

**GREENSBORO VOICES/GREENSBORO PUBLIC LIBRARY ORAL HISTORY
PROJECT**

INTERVIEWEE: James Farmer

INTERVIEWER: Eugene E. Pfaff, Jr.

DATE: n.d.

[Begin Tape 1, Side A]

EUGENE PFAFF: --you are aware that this conversation is being taped, and that we have your permission to so tape it?

JAMES FARMER: Yes.

EP: All right, thank you. Mr. Farmer, I'd like to begin by asking if you could describe your experiences on the Freedom Ride of 1947 through North Carolina? I spoke recently with Reverend Charles Jones, and he gave me a description of it, at least the part in which he was involved in Chapel Hill.

JF: Well, here I can't help you because I wasn't on the Journey of Reconciliation.

EP: Journey of Reconciliation.

JF: Yeah, I was not on it then. I was not one of those on it.

EP: Oh, I see, you're role was just in planning it?

JF: Yes, I did participate in the planning, but at that time I was organizing for a union, the Upholsterers International Union of North America, and my job would not permit me the time off to go on that Journey of Reconciliation.

EP: I see. Do you have any idea who would have been involved with that in Greensboro or the North Carolina segment?

JF: Yes. I can think of three persons; there were others, but I think of three names now. One is George Houser, H-o-u-s-e-r, and he is in New York. He can be reached at the

American Committee on Africa in New York City.

EP: Thank you.

JF: The second is Jim Peck, P-e-c-k. He also lives in New York, and can be reached during the day at Amnesty International.

EP: I see.

JF: And there is a third person, a Bayard Rustin, R-u-s-t-i-n, and you can probably reach him through the A. Philip Randolph Institute in New York.

EP: Surely. Well, I was under the impression you had been on that so, I suppose we can--

JF: Oh, that error has been made a number of places, but I don't want to encourage it.

EP: I see. Well, if we found something that can correct research, we've made a contribution.

JF: Yes.

EP: Were there any attempts, prior to the sit-ins in February of 1960, to initiate any civil rights activities in North Carolina?

JF: To do what?

EP: To initiate civil rights activities in an organized manner in North Carolina through CORE [Congress of Racial Equality].

JF: Well, now, let me see. Prior to 1960, no. Most of CORE's activities, in its earlier years from 1942, when it was founded, until 1960 were in northern cities, with several exceptions. But North Carolina was not, to my knowledge, one of those exceptions.

EP: Was there anyone that you would consider as important to the advance of civil rights in North Carolina, perhaps Greensboro in particular?

JF: Important to the advancement of civil rights?

EP: Well, I was reading in the August Meier and Elliot Rudwick book [*CORE: A Study in the Civil Rights Movement, 1942-1968*] that there was quite a controversy within CORE, the executive committee, as to whether or not to extend below the Mason-Dixon line. A lot

of people, several people apparently felt that activity should be concentrated in the north.

JF: Well, there had been at every convention since 1943 in CORE, there had been considerable discussion as to whether to begin our type of activities in the South. You must remember that in those years, in the forties, and even in most of the fifties, nonviolence was unheard of as a technique in this country. Very few people were aware of it, and when we would speak with black leaders or white leaders about the technique of nonviolent direct action, which we were using in northern cities, they would think we must be some kind of nuts. "You mean if somebody hits you, you are not going to hit them back? What are you some kind of a nut or something?" would be the usual response. We got no publicity in what we were doing, because there was no television, for one thing, to help it spread. So, we debated [at] each convention whether we would invade the South with techniques of nonviolent direct action, so to speak, and I use the term "invade" advisably.

The majority of the delegates at the CORE convention felt in those years that using techniques of non-cooperation and civil disobedience in the South, especially the Deep South, would be suicidal, and that it would provoke so much massive violence that local blacks would have to face, after we had left the area, that it probably would not be worthwhile.

EP: Was this whole argument of the upper South being more tolerant as opposed to the lower South somewhat exaggerated, or did CORE feel there was substance to that, and that the upper South would be a better place to begin these civil disobedient nonviolent tactics?

JF: Are you referring now to the Journey of Reconciliation?

EP: Well, I know that was certainly one consideration then. I was thinking more of since that time, and up to the big push after February of 1960. I've heard this mentioned, and I wonder if this is more or less myth or if there was really substance to that in CORE's mind.

JF: Well, yes. The prevailing view within CORE was that there was a distinction between the upper South and the lower South. That the cultural violence which we would encounter would be much more severe in places like Alabama and Mississippi and Louisiana than it would, say, in Kentucky or Virginia or even North Carolina.

EP: What was the reason, the basis for this? Surely there must have been areas in each of those states that would have been equally as dangerous or violent as areas in the Deep South.

JF: There would have been, generally, but there were differences. For example, in Lexington or Louisville, Kentucky, we would not expect what we would encounter in Birmingham or Selma or in parts of, most of Mississippi. And I think that was generally valid. In West Virginia, for example, we would not anticipate the kind of extreme violence that we would have to count on in Mississippi.

EP: Was the sit-ins in 1960 that--the student phase of them anyway--that began in Greensboro come as a total surprise to CORE, and what sort of change in priorities or tactics did that mean for CORE to become involved?

JF: Well, first of all, as you know I'm sure, we had been sitting in, CORE had been sitting in since 1942 in many, many cities, largely Northern. The only Southern cities in which we had had such activities were Nashville, Tennessee, and a place called Bartlesville, Oklahoma.

The Southern student sit-ins did come as a surprise to us. They were not sponsored by CORE or sponsored by any organization, to be completely accurate. The Greensboro sit-ins, February 1, 1960, was a spontaneous action of those four freshmen students. CORE became quickly involved in it because those students went to Dr. [George] Simkins in Greensboro, who was the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] head there, and asked him to give them some help, told him what they were doing. Well, Dr. Simkins had read of CORE activities--he had received fund appeals, I'm sure, from CORE, and our literature--and knew that this was the type of thing that CORE had been doing for almost twenty years. So, he then called CORE, the CORE office, Dr. Simkins, the NAACP leader in Greensboro, called the CORE office in New York and asked CORE if, since they had had experience with this kind of technique and the NAACP had not, he wondered if they could give these young people some help.

Well, it was then that CORE dispatched one of its field secretaries to Greensboro. That was Gordon Carey. The only other field secretary CORE had at the time was Jim McCain of Sumter, South Carolina. According to my recollection, he, at that time, was on jury duty and was not free to go. So, Carey was sent down there, and Carey, at CORE's instructions, moved from city to city in the South, wherever there was a black college, and conducted nonviolent training institutes to train quickly in the technique of nonviolence. So, CORE participated in the spread of the Southern student sit-in movement.

EP: Elliott Rudwick and Meier, Rudwick and Meier indicate there was a great deal of intense competition between the NAACP, CORE, and the SCLC [Southern Christian Leadership Conference] to try to gain dominance or leadership of this new phase of the civil rights movement. Would you agree with that assessment? What was the character or nature of

this competition?

JF: Oh, I think that Rudwick and Meier overstated the case there. There was cooperation as much as anything else. Each group wanted to make sure that it had some visibility in what was an autonomous movement, and I think that was quite natural.

EP: But was it not true that the NAACP initially disavowed the tactics of CORE as being, perhaps, inflammatory or provocative?

JF: Well now, at what period do you mean in CORE's--do you mean after 1960?

EP: Well, I was just gathering notes, taking notes from their book, and I gather that initially, in the fifties, it was a very strong feeling, or they claimed there was. And I know that one reason Dr. Simkins, or it's been stated that one reason Dr. Simkins contacted CORE is that [the] national office of the NAACP initially refused to support or endorse the sit-ins in North Carolina.

JF: Refused to endorse the Greensboro sit-ins?

EP: That was my impression from a couple of books written on it, that it was more--well, partly he contacted CORE because--this is completely different than the court strategism of NAACP--but, I had the impression that the national office said that they thought this concept of direct confrontation on the lunch counters might lead to violence, and hence, initially disavowed it.

JF: Well, at that time I was with the NAACP, though I had been the founder of CORE in 1942. [Roy] Wilkins had invited me to the NAACP in 1959 as National Program Director. I was there at the time and I do not remember any disavowal of a technique of nonviolent direct action. As a matter of fact, the NAACP's usual response to it was to mention that, in its long history, it had engaged in techniques of nonviolent resistance; it was all-encompassing, and included everything.

Of course, it is true that that was not the NAACP's emphasis. Its emphasis was in the more conventional legal actions, court actions, and some lobbying activity. But I am not aware that the technique was rejected by the NAACP. In most of the NAACP publications, they stressed the fact that they had done such things.

EP: Did the strategies that CORE developed in North Carolina differ substantially from any other Southern state where they were organizing sit-ins?

JF: No. In the Southern student sit-in movement in 1960, the tactics in North Carolina were

the same as used in any other place in the South.

EP: Well, I know in Greensboro, having spoken with some of the students that initially sat in at Woolworth's, they said that they wanted to keep it student controlled and locally based, in part, to try to get away from this charge of outside influence, that sort of thing. Did CORE experience this same kind of, what I would characterize [as] polite refusal, in other areas, or was Greensboro rather unique in this way?

JF: Polite refusal, by whom?

EP: Well, by members of--in Greensboro at A&T [NC A&T State University] they formed what was called the Student Executive Committee for Justice. And Ezell Blair [Jr., now known as Jibreel Khazan] told me, he said that they were contacted by CORE and that they did accept CORE field secretary advice, presumably Mr. Carey, but that they were rather insistent that it remain under the control of the Student Executive Committee for Justice. And that indeed a CORE chapter wasn't formed here until two years later.

JF: Oh, well, yeah. We didn't try to form CORE chapters at that time. Our interest--and this is authentic--our interest was in seeing to it that the movement spread. We were much less interested in having it as a part of CORE in any sense whatsoever. If you would look through the minutes of the CORE National Action Committee, which was our board of directors, you would see that the members of the NAC, the National Action Committee, were virtually unanimous in feeling that this ought to be student controlled. There was no conflict between the Greensboro students and CORE on that issue at all.

EP: Well, so CORE just remained in an advisory capacity?

JF: In an advisory capacity; we did not try to run it, we didn't want them to be CORE people, because they were not CORE people. We just wanted to see that the technique of nonviolence got used more widely throughout the South, and that a general nonviolent, non-cooperation, against-segregation movement got started.

EP: The impression I receive, once again, from reading the book, is--and in general, books on the civil rights movement--is that, certainly after the Freedom Rides, CORE, on the campuses, did become the predominant action, direct action arm of the civil rights movement. I'm trying to establish Greensboro's position in this. Certainly those who focused on it, it's very easy to try to give it more importance than it actually had. Did it serve as a symbol, being the start of the student lunch counter sit-ins?

JF: Yes, no doubt about that at all. Greensboro was, at that time, a symbol, and other black

college students, watching on television what was happening in Greensboro, were stimulated to go out and do likewise. And it remains until today a symbol of the student sit-in movement.

EP: I would assume, then, that in the Freedom Highways Project there was a two-week, very intensive workshop established at Bennett College. And it's been suggested to me that one, Greensboro was selected because of its symbolic value, and two, Bennett was a private institution that was sympathetic and free from state legislature control.

JF: That is correct.

EP: Did you have any direct input into the planning of that workshop or did that come mainly through Mr. Carey's office?

JF: No. Well, you see, CORE was a tiny organization at that time. When I was invited to leave the NAACP post and go back to my old organization which I had founded and which had remained largely voluntary until those years, we had a small staff. In addition to myself as national director, we had Marvin Rich and Gordon Carey and Jim McCain as full-time staff people, and that was it.

EP: Were my assumptions correct concerning the reason for establishing the workshop in Greensboro and at Bennett?

JF: Yeah, well, when we devised the Freedom Highways campaign, we chose North Carolina as a target, as a target state, so to speak.

EP: Why did you choose North Carolina? For the reasons you previously cited?

JF: For reasons we previously cited, yes, and we had hoped to move from there to other states if it was successful there, and if the spin-off--in fact it didn't include the other states. Partly because of Greensboro as a symbol of the sit-in movement.

EP: It's very interesting to me that then shortly after the workshop ended, the intense effort shifted to Durham. What exactly was the reason in the shift of emphasis?

JF: Well, one reason was Floyd McKissick's presence in Durham.

EP: So he was a very strong--

JF: He was a strong activist, though he was chiefly NAACP then. But [he] did support fully and believe in the technique that was being used by CORE. And Gordon was very friendly with Floyd, and that was one reason for it.

But back to the other question you asked of whether the decisions on the Freedom Highways campaign were made in one office or another in CORE, there was only one office, [laughter] and all of us participated in it.

EP: I see. I get the impression from reading the memos that went back and forth between North Carolina and the national office of CORE, was that there had to be an essential revamping of the activities, that perhaps they felt they had taken on too many cities at one time, and that the very limited staff was being spread too thinly over the state, and as a result that the Task Force was formed. Was that a policy or a strategy decision that--

JF: Could you ask that question again? I--

EP: Well, in the memos that emanated from Gordon Carey to some of the--well, particularly to Floyd McKissick--he said that he felt that they had made a mistake in trying to take on the entire state as a whole, and that they were moving staff members too rapidly from one state to another--I mean, one city to another, not allowing them to stay long enough to really, effectively form a good strong CORE chapter or organization in each state. And I gather that this had something to do with forming the Task Force, and I just wanted to know if this was a correct assumption, or incorrect.

JF: Well, the Task Force decision was made on a national basis. In other words, after 1960, especially after the Freedom Rides in 1961, CORE began to grow in prominence and in reputation and in number of chapters around the country. We increased the fundraising, the budget grew, but still we did not have enough money, did not conceivably have enough money to place field staff, full-salaried field staff people, though the salary was ridiculously small, in each state and in each city where there were CORE activities, because every day we were getting letters, requests for the formation of CORE chapters in some given cities.

So, we wrestled with the question of how we got more staff on our limited budget and decided that we would use people who were essentially volunteers, would recruit people who were volunteers, paying their expenses and a small stipend. We decided on a name for this kind of volunteer employee, and the name chosen was Task Force because it had kind of a military connotation, albeit a nonviolent military connotation for us. So, that was the reason for it, to try to get a larger number of staff people without a comparable increase in expenditures.

EP: I know that two towns, or two cities that were very much involved in the Freedom

Highways Project were--in North Carolina--was Durham and Statesville. Were--and there was a great deal of controversy over the type of court strategy and this sort of thing. Was it considered a success by the national office?

JF: The Freedom Highways campaign?

EP: Yes.

JF: Yes. The Freedom Highways campaign was considered to be eminently successful. The one thing which gave us pause and caused us concern was that it did not receive the kind of publicity which it should have received nationally. At one point, incidentally, we were unable to get any news stories outside of the state of North Carolina, which led us into some real discussion on the question of management of the media. We know that we would hold press conferences and we would have activities which were extremely newsworthy. There would be representatives of the wire services and of the networks present; [they] would take the information. We also learned that the information did go on to the wires, but still was not picked up.

EP: What was the reason why the national media refused to give it more prominence?

JF: Not just the national--well, yeah, I guess, in a way, you could say the national media. Here you are asking for speculation, because I don't know what the reason was, I just know it was a fact. For example, in Greensboro at one point, we had more than three thousand students in jail during the [1963] campaign there. That was students from A&T and from Bennett and other people--called a mass meeting and more than a thousand or more people came to the mass meeting and all of them bringing their toothbrushes, ready to go into jail. And it was the first time that people had been locked out of jail; they dropped all bail bond requirements and told them to leave on their own recognizance, and when many of the students refused to leave, then they were physically removed [laughter] from the jail, and taken back to their campuses.

Now this was newsworthy, extremely newsworthy. We were informed, I was informed, as national director of CORE, by a reporter at one of the New York City newspapers--that reporter, unfortunately, is now deceased, so he could not confirm this--that a memorandum was passed down to the news department from the editor's office, editor-in-chief or managing editor saying, "When items come in on the wires regarding the Freedom Highways campaign of CORE in North Carolina, refer it up here to me."

EP: So, there was a definite, what you could almost say, blackout of the media.

JF: Yeah, there was a blackout outside of the state. And I would--since I'm guessing now,

and it has to be understood that I am not making a charge, I am guessing, speculating--I think that the state is able to, on certain occasions--by the state I mean the governor, chiefly. Even a friendly governor as Terry Sanford was a friendly--though he had to do what he had to do--but he understood what we were about and we did not consider him hostile.

He was at that time--again, a governor would be-- trying to get Northern industry to move into his state, and the activities of large numbers of people being jailed and the turmoil which that would symbolize would not be calculated to encourage industry to move into the state. And thus, the governor is able to make certain calls and to limit the publicity which it's received. We have found that in some of the other states, too, by the way. We found that in Louisiana, where, on one occasion, I had to get out of town in the back of a hearse to escape from a lynch mob that was made up of state police and other deputized persons, and held a press conference in New Orleans after the escape. And not a word of it got out of the state, and only one paragraph of it in the New Orleans daily newspaper. [laughter] It is possible, you see.

EP: Yes, I read that, I recall. Well, in as much as you've mentioned, the mass arrests and jailing in Greensboro in the spring of '63--as I mentioned before, some historians have alluded to this, and certainly in my mind, the fact that Greensboro happened almost simultaneously with Birmingham--did it serve as a contrast between the upper South and Deep South municipal and state reactions? Would this be a valid assumption that they were handled violently in the Deep South, and in the upper South they were handled more nonviolently, certainly with the same idea of trying to squelch the demonstrations with as little concessions as possible?

JF: Yes. I think that's correct. I think that's true. We didn't encounter the kind of massive police violence in Greensboro that Dr. King encountered in Birmingham.

EP: Well, following up on that, would it be legitimate--I know that "jail no bail" had been used by CORE in a number of other cities, and you mentioned Lexington, Kentucky--was Greensboro kind of an experimental station into these kind of mass demonstration tactics, or had they been pretty well established in other areas by CORE?

JF: They had been pretty well established by CORE in other areas. We were founded, as you know, on the Ghandian principles, and we believed in jail-ins, staying in jail rather than bailing out right away, and were, at that time, trying to establish that as one of the principles of the burgeoning nonviolence movement in the country.

EP: Did you work very closely with Floyd McKissick and the lawyer that he suggested or had appointed to actually defend in court the people in Greensboro that were arrested? His

name is Clarence Malone, he is still in Durham. Was that a pretty close working relationship?

JF: It was a close working relationship. Floyd was a friend of mine and we worked closely.

EP: Did you frequently come to Greensboro? The newspaper indicates you were here in the fall of 1962 when there was a big push against two of the local cafeterias, the S&W and the Mayfair, and four segregated movie theatres downtown, and then again you returned with the marches in the spring. Was Greensboro a frequent stop for you?

JF: Well, it was during those years, yes, '62 to '64.

EP: Is there--once again I am trying to establish Greensboro as a place in all of this activity. Was Greensboro a place of particularly intense activity or was this just one of quite a number of places?

JF: No, Greensboro was a place of intense activity. At the time of the Freedom Highways campaign, that was the major CORE campaign nationally. We had envisaged it as becoming the highways counterpart of the bus campaign and the Freedom Rides.

EP: One thing that--turning once again to Rudwick and Meier--they suggest that one ongoing problem of the national office was that, from the beginning of CORE's inception, it was a very decentralized organization, that the local chapters had quite a lot of autonomy. Did this present a problem, particularly in Greensboro, that the national office--did it have any difficulty trying to establish the overall strategies and aim of CORE as a national organization on a local level?

JF: No. Quite frankly, we ran into no difficulty on that point at all in North Carolina, and certainly not in Greensboro, North Carolina. We found that the local people who were participants in CORE activities were not only willing to listen to CORE's advice and recommendations, the national office's advice and recommendations, but sought it constantly. [They] wanted to know what we thought, and we didn't have any strong disagreements on tactics.

EP: Your role, when you would visit Greensboro, was it to participate in strategy-making decisions and to establish policy, or was it a kind of a public relations in the sense of focusing the media on the Greensboro situation?

JF: It was both. My responsibilities were, as the chief executive officer of CORE and the policy person, to involve myself in all of them. And since--as the director of CORE, the

press would be more apt to come out, then certainly I sought to use that prestige in that regard.

EP: I recall one memorandum--I realize it's unfair to pick out one of literally thousands, but Ike Reynolds, I get the impression, had to be rather severely reprimanded by Gordon Carey because he was essentially, initially trying to establish a stronger CORE support at A&T, at least in the early stage of '62-'63, through the auspices of the Southern Educational Conference Foundation [Southern Conference Educational Fund?], and that he was told "under no circumstances pursue this." Was this a major problem?

JF: Well, it did become a problem from time to time. Now Gordon--I don't recall the memorandum. If he did, it was a part of a staff decision in a staff meeting, because Gordon would not have done that on his own without checking policy with me, and I, of course, would check policy with the National Action Council. It occasionally became a problem.

EP: What is your assessment of William Thomas, who was chairman of the CORE chapter during the massive demonstrations?

JF: He was a student then wasn't he?

EP: Yes.

JF: Yes, I remember him. I remember him quite clearly. A bright young man with a great deal of potential who was thoroughly dedicated to the struggle against segregation, and was perfectly loyal.

EP: Could you recall--I certainly don't expect you to recall the specifics, but the general nature of the discussions you had with him in the Greensboro situations? Were each of the changes in tactics discussed with you by him prior to the initiating, or would he, more or less, inform the national office after they had happened?

JF: No, he checked with us before.

EP: So, he followed pretty closely the guidelines of CORE?

JF: He did. As a matter of fact, we were so much impressed with that that we tried to get him on the staff. I believe he was on the staff for a while after that.

EP: One thing, item, that received a great deal of press attention, at least here in Greensboro,

was there looked like there was going to be some breakthrough after Robert Kennedy held the meeting with the owners of the theater chains throughout the South in Washington in late May.

JF: In what year now?

EP: Nineteen sixty-three. And, in effect, depending on who you talk to, he told them to desegregate, or he intimated that the federal government was going to support the move for desegregation of theatres, and they better get in line.

You and Bill Thomas traveled to Washington--I think, actually, the weekend of May twenty-eighth I believe is the date--and there was speculation as to whom you spoke to, and Mr. Thomas himself was rather vague about it, he thought it probably some member of Kennedy's staff. Do you recall this meeting at all?

JF: I don't recall it at all.

EP: So, apparently the press gave it a lot more weight and attention than it actually merited?

JF: I would say so.

EP: I believe we already covered this next question I had in mind about Greensboro's significance in terms of strategy development, that it really did not particularly effect any, or initiate any new strategies. Was it a major publicity event? Did--I remember you said there was a news blackout--

JF: There was a blackout of news.

EP: So, once again, it did not have national impact?

JF: It did not have national impact. We received publicity within the state of North Carolina, but it did not get outside of the state, though it was on the wire services and was covered by the networks.

EP: Do you have any recollection of any addresses that you made before the Greensboro CORE? I know you were quoted at the time as saying that one reason that you came to Greensboro was you were impressed with the amount of adult black support that students were receiving, presumably that there were other cities where the students simply were not able to enlist this kind of strong support. Was that genuine? Did Greensboro, the black community really come out and support the students much more actively than in other communities?

JF: Oh yes, there's no question about it; it did. More of the ministers supported them. More of the professional blacks supported them. And the presidents of colleges supported them. I remember, particularly, the president of Bennett who--

EP: Dr. [Willa] Player, yes.

JF: --yes, Dr. Player--who became a strong supporter.

EP: Well, you've mentioned that you felt that Sanford, Governor Sanford was a very sympathetic governor, certainly vis-à-vis other Southern governors. Do you recall any meetings that you had with him concerning the demonstrations in North Carolina?

JF: Yes, I recall meeting at his office or at the governor's mansion, or both. I do not recall the substance of it, I just recall the occasion. Naturally, he was interested in working out some arrangement to stop the demonstrations, any governor would be. And I do recall that we reached certain agreements--not on stopping it, because we were not going to stop demonstrations until we got a solution to the problems we were seeking to solve--but we got some agreements and we found out that the governor was a man who would stand by his word.

EP: Well, I know that he very repeatedly--at least for public consumption--stressed voluntarism, and that it was not the place of the governor's office to try to push through legislation to have mandatory desegregation. But what sort of things did he suggest that CORE considered as favorable compromises?

JF: Actually, I don't remember the details of those, it was such a long time ago. All that I recall is the cordiality of our sessions with him.

EP: I see. I gather that, or it was reported anyway, that he was doing some behind-the-scenes jawboning with people who had chains, either regional or national chains in theatres and cafeterias.

JF: Yes. We understood that that was the case.

EP: So, he was kind of behind-the-scenes trying to use his unofficial influence?

JF: That's right.

EP: I see. Do you happen to recall any meetings or talks or perhaps even confrontations with

some of the more local representatives of the city? Apparently, the city council and the mayor, right up until he made a statement near the end of the demonstrations, was noninvolvement at all, completely turning everything over to the human relations commissions that were set up. In your memory, is there any kind of compromise, or receptivity to compromise on the part of local administration?

JF: No, I'm sorry I don't remember the details of that at all.

EP: I know that one of the legal representatives of the theatres and cafeterias was a rather colorful character named Armistead Sapp. Do you happen to recall any--

JF: No I don't.

EP: I see. One thing that I find very interesting in talking with Mr. Malone was that--this was after Greensboro had died down, and there was a shift to Chapel Hill--that Mr. Malone says that this really came not so much from the black community of Chapel Hill, but it was spearheaded by predominantly white, middle-class students at the university there [University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill], and that CORE, at least in North Carolina, was reluctant to join in this push. They already had the test cases before the [U.S.] Supreme Court, it was obvious that the civil rights bill [Civil Rights Act of 1964] was going to come out, the only question was when.

And that--Raymond Mallard was a court--was a judge that handed out particularly stiff fines and sentences. And it was Mr. Malone's feeling that certain conservative powers-that-be in the state had more or less gotten him appointed with this expressed purpose, and that the goal behind the stiff sentences and fines was to financially break CORE in North Carolina. And he says that they came pretty close to doing it, and that there was an eleventh-hour agreement made with Governor Sanford where he used the power of executive clemency so that these cases would not have to go on through appeal up through the Supreme Court. Was there a concerted effort to financially break CORE in North Carolina?

JF: Well, I don't know what the motives of the state were. I have no evidence of that, but certainly we expected the campaign to be an expensive one. As a matter of fact, the only reason we raised money was to use it on such campaigns. Most of our money was spent out in the field, where it was supposed to be spent. But I don't recall North Carolina doing more than any other state did to try to make it expensive on us.

But, you see, we did not consider that unexpected at all, because our objective was to make segregation as expensive as possible upon the state, hoping that eventually or before long they'd come to realize that segregation was too heavy an albatross for the "ship of state" to bear. So we were trying to do that too, and if they borrowed our tactics,

we could not complain about it.

EP: I gather that North Carolina frequently did serve as a--well, not so much test case, but you did mention that Freedom Highways was deliberately pushed strongly in North Carolina. When the breakthroughs did come through, was it through North Carolina, or did the scene shift to other states? Did North Carolina recede in importance or was it there in the forefront of the breakthroughs?

JF: Now, you mean breakthroughs in what?

EP: Desegregation, either before or after the Civil Rights Act--I mean, given the fact that CORE expended so much time and money and personnel and effort in North Carolina.

JF: Yeah. Well, you're asking if those breakthroughs contributed to the passage of civil rights legislation or--

EP: Well certainly that's one of my later questions. I was trying to summarize that in a more general fashion by saying that given the amount of time and energy expended by CORE in North Carolina, did it more or less bear out to be worthwhile in that, was North Carolina one of the early states where there was significant compliance, either through volunteerism or, later, mandatory legal requirements?

JF: Yeah, let me ponder it just a second--can you hold on a minute?

EP: Certainly.

JF: Just a moment, please.

[Recorder turned off, then back on]

JF: I'm back. Yeah, there was some compliance. I recall that major chains, restaurant chains--which were the focus of the Freedom Highways campaign, actually--

[End of Tape 1, Side A--Begin Tape One, Side B]

JF: The civil rights bill passed, and we were not going to bank everything on it, so we were going to try to desegregate things, even if there were no civil rights bill.

EP: I have only one or two more questions now. I think you have given me a very good idea of, perhaps, in some writers' opinion, a certain exaggerated importance of North

Carolina, and in other cases somewhat legitimate.

I'm curious, CORE's influence seemed to wane rather quickly in North Carolina. Perhaps it's just by comparison to the amount of at least within-state publicity on the marches. Then certainly '64-'65 [there was] very little announcement--of course, some of the local CORE members have told me that they started getting into things that didn't generate a lot of publicity like voter registration drives and negotiations and that sort of thing. Did CORE's influence wane rather abruptly in the upper South, particularly North Carolina?

JF: Well, compared with other areas, yes. We never had a huge staff, as you know. Even at our height, including all the Task Force people who were basically volunteers, we never had more than 150 staff persons all over the country. And we had a small national office. We never had a budget one-half the size of the NAACP's or anything else like that, so we couldn't keep a focus on ten states at the same time.

As a matter of fact, none of the movement could or did. What happened in those years was that the turf was divided up. There were meetings held in New York between the heads of the civil rights organizations--Martin [Luther] King, Roy Wilkins, Whitney Young, and John Lewis or Jim Forman representing SNCC, and I representing CORE--and we divided up areas of the South. North Carolina was a CORE state; South Carolina was a CORE state; Georgia was a SCLC and SNCC state; Alabama, SCLC and SNCC; Mississippi, CORE and SNCC; Louisiana, CORE; and so on. So, what we had to do was to select one or two of those states [in] which we had primacy and concentrate on that. So, after the Freedom Highways Campaign, what little staff we had was put into areas such as Louisiana, where we began a campaign there.

EP: So really, the big push for CORE in North Carolina was the Freedom Highways campaign in '62?

JF: Freedom Highways was the push, yes. What we had hoped, and what really didn't happen, was that the local chapters of CORE had established in North Carolina would continue their activities without so much effort from the national office, but that did not occur.

EP: Do you have any idea as to why that didn't occur?

JF: [phone rings] No, I don't. Can you hold on just a second?

EP: Certainly--yes.

[Recorder turned off, then back on]

JF: And what was your question?

EP: Well you had mentioned that CORE was disappointed that the local chapters didn't carry on on their own, and I had asked you if you had any--did you know why that didn't occur, and you had said no.

JF: Well, the only reason I can give is that the local chapters there were accustomed to counting on the national office and staff persons. This is, in a way, the same answer I gave to an earlier question about any conflicts between the local groups and CORE over the policy. Quite to the contrary, local groups counted on CORE national office for our policy and for leadership in that regard.

There was always in the movement, and certainly within CORE, some tension on the issue of whether the local chapters should be movements running themselves, or whether they should be adjuncts of a national office. There was--SNCC took a rather hard line on that; their local groups were local movements. NAACP took the opposite position, and local groups were adjuncts of the national organization. And CORE was somewhere between those two, feeling that they should be able to run themselves, but yet the national office should lend them support and succor. So it really did not happen in North Carolina. After the national office resources were pulled out, we found that the local chapters did not continue their activities.

EP: In your opinion, did the efficacy of nonviolent, direct action prove to be short-lived after the initial successes of the marches and demonstrations? Was there a limited purpose they could serve or accomplishments they could cause to happen through that technique?

JF: The technique? Well, I don't think so. No, to the extent that they were used, they were extremely successful--the short-term objectives. I think that in those years, many of the activists may have viewed the short-term objectives as being the long-term and ultimate objectives, but they were short-term. That was eliminating segregation in places of public accommodation.

EP: I gather that it did not really lend itself to the more--less dramatic and more drawn out struggle of broadened job and economic and educational opportunities?

JF: Well, I am not prepared to say that it didn't lend itself. I am prepared to say that most of us were not sufficiently imaginative to adapt it to those techniques--I mean, to those issues as effectively as it could be so easily adapted to restaurants or buses.

EP: When you say "most of us," are you including the national office or just the local

chapters?

JF: I am including myself and everybody else. I am including all the leadership in the nonviolent movement.

EP: Well, in the subsequent years, has anything occurred to you subsequently where it could have been used against major corporations--well, take North Carolina, for instance, Burlington Industries, JP Stevens, that sort of thing?

JF: Well, in corporations, yes. The effective nonviolent weapon is a boycott. And that was used to enable the student sit-in movement to succeed. It didn't succeed because we sat in; it succeeded, in large part, because, generated by the national publicity, people all over the country began boycotting the variety stores.

EP: Is this merely a matter of semantics, or is there a fundamental legal difference between economic withdrawal and boycott? I know that in some of the news stories, CORE representatives were careful to make a distinction here.

JF: Well, we made a distinction because there are some legal complications in the word "boycott." And so they were preparing to go into court and argue that this is not a boycott, technically. There are laws, as you know, against secondary boycotts.

EP: Yes. Well, I'd like to bring this interview to a conclusion through looking at the Rudwick and Meier book. What is your overall impression of their assessment of CORE?

JF: Well, they are both good historians, and especially Meier, Auggie Meier, I know much better, and he interviewed me several times. One of their problems was that there are many, many gaps in the CORE history where there is not enough documentation. We didn't do a very good job of record keeping, because we had no sense of history in that way. Therefore, they had to talk with a number of people who had different points of view, and different views of incidents and events and episodes, and in the absence of documentation, they had to make judgments. Well, sometimes the judgments were not correct. That was unavoidable. I see no way that that could have been avoided in the absence of documentation.

Now generally, I think that it was a good, painstaking history, perhaps a little too heavy on details, perhaps a great fascination with the trees and some failure to see the entire forest.

EP: I know that they have their own stated opinions of your leaving CORE. Would you characterize your opinion of their assessment of--

JF: Well, I don't recall their assessment.

EP: Well, I am not sure of the specifics myself, but I gather that they say there was essentially a long term power struggle and more--kind of a loss of the original goals of CORE in that it became more--less of a movement, and also there was more susceptibility to the black power movement in that--

JF: Well, the black power movement had not started then. It started in the middle of '66, summer of '66, and I left CORE in spring.

EP: Well, what would your assessment be of the current state of CORE under Roy Ennis? There have been severe charges--

JF: [laughter] What was the last--

EP: Well, I was just going to say that there have been charges that it really almost runs as a very coercive private business.

JF: That it is a coercive private business, and the fundraising is highly questionable to put it very mildly, and the way the funds are used is even more questionable. And it's run as a total dictatorship without any democratic control whatsoever.

EP: So, any resemblance between CORE of the early sixties and the contemporary view is merely the name, I gather.

JF: That's the only thing whatsoever, except that Ennis does use the CORE reputation through that name, which is extremely unfortunate. But we didn't--I didn't answer your earlier question.

EP: Well, what were your reasons for leaving CORE?

JF: After the Civil Rights Act of '64--and this may take two minutes or so--when the movement changed its focus from the South, and became national in scope, it was not as easy to get a handle on the national or northern issues as it had on the more dramatic Southern issues. And it was not easy to focus attention on them, because in the South we could personalize the opposition; it could be a Bull Connor [outspoken segregationist of Alabama] or KKK [Klu Klux Klan] or what have you. In the North, it was more diffuse, and thus it was hard to get a handle on it, which meant that our activists began to turn inward, and if you want to use the word, became cannibalistic, and began fighting each

other. We had such ambiguous and unlimited energies; they had to be used some way. And without a clear focus of attack, then our members, our groups, and our organizations began chewing at each other. There was a lot of that, and this led to much unpleasantness, and I felt that I had to spend as much time fighting battles within my own organization as in fighting the enemy, the segregationists, and felt that that was not worthwhile and that was most unfortunate.

But that was the general climate in which I left CORE. The black identity movement at that time was not sufficient of an issue to have been a major factor in my leaving at all.

Now, the occasion for my leaving was an attempt to set up--my attempt to set up a national campaign against functional illiteracy and illiteracy, feeling that now that we had opened up many doors, had banged them open with nonviolence, there were literally millions of people who couldn't walk through them because they lacked the basic educational skills: reading, writing, arithmetic, computing, and so on. So, I talked with the president, President Johnson and others and had proposed a national campaign against illiteracy, had gotten the support of Wilkins, Whitney Young, King, A. Philip Randolph, and SNCC as well. [I] set up a nonprofit corporation to do that. I was president of it, and all the heads of civil rights organizations were on the board of directors that agreed to be it. And we had been promised funding through the Office of Economic Opportunity.

Well, politics entered in and the funding never came through. But in the process of maneuvering toward that funding, there was a leak in a national newspaper, prematurely, of the plans indicating that I planned, at a very early date, to leave CORE in order to head up this national corporation which had been founded. Well, this was entirely premature, yet it created some havoc within my organization, CORE. It was barraged with calls from all over the country, saying, you know, "Is there any truth to this? It's on the wire service out here and we're being called by the press and what do we say? What's going on, after all?" So, I felt that what I had to do then, in view of that leak and the commotion that it created within my organization, I had to call a meeting of the National Action Council, its board, and there explain to them what my plans were, that the leak was premature. I planned to bring it up to the board at a later date, more appropriate date. But now that it had been leaked, I tell them I was leaving and then set a date for resigning as national director, and asked the board to set up a search committee on which I would participate. So, that's the way it happened.

EP: Well, I want to thank you very much for participating in the oral history program of Greensboro.

[End of Interview]