make a new day."

VD: That was Sunday night.

JE: Most have been an exhilarating feeling to see that.

VD: It really was because, the thing was, that there were just so many people there that you knew and loved.

JE: And then besides that, there were all those people you didn't even know, and they were obviously a part of that movement. Did it give you a sense of real hope about the South being able to work out its own problems.

VD: It certainly did. I can just remember feeling a sense of real exaltation. But I don't think it lasted all the way through because, let's see, Mrs. Roosevelt spoke that night and then Hugo spoke. After Mrs. Roosevelt spoke and after Hugo spoke, the papers came out with just the vicious lot of, you know, lies.

JE: You don't, by any chance, still have any papers from that period, do you? Like, for example, a copy of the program or the proceedings or anything.

VD: No, I wish I did have but I don't.

JE: Let me mention some names to you. I'd like it you would--obviously some of these are going to be people who were not there, and you can just say as far as you know they were not

there, or you don't have any recollection. But if I call a name of somebody who you remember as being involved, just tell me what you remember about what role they played. You mentioned Frank McAllister.

VD: I just couldn't stand him because he began to red-bait almost immediately. He was a socialist. And there was another fellow whose name I can't remember, also a socialist, but they began to red-bait almost from the first day. I didn't know who they were from Adam's house cat, and he asked me if I would let them drive me home. See, my mother and father lived in Birmingham. So they did drive me home, and all the way home he was asking me did I realize that the whole thing was a communist plot and, you know, the people were communist. Well, I disliked him immediately. I never have gotten over disliking him. I don't know whether he's even dead or alive now, but I just remember after the feeling I had had of such a beautiful sort of love-feast, and to have that start so soon.

JE: And that was just one of the little internal splits that eventually came out.

VD: Well, the socialists hated the communists and vice versa. If they ever got together, it was always bound to be a fight.

JE: What about H. L. Mitchell, was he there?

VD: Oh, he was a darling man. He just died recently. His wife still lives here in Montgomery. I called her up just the other day, poor thing, she's so lonely now that he's dead.

JE: Was he there at the meeting?

VD: I can't remember if he was there at the meeting or not. He was a socialist, but he wasn't the kind who was always red-baiting, but he was an actual socialist and believed it very firmly.

JE: What about Howard Kester?

VD: Well, I never knew him very well. He was with the church group.

JE: Was he at that meeting?

VD: If I recollect right, he was.

JE: And you said Myles Horton was there. An Aubrey Williams was there. Tell me about Aubrey Williams, what recollection you have of his role in that particular thing?

VD: He red-baited some himself at the time. He made sort of a joke of it, as I recall.

JE: He was a rather humorous fellow?

VD: Very funny.

JE: Good sense of humor. Clark Foreman, of course, was there and took an active role?

VD: Very active role. Indeed, he later got to be head of it. He came from a very aristocratic, rich family in Atlanta. I never thought he was myself, I'd known him a long, long time, but some people did think that he was sort of arrogant and rich. He really wasn't rich. He was a little arrogant maybe.

JE: Will Alexander?

VD: Oh, I knew him well. I think he was at that meeting, but I remember in Washington, he was a very nice man. He had some sort of an organization in Atlanta for a long time.

JE: The Council on Interracial Cooperation.

VD: Then he and his wife split up and took up with another girl, and that was a kind of scandal in Washington in those days [laughter].

JE: Willis Weatherford? You don't remember him. Virginius Dabney?

VD: Yes, I knew him well too, but not terribly. See, I lived in Virginia, you know, and Virginia Episcopal Theological Seminary. Virginius Dabney, we were always trying to get to support the anti-poll tax movement. He never would. So he and I had many a conversation, not a conversation but written, but he never would.

JE: Did he come to that meeting in Birmingham? You think he was not there?

VD: No, he was not there.

JE: Jonathan Daniels?

VD: No, Jonathan Daniels and Ralph McGill and Hodding Carter weren't there.

JE: None of these journalists came to this?

VD: Well, no, they didn't. Not only didn't they come, but unfortunately for the Southern Conference, they did a good deal of red-baiting, too.

JE: All of them?

VD: Well, yeah, I'd say they all. . . .

JE: Jane and Dolly Speed?

VD: Well, that's the two communists. They came from Montgomery. They were of the Baldwin family which is one of the

old, wealthy families here in Montgomery. And Dolly took Jane [her daughter] to Vienna because it was cheaper to live in Vienna in those days, and her husband had died. She came from Louisville where there was this Speed Museum.

JE: Big, important family in Louisville.

VD: Well, anyway, they may have been big and important but they were poor as Job's turkey. So she took them, her boy and her daughter, to Vienna to educate them. And while they were in Vienna, the Nazis came, and Jane got to be a communist. So did Dolly. Then when things that dangerous, they came back here to Montgomery to Mrs. Reed, her sister, who had a lovely place here.

JE: They were not married, either of them?

VD: Well, Dolly was kind of elderly to get married, and Jane got married to, I think he came from Puerto Rico or someplace.

JE: And Rob Hall ended up driving a Cadillac, married to a rich woman. He was the communist leader of Alabama at that time.

VD: That's right. He ended up marrying again and having two children. Two boys, one went to Andover and one went to Exeter, I think. He had a Cadillac, and he had nothing further to do with communist, you know, radical Maoist.

JE: Howard Lee?

VD: Well, Howard Lee was a sweet boy. He came from Arkansas, and he was a real kind of a country boy. He had a passion for Mrs. Roosevelt. He used to keep her mirror by his bed, and he just loved her dearly. As I recall, he committed

suicide, but nobody ever can remember, knew why he committed suicide.

JE: Alton Lawrence?

VD: Alton was a lovely boy, young. He went to the University of North Carolina, and he was very radical in a way, I suppose. He married a girl who worked in the mill. When we were called down to New Orleans--Jim Eastland, you know, Clark Foreman, and me, and Aubrey Williams--he never was called down. We thought that was very strange, and I think he became an informer. I hate to say that, that he saved himself from going. And he told me it was because his wife couldn't take it. Now, whether he actually informed or just refused to--I just know he disappeared off the face of the earth. I haven't seen him since.

JE: Mrs. Bethune?

VD: Oh, Mrs. Bethune was just like a great, you know, African lioness. She was a very large, stout woman who had tremendous amount of strength. She's the one that--I was working in the democratic committee, the women's division, and we were all working on getting rid of the poll tax because the women had a hard time voting. You see, the men didn't pay their poll tax, and they didn't have much money. So she said we had to get together with the blacks. So she got us together with people like Charlie Houston and Bill Hastie. Then Jim Farley said we couldn't do it in the democratic committee because it was making the southerners so mad. So we had to get out and do it outside the committee, I mean, fight against the poll tax.

JE: One anecdote you tell in the book is that Judge Charlton who was presiding spoke to Mary Bethune and said, "Mary, would you like to come to the platform?" And she wouldn't come until they called her Mrs. Bethune.

VD: That's absolutely true. She was not Mary. She was Mrs. Bethune.

JE: What about Louise Charlton? What was she like?

VD: She was a very nice, able woman. Somehow, she just disappeared after, never saw her again after that meeting.

JE: What kind of judge was she?

VD: I think she was kind of a. . . .

JE: Municipal judge or something here locally, I mean in Birmingham?

VD: Some sort of a. . . . After that meeting, I never saw her again.

JE: Maury Maverick was there?

VD: Maury was there, and he was wonderful. He always was terrific. He's the one that introduced the bill to get the poll tax. That was the first thing we did, you see.

JE: John L. Lewis come to that meeting?

VD: No. Bill Mitch was there.

JE: Claude Pepper was there, wasn't he?

VD: No.

JE: You don't think so? I know he came to some of the later ones. In fact, he was given the Jefferson Award at the last one of those meetings.

VD: He didn't come to the one in Birmingham, as I recall.

JE: Of course, Hugo Black was there.

VD: Hugo was the main one, and Mrs. Roosevelt.

JE: Lister Hill there? Any other office holders? The governor of Alabama came, Bibb Graves.

VD: I don't remember him.

JE: Some place I read that his wife was the one who took all the ladies around for a tour of the city. It was like a social event or something.

VD: I think that's wrong. I never remember that. Yeah, I think that's wrong, and I don't think Bibb Graves came. You've got to remember that, I told you about the love and affection and the feeling of thrill on the first night. By the second day when they'd begun to threaten us with police and all, the papers had also begun to be very hostile.

JE: John Temple Graves ironically ended up introducing Hugo Black, because the person who was supposed to was ill. And John Temple Graves, who at that time was saying all kinds of nice things about all this, even in the paper he did, but later on he wouldn't touch them with a ten foot pole.

VD: Yes, not only that, he wanted to clear himself of any kind of [laughter] dealing.

JE: Mark Ethridge? Barry Bingham?

VD: Not that I remember. Now, I may be mistaken about that because I don't remember their being there. Now, I can remember them as being in Chattanooga because they were trying very hard [Interruption]

Atlanta--the United Mine Workers, at that time, was very anti-war. In other words, they were against the war entirely. Well, you know, the president was for the war. So he was very much against the coal people. So Barry came down, and they were trying to keep the convention from passing a declaration against the war. You see, also at that time the communists, such as they were, were also against the war. It was during the period of the German war. So Barry and Mark were down there, for the President of the United States, trying their damnest to keep this organization from passing a resolution for peace and against war.

JE: I see.

VD: I can remember fighting for that, 'cause they did. The reason, it seems to me, the president was so much more engaged in it than people have ever given him any credit--maybe he didn't want to be known that he was engaged in it--was, as far as he was concerned, all he had [laughter]. He didn't have anything else to depend on.

JE: I've been reading some of John Temple Graves' newspapers and other people's papers from right around that time.

VD: They were out to get us.

JE: But they weren't then. What went in the newspaper during that immediate time was essentially. . . .

VD: They changed later.

JE: Yeah, I know. But I'm talking about that week. I'm talking about all these fifteen hundred people who came down there, and aside from the police and that one incident about segregation, it was a very favorable beginning.

VD: Well, that's true. It was. But then they turned later. [Laughter].

JE: Then everybody eventually fell away 'til the point where, if you go all the way up to 1950 and look, most of the people who were in that room wouldn't identify with that movement, with integration or any kind of racial thing.

VD: It was red-baiting again. Terrible threat of it and being caught up in it.

JE: Did you think or do you think now as you think back on it that the Southern Conference for Human Welfare in the beginning had an interest in eliminating segregation?

VD: Very much so.

JE: It didn't come out much in what was said there. There was not much talk about doing away with the institution of segregation. I mean, people came at it from different ways. They talked about the poll tax as being discrimination against white and black alike. They talked about the lynching laws such being a meanness that ought to be done away with. They talked about the white primary as being unfair. That everybody ought to have the right to vote. All that, you know, people understood, but none of that had to do with the institution of segregation, with segregated stores and restaurants and schools and churches and all that kind of business.

VD: Well, maybe it was understood rather than enunciated, but I can't think of anybody there that didn't think that segregation was a terrible evil. The fact that Mrs. Roosevelt

made such a point of refusing to accept it showed how we felt, I think. Because she made such a drastic point.

JE: Yeah. I was struck, reading about the Southern Regional Council later on in the '40s, when the Council was formed in 1944 and all the way up until almost the time of the Brown decision in '54, their official position was not to eliminate segregation but to make separate equal. They put all their emphasis on spending the money to upgrade the Negro schools.

VD: They did that, and not only that, they were anti-communist because they, Aubrey Williams, they wouldn't let him be on the Council. He was proposed for it, and they put him on it, and then he was thrown off. So then they asked Cliff, my husband, to be on. He said he wouldn't be on as long as they wouldn't let Aubrey on.

JE: So your recollection of the Southern Regional Council in the '40s was that it was a little bit to the right of where your thinking was?

VD: Yes, it was indeed. Nice people, but very much to the right. Because they didn't believe in, they didn't fight for integration, and then they had this--which I thought was the silly fear of communists taking over. It's turned out to be pretty silly.

JE: Yeah, look what's happening now.

VD: I mean, not only wouldn't they very well take us over, I mean, in the war, but hadn't got enough food to put on the table.

JE: What about Lillian Smith, was she at that meeting?

VD: Oh no, oh, she probably was at that meeting. She was a very lovely person in many ways, I thought, but she had a passion, not a passion, really--she never had a passion for anybody except what's her name, the lady she lived with--but she was very devoted to this Frank McAllister. He had a tremendous influence on her. She got out of the Southern Conference on account of him.

JE: Is that right?

VD: Yes, she just frankly got out. She said that Frank had gotten out, and she got out. Frank did as much harm as anybody .

. . . .

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

VD: The whole thing was so ridiculous [laughter].

JE: But your recollection is that McAllister was not from the South.

VD: No. The last time I heard of him teaching was in college up in Chicago.

JE: John Temple Graves, according to my reading on this, was co-chairman of the Race Relations Committee for this conference. He and F. D. Patterson, who was the president of Tuskegee, were the co-chairs of the committee that met during that week.

VD: Well, he certainly introduced Hugo very nicely, I'll say that.

JE: Dowbrowski was there, wasn't he?

VD: Yes, he was there.

JE: Was he chosen at that meeting to be the executive secretary of this.

VD: No.

JE: That came later.

VD: That was later. I think Lee and Alton Lawrence, either one or both of them, were--I think it was Howard Lee. He got to be the executive secretary.

JE: H. C. Nixon was there?

VD: Oh yes, and he was wonderful. Now, you talk about who ran it, you might say that he ran it more than anybody, if it got run. He wrote a wonderful book, you know, about the rural Piedmont. He was a lovely man. He was at Vanderbilt, I think.

He was extremely pleasant, delightful and charming man, but he got scared later on, and his wife just made him get out because she was just afraid on account of the children. Wouldn't have anything to live on. But he didn't red-bait and he didn't say anything wrong about us. He just got out.

JE: Gunnar Myrdal was there.

VD: If he was there, I never met him.

JE: According to the book, what's that man's name who wrote a book about the Southern Conference, he said that Myrdal was there researching the book that he subsequently published, the famous book on the American dilemma.

VD: I never. . . .

JE: Charles S. Johnson, the president of Fisk?

VD: I knew him, only in a pleasant way.

JE: And Rufus Clement who was the president of Atlanta University?

VD: Yeah, they were there. I knew all these people but, you know, I didn't know them extremely well. See, we had a very tight little group of people that became dear and darling friends and remained so until most of them died.

JE: Who would you name in that group?

VD: Well, Clark Foreman and Tex Goldschmidt and Cliff, my husband, and me, and Mary Foreman, Clark Foreman's wife, and Ricky Goldschmidt, who was Tex's wife, and then there was Aubrey Williams and his wife Anita. Let' see, and actually there was Lyndon and LadyBird.

JE: Was this back in Washington then?

VD: Yes, this is back in Washington.

JE: What about those people like Jonathan Daniels, many of those? Did you all socialize with them?

VD: Not at all. It was a completely different group. Then there was that man who was a great friend of Lyndon's, Caro's been writing about him in his book so much. He says about we were all such a close group. He named two or three people who were not in it, were wrong. Then, of course, Abe Fortas was there, right closely associated. We just had supper together often, 'cause we were great friends. I wouldn't say Lyndon and LadyBird were, yeah, they were a part of it.

JE: You went back to Washington, of course, after that meeting. How long did you live in Washington then? I can't recall when you all moved to Montgomery.

VD: I moved to Washington in 1933. Hugo was in the Senate. Hugo got him [Cliff] to come up there to help open the banks. He was with the Power Company law firm then, and they were having a pretty tough time [laughter] with that. So he went there. He thought he'd stay about two or three months, and we stayed twenty years.

JE: So you all left there when?

VD: '51.

JE: Oh, you stayed until '51. That's when you moved back here to Montgomery.

VD: So we stayed in Washington all that time. Then, you see, he went from the RFC to the Communications Commission.

JE: Let me mention another period of time, now that I know you were still living in Washington, I wonder about some thoughts you would have on this. [Interruption]

In the spring of 1950, now, I want to give you a few things to kind of jog your memory. That was the year that Claude Pepper was defeated in the Florida primary by George Smathers.

VD: Nasty son-of-a-bitch [laughter]. That was the vilest thing I ever saw in my life.

JE: Yeah. That same spring, almost within a month of that date, Frank Graham got beat. James F. Byrnes got elected governor of South Carolina, a genteel racist. He was a boiler-plate racist, down to the marrow of his bone.

VD: That's right.

JE: He went to the governor's office as a bitter enemy and foe of Harry Truman. I'm thinking of that summer and subsequently the election in the fall, the Korean War had started. The Dies Committee was going full blast, and the Senate's Internal Security Committee was getting into it. The whole red thing was getting completely out of hand, and there were court cases. . . .

VD: You see, Clifford was resigning then. He was reappointed in 1948 by Truman, and he refused to accept the appointment on account of the loyalty oath. He said he would have to administer the loyalty oath, and he thought it was wrong and bad and unconstitutional. So he rescinded. I mean, he didn't rescind, he just refused to take appointment. Then during that year, 1948-49-50, he practiced law in Washington. There

were a whole lot of people who were in trouble. The trouble was that they never paid him anything. So that's when we decided to come back to Montgomery.

JE: Well, I guess the question I'm trying to lead up to is, it strikes me as a sort of courageous thing for you all to come back South at that point. This wasn't a very safe place for people to be with the kinds of attitudes that you all had.

VD: We didn't have any place to go. You see, Cliff had had a very severe bone operation on his back. So he had to come home 'cause it's the only place--his mother told him to come home until he got well. So there was nothing for us to do but come home. We had no place to go. I mean, we had a nice house, but we couldn't pay it.

JE: You couldn't make a living up there.

VD: No. So we came home, and it was a year or more before he could even practice at all. We weren't courageous about doing it. It was just having to. We knew it was bad, and then we knew when he took those first cases, he knew it was going to be bad. But he took them just the same. Then, you see, when Mrs. Parks came on, he went down and got her out of jail, although the NAACP had to handle the case.

JE: Had she been up to Highlander before that or after that?

VD: Yeah, I got her up there before that. If you read the old lady from Charleston who was such a remarkable woman, she says in her book that Mrs. Durr got Mrs. Parks to Highlander, and

I did. I was the one who told Myles to invite her up. Then Aubrey Williams gave her the money to go on.

JE: That was before 1955, wasn't it?

VD: Yes.

JE: So this whole idea of Mrs. Parks, who's finally getting tired and sitting down and denying those people, that wasn't really true, was it? I mean, she knew what she was doing.

VD: She knew what she was doing, and after having a visit to Highlander, she realized how it was worse than ever. She just couldn't stand it any more, you know, being made to stand up for a white man. But it was tough. I would have left, but Cliff wouldn't leave. So, of course, I wouldn't leave. But you see, I still don't think the South is any nest of [laughter]--I think it's still racist. I don't know how long it's going to be before it's not racist.

JE: You and I aren't going to live to see the day.

VD: No, I don't believe we'll ever see that day. You know, I'm making the best of it now, a lot of people I like and all, good friends. But as far as the South actually becoming a [laughter] place of equality, I don't see it at all.

JE: Again, just to linger for a minute on that period around 1950, as I look back on that, it seems to me like that was a low point in a way. After those election defeats and the rise of the anti-communist stuff and the growing agitation among the white power structure in the South against any kind of racial change, it just seemed to me like things, from 1950 until '54-'55, was just sort of like a quiet period where nobody did much.

And it took the court action and the people going in the street and marching to bring about the social change that we got.

VD: Oh, absolutely. There's no doubt about it. The thing is that the combination of the fact that Mrs. Parks refused to stand up, that was the sort of trigger point. But the thing that made it so amazing was that Dr. King would have come along at exactly the same time. So here you have a man who speaks with the tongues of men and of angels or whatever. Just a marvelous orator. And he can stir people up the way he stirred them up. Perfectly remarkable.

JE: What time in '51, what time of year, did you all come here? [Interruption]

VD: ()

JE: Yeah, that happened to a lot of people.

VD: ()

JE: They never even knew anything was going on.

VD: Well, you see, when we got down here in '51, Cliff went right to bed.

JE: What month of the year was that?

VD: It was in the summer. I think it was in June or July. He had to go right to bed. Then he had a doctor in Birmingham who was his doctor. So he stayed up with his sister in Birmingham. He stayed up there for about three or four months. Then when he came back down here, he had to swim every day. I was taking shorthand and typewriting. Finally got a job.

JE: Where did you work?

VD: I worked at the insurance office of the state. We were living in my mother's house which wasn't very far. She had a great, big old house and two servants. So the children at least had, I had three children (). I was lucky, but it was a bad time because there was nobody in Montgomery at all that we could talk to that had any interest in anything we were interested in except Aubrey Williams, ().

JE: So did you see a lot of him during this time?

VD: Yes, constantly, every day. After the Jim Eastland thing, you know, and being threatened, with Wallace being put in jail too, and he went on off back to Washington.

JE: He's dead.

VD: He was dying, well, he was dying of cancer of then.

JE: Is his wife still living?

VD: No, she's dead too.

JE: Did they have children?

VD: Oh yes, Maury, Winston, Jerry, and--had four boys. There's a very good book that Mr. Salmond wrote. You haven't seen that? Well, you ought to get it. It's John Salmond. He's from Australia and he's just finished a book on my husband. It's coming out by the University of Alabama Press. You see, the thing you've got to realize from our point of view was, in the first place, none of us were communists, and we thought the whole thing [laughter] was absolutely insane. And the whole communist fear was insane.

JE: It was a diversion. It had nothing to do with the real issues.

VD: Had nothing to do with the real issues, but more than that, it was so idiotic. Cliff had been over there twice. Had been sent by the government, once for communications and once for something else. And he came back and he said they don't have enough fuel. They couldn't any more defeat us than, it's impossible.

JE: If you think of the years 1951, from the summer of '51 until the summer of '54, can you think of any involvements that you had that were active in these social issues, or was that pretty much a quiet time for you?

VD: Well, the thing was that's the time I got Mrs. Parks up to visit Highlander. Cliff, when he started his law practice, he immediately became active in police brutality. These men would come in with him and pull up their shirts, and you could see where the welts were. He was busy with that. Now, he never won any cases, but he got a lot of publicity for these, which they didn't like. But I had three children and I was working and had a job, life seemed so busy to me that I can't think of any particular. . . . The only thing I can think of in that period was the terrific red-baiting.

JE: Yeah, right. It just got worse and worse, didn't it?

VD: Yeah, just got worse, worse, worse. It spread and spread and spread. George Wallace took it up.

JE: Do you think there was a deliberate, conscious, intentional seizing of that issue, the red-baiting issue, by the segregationists and the racists of the south in order to cloud the issue of social change?

VD: I don't think there's any doubt about it.

JE: I mean, obviously there was a parallel. It was a coincidental thing to the very least. But I wonder if you think that people like George Wallace and Eastland and Talmadge in Georgia and these people seized upon the anti-communist thing as a way to disarm the people who were trying to get. . . .

VD: Oh, I don't think there's any doubt about it. It was so plain to be seen. Jim Eastland was running for Senate, and the Brown decision was about to come down. Okay, so what does he do? He finds me out, who is Hugo Black's sister-in-law, then his son, young Hugo, who was working up in Birmingham. Then he gets hold of Aubrey Williams and Myles Horton and holds this hearing about the communist danger. That the Brown decision will prove that the Supreme Court is a communist outfit. So you see, they just use it all the time. Use it constantly. Dirty time. [Interruption]

JE: Run my theory by you, Mrs. Durr, and see if you think this holds any water. In 1945 there was so much change in the wind all over the world as a consequence of the war, the end of the war, the atomic bomb, new technology, television was just coming into its own, air conditioning had just arrived in most people's houses and was coming to their cars--the whole society was being changed. Airplanes, jet airplanes, I think in 1944 they had something like seventeen flights a day out of the Atlanta airport. That's all. Now they have seventeen a minute. I mean, all of this stuff was just right on the lip of change. It was just about to happen. Meantime, all these men had been

out of the South, had gone overseas, had been in new situations where they saw people living in different ways. Women had been working in the factories and working government jobs. Nothing was like it had been before. Everything was going to change. And it seems now, as I look back on that period of the last five years of the forties, that it was a golden opportunity for the South to make a lot of social change, in terms of race and class and economic conditions of people and whatnot, voluntarily. To decide that the time was right and to go ahead and do that, but it didn't do it. It shrank away from doing that. The politicians prevailed, the governors and senators and congressmen prevailed, against the president of the United States even, and prevented social change of that kind from taking place. And so as a consequence of our failure to do it voluntarily, then we came up on the twenty-five year period that began in 1954 with the Brown decision and that, indeed, goes on to this very day of unsettled, incomplete social change that people still are not in agreement about. So I'm looking at that little five year period as what our former President Reagan called a window of opportunity, a little hinge of history, when things change from an old way that looks essentially backward to a new way that looks forward. And in both directions the view is rather frightening. Right there in the middle, there was a chance for people to say--in other words, it was the last opportunity for the South to fix its own social wagon, and it chose not to do it and as a consequence, we're still mired in this problem. Does that make sense to you?

VD: Well, it certainly does make sense to me because I certainly think we're mired in the same problems. Would you like a glass of wine?

JE: Yes, I would. If I wrote a book that essentially said that. . . . [Interruption]

I'm working on, and I'm looking for people to talk to who can identify with that notion. That it was an opportunity lost. And you all were trying. You were trying your dead-level best to get people to move along on that issue, but it just wasn't going to happen. There were too many powerful people who were so immersed in the culture of segregation and racial inequity that they couldn't give that up.

VD: Yeah, but I also think that red-baiting had a lot to do with it.

JE: But as you pointed out though, it was segregationists, it was racists, who seized on the red issue to work to their own ends.

VD: That's absolutely true.

JE: So it all kind of worked together.

VD: But the thing that bothers me today is--here is this great, big festivity for Mrs. Parks. There were only a very few white people there, just a handful. All the rest of them were black. [Interruption - talking in background, someone else enters. Extraneous aside for a few minutes]

JE: Let me ask you a little bit more about that auditorium. It's like a horseshoe and there are seats all up, like in the balcony, all the way around, and then there are the people down

on the floor. When Mrs. Roosevelt spoke, the paper said there were seven thousand people there. That would fill the whole thing up, including the balcony and everything. Do you remember that place as being full?

VD: I do, indeed. It was full for her, and it was almost as full for Hugo.

JE: What about on that Sunday night when you started?

VD: Well, no, when we started, it wasn't that full.

JE: Was everybody down on the floor, not up in the balconies?

VD: Everybody was on the floor. And there was a lot of kissing and hugging, glad to see you.

JE: And also singing. It was kind of like a big camp meeting almost?

VD: Yeah. And then Frank got up and made just a wonderful speech, Frank Graham.

JE: He must have been quite a fine man.

VD: He was. A wonderful man. And he got beat just the way Claude Pepper got beat, by red-baiting. Absolutely insanely ridiculous. They both got beat. Frank, with him particularly, it was just so absolutely insane.

JE: Something else about that auditorium that struck me, during the days of segregation they had entrances on the side, outside the building, on both sides, and the black people had to go in those doors and up the stairs and sit in the balcony for like some kind of show or anything like that. They sat up there in the crow's nest.

VD: Well, I don't remember that at the Southern Conference Meeting. I remember so distinctly the division.

JE: So I'm thinking, they must have come in the front door, though, just like everybody else did.

VD: I think they must have too.

JE: Particularly that first night when everybody was together on the floor.

VD: Well, it was a great beginning. Then you see the next meeting was in Chattanooga, and then the next meeting was at Nashville. Now, Nashville, I remember, this was one of the dirtier things they did. Mrs. Roosevelt came down with Paul Robeson and he was going to sing. So it was all kind of nasty, disgusting, you know, the rumors about her and Robeson. Rumors, I don't know how it got around, but it did.

JE: She was a very courageous lady, wasn't she?

VD: She certainly was courageous. She was a very brave woman, but she was a woman who was unhappy. She'd had some sort of feeling of--it's hard to express--you should read the book of her daughter. Sex was something terrible to her. Naturally then for her husband to have gone off with another woman as he did, was a terrible blow to her.

JE: She was an unhappy person in her private life.

VD: I think she was an unhappy person in her private life, not her public life, but her private life. She was brought up like a Victorian maiden of some kind. Mr. Roosevelt was not a Victorian that way at all.

JE: As, alas, most men are not. Never have been.

VD: [Laughter] Never will be. I do feel though, in her case, it was a very sad that she would adore a man as she did, you know. Really worshiped him and feel just a sense of love as she did for him, and then have him reject her. But I think she felt rejected.

JE: Let me ask you something else, Mrs. Durr. With a few exceptions, the people who were the most active in the Southern Conference for Human Welfare were white, middle and upper class southerners, most of them, not all. I don't guess H.L. Mitchell [laughter] had a lot of money any time or his family background was, but you take Joe Gelders who was from a wealthy Jewish family and Clark Foreman from a wealthy family. Your family was not wealthy and, in fact, there were times when you all had considerable poverty, but you were an upper class family by my understanding, and I think yours, of what that means.

VD: What it means [laughter] was that you were rich at one time.

JE: That's right. It was out of a southern tradition of noblise oblisse or patrician feelings. All of you had come out of a cultural experience that tried to rise above the meanness of segregation. And you all were idealistic people, trying to improve the world. But it was essentially an upper middle class, white effort, wasn't it, by and large?

VD: Well, it certainly was, no doubt about it. On the other hand, the person who really did the most to change the South was Lyndon Johnson, which was the vote and the federal thing. Lyndon wasn't upper class at all. Country boy, grown up

in the hills. And I don't think he had though very much about segregation. I think that Bird maybe might have influenced him some, but I don't think he thought about race at all. Because, you see, he lived up there where there wasn't. . . .

JE: But he ended up being the one who did the most.

WD: That's right. He ended up being the one who did the most. I always thought Bird helped him. She never talked about it, but I always thought she did.

JE: You know, I had a notion one time, I got to thinking. .

WD: You ought to go and see her.

JE: I'd like to, yeah, that's a good idea. I got to thinking one time that if you had elected the wives of all the presidents we elected instead of men, we'd have had a lot better country.

WD: That may be true. On the other hand, Lyndon did what he did, and how he did it I'll never know, you know, to get that bill through. I just don't know how he did it. He was a good politician. I always say he made a mistake on the Vietnamese War. But if you ever have a chance, if she'll talk to you, of course, she's very. . . . But she'll defend her husband. I think it would be interesting to know from her what he thought about the race situation.

JE: In this period of time, the '40s.

WD: Because, after all, he was the one who changed it by passing the law, you know. And then not only that, he said when he passed the law, this is going to be the end of this [laughter] Democratic Party.

JE: Harry Truman is a puzzling figure to me. You know, he was the one who instigated a lot of this stuff, even more than Roosevelt in some ways. Like dropping the race barriers in the Armed Forces and then that Civil Rights Committee that he formed in the '40s. And yet, I can't find any clue at all in reading books about him that he really cared about this one way or the other. He didn't have any strong feelings about the racial thing.

VD: Well, not only that, he was the one that did all the red-baiting. I think he did a great harm. I never had many kind feelings toward Harry Truman because my husband tried so many of these cases where these people were absolutely ruined and thrown out, and had actually done nothing whatever. He had a woman, I'll never forget, a black woman, they said she was a communist. Found out she had gone to George Washington University and was taking a course in culture or something.

JE: Some inanity.

VD: That's right. They said she was a communist. Then it turned out that these two white women, old white rabbits, were after her because she was above them, and they thought it was terrible for white women to be bossed by a black woman. They were just out to get her. And when it came down, you know, the finger was put on them and they were discovered to be the ones who were doing all this dirty work. Oh, they cried, and they said they promised. Everybody had said they'd be protected. But it was so much dirty work going on.

JE: It was a mean spirited time.

VD: Really mean spirited.

JE: You knew Aubrey William really well?

VD: Very well.

JE: That man wasn't a communist, was he? I mean, that's ludicrous, isn't it, to think that he would have been?

VD: ()

JE: And Clark Foreman? That's just a big laugh. He couldn't have been communist.

VD: Clark Foreman wasn't.

JE: And I've known Myles Horton, I knew Myles Horton for the last twenty-five years, and I would absolutely bet my last dime that man was never a communist, not even in spirit, let alone. . . .

VD: Well, it was so stupid.

JE: There weren't any damn communists in the South that I could tell, except here and there, you know, a little fringe group of people.

VD: The thing is for Myles and Aubrey, being called a communist was absurd. But they were. There's no doubt of it. They certainly were. And Myles, not that he's died, I've been reading the obituaries and even the New York Times has given him an obituary. But when I think of all the times I used to go up there.

JE: Oh yeah, he was--I wrote a long piece once about the trial of Highlander, put him on trial, you know. And it was the communist thing and the racial things all wrapped up, but all they could find to really nail with was that they had a little

beer. And they stuck him for sending beer without a license. Took away the charter. Took all their property out in the middle of a field and had an auction. Sold every last stick of furniture.

VD: Burned down the building.

JE: Just an absolute disgrace.

VD: I wish you'd stay and have supper with us.

JE: Well, I appreciate it very much.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW