

TRANSCRIPT: WOODROW COLEMAN

Interviewee: Woodrow Coleman
Interviewer: David Cline
Interview Date: April 16, 2010
Location: Raleigh, North Carolina
Length: One audio file, approximately 28 minutes

START OF INTERVIEW

DC: Okay, so good afternoon. My name is David Cline for the Southern Oral History Program, the Duke Oral History Project, and the SNCC Documentary Project. It is April 16, 2010. We're in Raleigh, North Carolina and I'm speaking today with Woodrow Coleman, and if you would introduce yourself and tell us when and where you were born and where you were raised? We'll take it from there.

WC: My name is Woodrow Coleman. I was born in Texarkana, Texas, January 14, 1934. [Pause] What else you need?

DC: Okay. [Laughs] Can you tell me a little bit about your family, how many kids were in your family?

WC: I had four brothers in my family. I was the oldest one and three of them--. I think only one went to college. [Funny thing], my third brother went to college. When he graduated from college--when he graduated from high school--he wanted to go to college and so, well, nobody had no money then for him to go to college, you know. [It wasn't no thing.]

DC: What did your father do?

WC: My father worked at the Coca-Cola plant and before he worked there he worked at a place called a nursery. When I was a kid he worked at this nursery and we had a little house and we had all kind of fruit, peach trees, pear trees, you know, all around us so we always had plenty of fruit to eat. But anyway, as I was saying, my brother, the strange thing is one of my cousins lived next door and moved to Bakersfield, California, and we was cousins, just like a whole family, and so she found out, you know, he didn't have no money to go to college. She said, "Come out here. You can stay with us and go to college." In California college was free, [Laughs] you know, so he went out there. He [02:32] go to college. He had to work so he got a job as a security guard around the college, which was a real good job, you know, because it was a state job. So he got that job and then when he was done, he finished two years of college, he transferred to Cal State in Los Angeles, California. He was already [with the] state, just moved over there and got a job, the same job. Then he graduated from Cal State and he got a job in [poli-science]. [03:14] company. I'm telling this story for one reason. Just recently the tuition was raised in California and I said, "Man, you should be out there protesting because you got a free education and now they're raising [03:34]." He said, "It ain't gonna do no good now because there ain't no money."

But you know and I realize--my brother realize here, he had three kids, all his kids went to college. The only reason all his kids went to college and graduated from college is he had a college education, his wife had a college education, and their life was a lot better than mine. They live a whole different life [than I do]. But you know, [now I want you to] think about that. I had one son, he graduated from college and I didn't go to college.

DC: Tell us about that, about your schooling and going out for work and that kind of thing.

WC: I just graduated from high school and that was it and I started working.

DC: In Texas?

WC: Yeah. Well technically I worked before then. During my time there was lots of work around. I guess technically there was work around, for kids I guess. I used to get a lawn mower and just go around mowing people's lawns, you know, so I worked all the time.

DC: And how did you first get involved in Civil Rights Movement kind of work?

WC: Well I guess it came from my mother's part, but once I came to California I joined the NAACP. Of course my mother said I should do it and I think my parents belonged to it too, and so they met once a month in East L.A. I was about twenty years old or something and there wasn't a lot of young people there; it was a bunch of old people.

DC: And, I'm sorry, you had moved from Texas to--?

WC: California.

DC: To California.

WC: Yeah. So, some guy said to me, he said, "Man, you don't need to be over there with these old people. You should be in CORE." I didn't know nothing about CORE. [Laughs] So he said, "Yeah, man, that's where the young people's at." So, he told me where to go and I went over to CORE and I met [06:18] our office. We worked at night so they used it during the daytime so we went there. So I guess I went to one, maybe two meetings or something, and the next meeting I went to was when Birmingham

burst, when they put the dogs [on the demonstrators and water], and the place was just full. There was like fifteen or twenty new people there that I didn't even see, you know. What's going on? [06:58] demonstration. The thing that--. What was in back of my mind and came out is that the people was concerned about--that's the impression I got-- they was concerned about mistreatment of the dogs, not that the dogs were biting the people, you know, and I was--. I didn't worry too much about that because if you got peoples, you know--I was interested in the demonstration, but it took me a long time to realize that was important too, mistreatment of dogs, because dogs aren't like human beings. They can't talk, they can't vote, they can't say nothing if somebody beats them. If nobody stands [up] for dogs it'll just be--they don't have no voice. So that's the way I got involved in CORE. From then we started raising money and doing demonstrations, [08:16] demonstrations.

DC: Can I stop you just one second--

WC: Sure.

DC: --and take a quick break. I'm sorry. I saw Jessie--

C: Oh, yeah.

DC: --and I just have to grab her. I'll be right back.

C: We're trying to coordinate the people--. We're doing recordings over at the hotel a little bit later--

WC: Oh, yeah?

C: --so we're moving people back and forth and she's someone that needs to be over at the hotel right now. [Laughs] It's been a little bit of a mess getting this stuff

coordinated, having two different sites we have to take care of. Have you been enjoying the conference so far?

WC: Yeah.

C: Yeah.

WC: I really enjoyed [09:07] today.

C: Oh, yeah.

WC: I tell you, he was right on the mark.

C: I had to miss it. I was doing interviews here so I missed it, but it was good, huh?

WC: Yeah.

C: Yeah. I saw him speak at Duke about two years ago, I think. Most amazing thing I think I've ever seen.

WC: You talk about Duke, my son, who moved from California to here, we were talking last night about Duke.

C: Oh, yeah? [Laughs]

WC: He was saying how like Duke, they got an atomic energy plant, right?

C: Uh huh.

WC: Yeah. He said they said by 2010, or 20-something, they were going to have seventy-five percent atomic energy and twenty-five--thirty percent coal. I said what about wind and solar? No, no, [that ain't even a subject].

C: Wow.

WC: [Laughs] He said, no. He said some electrical official said she brings it up every time and [they] vote it down. They don't even talk about it. [Laughs] I didn't know nothing about North Carolina until he moved here. I learned a little about it.

C: Yeah? It's an interesting place.

WC: Right. Just between North Carolina and South Carolina is night and day.

C: Oh, yeah, definitely. Did you figure it all out?

DC: Yes.

C: Jessie should be over there [and isn't, right]?

DC: Right. She's just going to go now.

C: Okay.

DC: It's all going to work out.

WC: I forgot where we left off at.

DC: [Pause] Okay, so we--. You were just saying how you'd gotten involved in CORE and really that first couple of meetings you were talking about.

WC: Oh, yeah.

DC: Yeah. What year was that you moved to L.A.?

WC: '55.

DC: Okay.

WC: Yeah. So we start doing support for Birmingham, like we'd picket the federal building and protest, you know, [to get] the Justice Department to do something about the civil rights demonstrations down South. That went on for awhile, and all of a sudden--well not all of a sudden. I guess from that the Freedom Rides started. My L.A. CORE sent more Freedom Riders than anybody else. They sent about three hundred and

some Freedom Riders down South. I think they sent one group down South and I think they sent one group to Texas. So that was a whole new experience, the Freedom Ride thing, and it really was amazing the kind of support we got. For instance, we had one Freedom Rider that went down to Mississippi and he was too young and they sent him back, and we just worked him to death because every night he had to go speak [if somebody wanted a speaker] because he was the only Freedom Rider available. I mean he really worked. He was a young dude too, and I guess he had a lot of energy, so every night he was speaking somewhere. I think about it nowadays, he was speaking at Jewish community centers, churches, places like that, and we'd raise fifteen, twenty dollars, or something like that. You know, [Laughs] it don't mean nothing now, but when the Freedom Riders came back, they had--. Well you know to get them down there you had to raise the money to send them down there, and come back, but also I think they sent them back--. I think CORE paid for their way back but I think we paid for the tickets to go down there. Sometimes we had to do it--. [When we're black] we had to do it by airline. But we had to raise that money. We raised that money just by, you know, fifteen, twenty dollars, just like that [14:30].

DC: What kinds of other work do you remember doing with CORE?

WC: The other thing we did, we had--. The city had a housing tract in a place called Monterrey, which is like fifteen minutes' drive, in those days, from Los Angeles. It was still in L.A. County. The way housing tracts are made, they have three or four model houses and direct the people to the model houses and that's where you make the sale at. But once you take over the model houses they don't have nowhere--. [15:19] operation now. We had a sit-in at a housing tract for about--I think it was some kind of

record like sixty-five days and sixty-five nights, in a place called Monterrey Park, and I think we started on Saturday and on Sunday the police chief came out. He said, "What's going on?" I said, "We're just sitting out here waiting to buy a house." [Laughs] So he said, "Oh, okay." So we never seen him no more. But we finally got the house.

DC: Do you remember other projects that you were involved in?

WC: We had several housing projects we worked on. One of them was a place in Wilmington, California, near the beach--not the beach--yeah, near the beach, where a guy who worked at the post office wanted a house and they [wouldn't sell] the house. This wasn't necessarily in a housing tract but this was [where they'd] built a bunch of houses, so what we did was we got a white couple to go in and see the house. [16:53] You know you come out and they let you have a key and go around and look at the house. So when we got the key we was already set; we just moved into the house, physically, about, oh, four or five of us physically moved into the house. [And we fixed the house up, put stuff on the floor 17:21 stuff,] because this was the house they wanted so we wanted the house to be new, not even used. We wanted it to be just like it was a new house, so we made sure that--. You know we put stuff down so we wouldn't mess it up. We physically moved into the house, got the lights, telephone, all that hooked up and stayed there for a couple of weeks. One of the things that I did, I was working so [there was other people] in the day time so I would leave to go to work every morning. So one day I left to go to work [18:14] I came back somebody was, you know, would let you in the house. I came back three times. I don't know--. I always forget stuff. I guess the third time I came back the guy just knew it was me so he just opened the door, and it was the police. [Laughs] They arrested everybody.

DC: Oh, no.

WC: Yeah. So I used to call the house every day at 12:00 to see what happened. The phone rang and nobody answered the phone so I finally called the office and they told me they'd been arrested. So we decided--. What we did was, we got sleeping bags-- it was in wintertime too, by the way, [Laughs] it was cold too--and moved out on the lawn, you know the front of the lawn? By the way, there wasn't no lawn out there. It was just dirt. So we moved out there and we stayed out there maybe a week and the police come and just arrested us all, took us to jail. So they took us all to jail, took the sleeping bags and everything. So when you're arrested they take all that stuff, so as soon as we got out of jail we immediately [started] getting more sleeping bags and stuff and moved back on the lawn. By that time one of the neighbors across the street--his name was Mr. Castro--had wetted the whole thing down, the yard, with mud that thick in it. He just wetted the whole thing down. So we just [20:08] in the mud, [Laughs] just laying out there in the mud. This is wintertime, mind you. [Laughs]

At some point, I don't know how long it was, the police come and arrested us for that. Now, this time when they come we photographed them. [There was a photographer there,] taking pictures. There was mud, they got all muddy, and everything, and you see police [doing with their] feet on people and all that, and this guy was taking these pictures, and they took us all off to jail. A guy with *Newsweek*--I can't remember his name but he worked for *Newsweek*--he wanted to see the pictures. He said he'd publish the pictures. So we got the pictures developed and took them out to him and gave them to him, and he looked at them. He said, "Oh, no. I can't publish these pictures." He said, "Nobody will believe this because this only happens in the [South]." So he never

published the pictures, you know, and it really just sort of--. [21:20] Anyway, one thing led to another. At some point, maybe five or six years later, this guy ain't working with *Newsweek*. He's just doing--when they had the underground papers?

DC: Mm hmm.

WC: It was one [time] we had underground papers all over the country, well probably in California. I don't know [21:44] too. He got a good job working for some rich guy that put out a newspaper. The paper was really a good paper, it had a lot of money behind it, except people wasn't buying it. So somebody sold him a story, I think ten thousand dollars, for D.B. Cooper--. You know who D.B. Cooper is?

DC: Mm hmm.

WC: They said, [Laughs] sold him D.B. Cooper [22:12] story. [Laughs] I think the story was--. [22:20] D.B. Cooper [was]. He bought the story. Before he printed it everybody knew it was a hoax. [Laughs] And so anyway, the guy fired him for that, [Laughs] so I got a big kick out of it.

DC: Now did you follow the development of SNCC and the work that SNCC was doing? Did you know about that on the West Coast?

WC: Yeah, but it wasn't that much--. Later on, as I got [more in the Movement] I began to follow SNCC and we had little support groups of SNCC out there, yeah. But it was a good combination between SNCC and CORE.

DC: Did you continue to work in the Movement?

WC: Yeah. Actually, [Laughs] I'm not a professional, but we got involved in employment--. We done a lot of work in housing. L.A. CORE was known for housing, you know. A lot of people don't understand about housing. One of the things we did

was, this was copied all--. We got it from somebody else and it was copied all over the nation. At one point they wouldn't bid on new housing for minorities, only less than one percent. The only houses they got were the houses when the whites moved out of them, you know. So what we did, we got this from somebody else, it wasn't our idea. It was something called Operation Window Shop. See we had people coming in all this time wanting to buy houses but people wouldn't sell them to them. We didn't have the ability and the manpower to go around to every housing tract. It was all over the place. [They] was building everywhere so we didn't have the manpower. So we developed this thing called Operation Window Shop and that's where we told people, go anywhere you want to buy a house; you go find it. If they won't sell it to you then you come back and tell us. You find the house and we'll get it for you. So the first time we did it, all the housing tracts, they closed down for the weekend. [So we did it a second time.] Well I mean the weekend is when you sell houses and you can't stay in business, and if you discriminate you can't stay in business and sell houses, so it had a big effect on discrimination in the sense that these guys, they couldn't afford to [shut down]. So we got a lot of people into houses. They had to. So that had a big effect on housing.

But anyway, we started doing stuff on employment and we would attract a lot of people, a mass of people. We had a bunch of young people and there was a bunch of old folks. I was part of a group in CORE known as the Action Faction. [Laughs] They were saying all we want is action. We didn't want to do nothing but just picket and sit-ins and stuff like that, you know. That led to something--we don't call it a split. A bunch of us started forming another organization out of CORE. [Does CORE still exist?]

DC: Mm hmm.

WC: Yeah. It was called the Nonviolent Action Committee. It was built on the SNCC model. The whole thing was CORE [wasn't] in the black community. We were right down in the black community and we had done a bunch of--. We did have a [restraining order]. We could do technically what we wanted to do.

DC: Was that mostly African Americans in that group or was it mixed?

WC: It was a mixed group, yeah.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcriber: Deborah Mitchum

Date: May 26, 2010