

Interview with **Gordon Carey**

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Washington D.C.

Interviewer: Judith Vecchione

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Note: These transcripts contain material that did not appear in the final program. Only text appearing in ***bold italics*** was used in the final version of *Eyes on the Prize*.

00:00:02:00

[camera roll 170]

[sound roll 1138]

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: MARK IT.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: FOURTEEN.

INTERVIEWER: CORE AND THE FELLOWSHIP OF RECONCILIATION WERE STAGING PROTESTS AGAINST JIM CROW IN THE NORTH IN THE 40s AND 50s. I WONDER COULD YOU TALK A LITTLE BIT ABOUT THE HISTORICAL CONNECTION BETWEEN THOSE EARLIER PROTESTS AND THE ONES IN THE 60s.

Carey: Well, I guess the, when CORE first began, it, it began in Chicago. It was started by a group of pacifists, socialists, predominantly white group of intellectuals and of course at that time all of the public facilities in Chicago and most throughout, throughout most of the north; restaurants and barber shops, roller skating rinks were all segregated. And [coughs] they were essentially trying to apply Gandhi and move— Gandhian tactics to the ending of these kinds of, of racial barriers. The movement actually is what I call, the movement, it wasn't

one but the, the CORE activities in those days were actually quite successful and they, they managed to integrate a lot of restaurants and this sort of thing. But it wasn't until many years later when suddenly in the South, that this sort of thing became—it was inspired by some of the things in the North but it was more inspired I think by the Montgomery Bus Boycott and some of the things that Dr. Martin Luther King was doing and then the, the some of the tacticians from this earlier stage in the '40s and '50s went South and began to work with the, the students and others in the South who, who were doing this. So there is no really direct connection except that they were sort of merged through a tactical approach and through the, the, the kind of Gandhian and non-violent discipline that the old CORE types were able to bring to this movement in the South. I myself for example grew up in a family, my father was a pacifist, he, he was a Methodist minister and he, he was a member of CORE in Grand Rapids, Michigan. As a matter of fact, chairman of a small CORE chapter there way back in the in the, in the, in the '40s. So I kind of grew up in CORE. I first met James Farmer when I was thirteen years old, that's forty years ago.

00:02:43:00

INTERVIEWER: WHAT ABOUT THE DIFFERENCES LET'S SAY BETWEEN THE, THE EARLIER PROTESTS AND THE LATER ONES IN TERMS OF WHO WAS DOING IT. YOU SAID THE FIRST ONES WERE MOSTLY WHITE LIBERALS. WHO WERE DOING—COULD YOU MAKE A COMPARISON WITH THE YOUNGER?

Carey: Well, the, the early experience with the, with the sit-ins that CORE had in the '40s and '50s, they tended to be, these demonstrations tended to be centered around universities. As a matter of fact you were more likely to have university professors, rather than students leading them and participating. By the time you came to the '60s, the university professors were no longer there, and it was, it was the students. And also it became predominantly black as opposed to maybe not predominantly white but, very substantially white in the earlier days.

00:03:37:00

INTERVIEWER: STOP FOR A MOMENT.

[cut]

00:03:40:00

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: FIFTEEN.

INTERVIEWER: COULD YOU TELL US HOW CORE GOT INVOLVED IN THE WORKSHOPS TRAINING IN, IN NONVIOLENCE IN NORTH CAROLINA FOLLOWING THOSE FIRST THREE TO FOUR SIT-INS?

Carey: Well CORE got involved in the, in the training of students down there as a result of a telephone call and a post card from Dr. George Simkins who was at that time the president of the NAACP chapter in Greensboro, North Carolina and he was a youth advisor for the NAACP there. George Simkins had heard about CORE through some people at the American Friends Service Committee office in High Point, North Carolina. And the lady there named Jean Fairfax had shared with him a couple of CORE brochures which among other things dealt with the boycotting of Woolworth stores in New York when Baltimore CORE was trying to desegregate the Baltimore Woolworth's and she gave him other brochures that they talked about other aspects of the nonviolent direct action programs that, that CORE had done throughout the '40s and '50s. So we had nothing to do with the beginning of the, of the sit-in in Greensboro, but when George knew these kids were going to be doing this, he sent us a post card, and I got the postcard in the national office of CORE, showed it to a couple of associates there, decided to call him on the phone, and I called him and he said, can you come down? And I said sure. In those days we rode on a bus and I hopped on a Greyhound bus or a Trailways, I don't remember what it was, and took the bus down to, to North Carolina. I never got to Greensboro, because by the time I got there they had closed down all the lunch counters and I telephoned George Simkins en route and he told me to meet him in Durham. I, I went to Durham and George introduced me to Floyd McKissick who was an NAACP leader in Durham and from there we got started and they asked us to—they, they asked me and later others to help change some of the kids because these—this sit-in movement was spreading from city to city and we did what we could to help.

00:06:15:00

INTERVIEWER: COULD YOU TELL US MAYBE GIVE US A BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF WHAT A, A STANDARD WORKSHOP WOULD BE LIKE?

Carey: [pause] OK. One of the workshops—we, we used to use a lot of socio-drama and I guess one of the best examples I could give was in Chapel Hill, North Carolina where strangely enough it wasn't college students in Chapel Hill who were sitting in, it was high school students. And every time these high school kids went out to sit in at one of the lunch counters, a bunch of white kids came around and started taunting them and starting fights and beating up on them and, and some of the black kids responded. They didn't know how to cope with this. So they called me in to run a workshop. I talked with some people. And first of all I found out that, that they were always going to the same lunch counter at the same time. School got out at let's say 3:30, at 4:00 they'd be at the Kresge's lunch counter and at 4:00 the white kids knew to be there to, to get into a fight with them. So I simply suggested, the, the easiest part of the workshop and the most dramatic part really was look let's just change our, our, our tactics. And instead of being at the Kresge's at 4:00, show up at Woolworth's at 3:30 or Woolworth's at, at 4:30. You, you got to take them by surprise. Well this was such a simple idea that it got them to thinking about other ways in which you can sort of use what Gandhi used to call moral ju-jitsu. It's the idea of getting your opponent off guard. And from there we started running workshops. We went through socio-dramas, we, we had some of the kids pretend that they were white hecklers and others were, you know, black students and they would start taunting and, and trying to fight and we would go through the work, through the social drama a little bit. We would stop, ask questions about

what had happened, evaluate it. We'd talk a little bit about the tactics, about what Gandhian tactics were about, about what, what non-violent action was about. The fact that it was purely a tactic. One did not have to believe in nonviolence, one did not have to be a pacifist in order to get involved in this. So it was a combination of very simple strategic planning, socio-dramas, talking with the kids that's all it was.

00:08:42:00

INTERVIEWER: NOW, WHY WAS THIS TACTIC OF NONVIOLENCE DIRECT ACTION PARTICULARLY APPROPRIATE FOR THE SOUTHERN CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT?

Carey: Because you were facing a very potentially—

INTERVIEWER: SAY IT AGAIN WITH A FULL SENTENCE.

Carey: Oh, sorry about that. Nonviolence was particularly appropriate to the southern civil rights movement because you were facing a, a potentially violent opponent who was very stubborn. And the opponent in this case the, the, the, the legal forces of these southern states and cities were ready to put you in jail for trying to do a simple act like eat in a restaurant or worse they might be willing to simply stand by and turn the, turn their eyes away when someone attacked these kids. Or adults, whoever they, whoever they might be. So that what you've gotta do, is you've gotta come up with some strategy that, that your opponent doesn't understand. You've gotta come up with some kind of a, of, of a flanking operation. And that's what nonviolent direct action really is. It, it's simply a, a very soft spoken but very aggressive means of getting your point across and by refusing to fight back you deny the opponent the basic means that he thinks he can use to overwhelm you. You take that weapon away from him. He says he'll send you to jail and you say fine. He says he'll beat you up and you say, well, I'm here, I'm still here, go ahead, do what you want. It takes all the fun out of hitting him.

00:10:37:00

INTERVIEWER: STOP PLEASE.

[cut]

00:10:42:00

[slate]

[change to camera roll 171]

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: SIXTEEN.

INTERVIEWER: COULD—WAS THERE SOME QUESTION IN THE MINDS OF THE PEOPLE YOU TRAINED ABOUT WHAT WAS INVOLVED IN BEING NONVIOLENT? DID THEY HAVE—WERE THEY STILL GOING TO BE STRONG, WERE THEY STILL GOING TO BE ABLE TO BE ACTIVE? AND HOW DID YOU RESPOND?

Carey: Many people when they, when they began to get involved in these nonviolent direct action movements and sit-ins and other kinds of direct action demonstrations had one of two feelings. They either felt like they could not remain nonviolent in the face of an assault or they felt that it was a sign of weakness if they were to do that. We tried to show them through socio-dramas and through stories and through talking to them, we spent long hours talking to people, you know, in, in, in groups. And, and we tried to show them that as a matter of fact this was real strength and we told them stories about the Gandhian movement where, where Gandhi got thousands of people as followers and Gandhi would impress upon them that they didn't have to believe at all in nonviolence. They didn't have to be pacifists. In the, in, in the rest of their life they could do as they chose, but in order to have an effective demonstration, in order to have an effective group experience they had to follow a discipline. And I'm not quite sure how we accomplished it, but as a matter of fact we were able to take large groups of people, sometimes hundreds of them, who had never had any experience with nonviolent direct action before and in a very short period of time we were able to get them to, to, to respond completely nonviolently. And often times I think that they would, they would do it simply because, first of all they knew it was very important. You know, what they were doing was very important. They didn't know how to attack the problems themselves. If someone else was coming in that they considered to be an authority and therefore they said OK, we'll try it. They would get into a situation, someone would swear at them, talk back to them, they knew from their own experience that when they, when they argued with that person in the past, the whole situation deteriorated. Now when they simply sat there, smiled at the person, and ignored him they were able to cope. So after two or three little experiences like this people began to catch on, began to talk to each other about it, and really we had, we had very little problem. It was astounding with, with the thousands and thousands of students and, and others involved in these movements, we had almost no violence perpetrated by people on the, on, on our side.

00:13:39:00

INTERVIEWER: IN FERUAR-FEBRUARY THERE IS THIS ENORMOUS SPREAD OF THE SIT-IN MOVEMENT, IT JUST, IT JUST, IT'S LIKE A WILD FIRE. NOW, COULD YOU TALK ABOUT THAT? AND WAS ANY OF THAT PLANNED OR WAS IT ALL SPONTANEOUS OR WAS IT A MIXTURE?

Carey: Oh, none of it was planned. When the, when the sit in movement began to spread in February it was completely spontaneous. None of that had been planned. However, the conditions were ripe for this. I and others had, had, had, had written reports and various things, in, in the preceding months. A lot of observers had felt that, that there was a great deal of volatility in the south and, and that things were going to begin to happen, especially in, in, in the upper South. What happened in Greensboro was completely spontaneous, local, no

outside agitation or interference except reading books and learning about what other people did. Then, that experience in Greensboro inspired students on other campuses, and I think what happened initially in North Carolina was that these demonstrations took place by and large centered around black colleges, and North Carolina has the highest concentration of black colleges in the nation. They have something like sixteen campuses in North Carolina and competition between the colleges, it's just like the football competition, took place and the kids in Durham, said you know we're not going to let the kids in Greensboro get the best of us. If they can do this, we can do it. And Winston-Salem, it's the same thing. Now, the role we played then was when George Simkins and Floyd McKissick asked us to, to help train the kids, yes we helped train them and as the thing began to spread after a couple of weeks, by the middle of, of February when it became absolutely clear that this thing was, was, was moving all beyond anyone's expectations, at that point we did begin to try to organize it. It wasn't, it wasn't national CORE that was doing it, it was, it was Floyd and myself and other local ministers around who would call each other and say well look I got a bunch of kids in this town and they're interested in, in having a sit-in, what do we have to do? Can you send, you know, Gordon Carey up there, can you send someone else up there to do some training so, so we'll know what to do? And yes we began to help organize it, but in no way did we instigate it. It was a completely spontaneous kind of thing.

00:16:17:00

INTERVIEWER: IF THERE WAS ONE MOMENT THAT YOU EXPERIENCED IN NORTH CAROLINA WHICH MADE YOU REALIZE THAT THIS WAS GOING TO BECOME A MOVEMENT. THIS WAS, THIS WAS, I MEAN, DIRECT ACTION WAS GOING TO SPREAD LIKE THIS AND BECOME A CLEAR MOVEMENT. COULD YOU PUT YOUR FINGER ON IT?

Carey: No, I don't think there was any one moment when, when I thought this was going to happen. It seems to me that, that as I worked with the students there and as I saw the movement spread over the state boundaries into South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia I guess at that point maybe, I, I did become convinced that this was a much larger thing than any of us had realized. So maybe, maybe there was a moment there where we saw it spread over into other states that we began to realize that that something was happening that there was much different and, and much greater than anything we could have, you know, thought up.

00:17:20:00

INTERVIEWER: AND WHAT DID YOU FEEL WHEN, WHEN YOU REALIZED THAT?

Carey: I think we felt somewhat overwhelmed. We felt a, a responsibility to try to keep enough organizational contact with all of this movement to, to keep it coordinated. You know people were being arrested in some places. You had to, you had to help take care of people when they got arrested. You either had to give them counseling, you had to provide lawyers for them, you had to provide bond for them, so that you had to have some kind of

organization and structure here, otherwise things could have gotten pretty chaotic. It was, it was a little frightening, but mostly it was challenging and a good deal of fun.

00:18:01:00

INTERVIEWER: COULD YOU TELL US THE STORY OF YOU AND TOM GAITHER COMING BACK FROM SOUTH CAROLINA AND THINKING UP THE IDEA OF THE FREEDOM RIDES?

Carey: Yeah, Tom Gaither was a, a student at a small black college in South Carolina who had become very active in the sit-ins there and active in CORE, one of the CORE chapters in South Carolina. Subsequent to that Tom was hired as a field secretary for CORE. He and I, of course the CORE office was in New York, Tom and I had, had been in South Carolina at a non-violent workshop, a training session, at one of the colleges there and we were taking a bus back to New York, from that campus. There were several things that had happened shortly before this time. One was that the Supreme Court had, had ruled that not only should the restaurants—not only should, should buses be integrated but also facilities that served interstate buses had to be integrated. That—there was a case from Richmond, Virginia. Tom and I happened to be riding on this bus, through the state of New Jersey, and we got caught in a snow storm. The bus was stranded on the New Jersey turnpike for something like twelve hours. And we sat on that bus and we talked. I opened my briefcase and the one book I had to read in my briefcase was Louis Fisher's biography of Gandhi, and Tom and I were reading this book and talking about it and a combination of sitting on a bus, the recent Supreme Court decision, and reading about Gandhi's march to the sea got us talking about an analogous march to the sea here in the South. And we began talking about something that would be a bus trip and of course we were also inspired by the fact that we knew of the earlier Journey of Reconciliation which CORE and the Fellowship of Reconciliation had sponsored back in '47 or '48 sometime. So we knew about this kind of tactic and, and I, I guess somehow the drama of the whole thing caught us up and we began to think about it, and as a matter of fact we sat there and planned the two of us, most of the freedom ride on that bus before we ever got back to New York City. Tom had laid out—Tom knew the black colleges in the South very well, he'd laid out a potential route for the, for the trip, we came up with a tentative name, we called it a freedom ride, and we went back to the office and proposed it. Incidentally we went to New Orleans on the trip because that was the ocean and that was analogous to Gandhi's salt march going to the sea. So, that's, that's where the whole thing, you know, started. We went back to the CORE office, talked to some people there and Tom and I both thought, I think now that, that, that they would probably not like the idea. It was a little too wild. It wasn't well thought out and so on. The people we talked to liked it. Marvin Rich, Jimmy Robinson, others in the office liked it, Lou LaFarmer and eventually it took place.

INTERVIEWER: STOP PLEASE.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: CUT

[cut]

00:21:41:00

[slate]

[change to camera roll 172]

INTERVIEWER: IT'S WRONG.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: WRONG. OK, SORRY.

[cut]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: MARK IT.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: SEVENTEEN.

00:21:51:00

INTERVIEWER: SO WE'RE INTERESTED IN THE FACTORS THAT MADE CORE MOVE INTO THIS DEEP SOUTH EFFORT AND DIRECT ACTION.

Carey: OK, I think the reason that CORE was responsive to the idea of the freedom ride was that as an organization it, it had become somewhat frustrated by the fact that the problems in the North in the '60s and the late '50s were so hard to tackle. In other words, the problems in the North were not primarily those of public accommodations and that's where CORE had had its, you know, strong suit. The problems in the North were housing, employment discrimination, and subtler kinds of things and no good tactics had really been developed for, for coping with those problems with—for, for, for dealing with them. On the other hand direct action appeared to be very difficult in the South because of the massive resistance because of the potential for violence and because states like Mississippi had such a, almost a police state. So that—from the standpoint of the black living there. So that it was very difficult to do anything there. So CORE I think felt somewhat stymied organizationally because in the North, it was facing very subtle problems, in the South it was facing a different kind of problem. It, it, it, it wasn't able to really penetrate the Deep South. The sit-ins had been primarily in the, in the border states and in the Upper South, New Orleans, Florida, but they had not been in, in Alabama, Mississippi and even where they had been, they were kind of sporadic. There had been no long, no long-lived organization that, that, that continued after a group of students might sit-in someplace. So, I think that we felt that, that something had to be done. That, that, that really conditions were more ripe for change in the Deep South than, than most of us had, had realized in the past and something dramatic was required and again it was, it was Gandhi. Gandhi was a, a great showman, you know, he was a he was, he was an actor, very dramatic. And we envisioned the freedom ride as something like that and something that had to the potential for capturing the imagination of the country

and something that might be dramatic enough that it couldn't be completely ignored. In other words, this little bus load of kids, kids, some of them were in their sixties; this little bus load of people couldn't simply pass through and they'd be thrown in jail with, with no recognition. As a matter of fact if it was done properly, it would have to get attention and it would have to bring to focus, bring into focus the fact that you had major noncompliance with what was now federal law. So that's why I think we did it, I think the organization responded because the organization was, was frustrated in this way and it worked.

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INTERVIEWER: STOP PLEASE.

[cut]

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[cut]

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: EIGHTEEN.

Carey: I think that the, the, the long range result of the Freedom Rides was organizationally for CORE it was important because it thrust CORE into becoming a, a major national organization involved in the, in the black protest. But that's not too important really. That's interesting history, but, what, what really happened was that we did begin to break the back of, of segregation in Mississippi and in the hardest core areas of the Deep South and once the freedom rides had taken place there was no place in the United States, that was—that, that could not be attacked. There was—every place was vulnerable. And I think that this event did open up the entire nation for change. It, it simply meant that there was no place that was invulnerable.

00:26:26:00

INTERVIEWER: STOP PLEASE, THAT'S A WRAP.

00:26:31:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

INTERVIEWER: SPOKE WITH OUR COLLEAGUES I MEAN I'M SURE THEY TOLD YOU THE RANGE OF THIS SERIES THAT WE'RE BASICALLY GO—COVERING, THE, THE FOCUS TIME PERIOD IS '54 FROM BROWN TO '65 TO SELMA AND THE VOTING RIGHTS ACT. AND, WE'RE, WE'RE JUST TRYING, WE'RE, I'VE BEEN

THINKING ABOUT WHEN YOU COME TO THAT POINT IN 1965 AND SELMA'S OVER AND THE VOTING RIGHTS ACT HAS BEEN PASSED, IF YOU COULD PUT YOURSELF BACK THERE CAN YOU THINK NOW WHAT IT WAS THAT WAS ACCOMPLISHED IN THAT FIRST TEN YEARS OF THE MODERN CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT POST BROWN MOVEMENT. AND WHAT WAS, WHAT WAS UNTOUCHED? SORT OF A, A SENSE OF WHAT WAS TO COME. WHAT HAVE YOU, WHAT HAD WE TAKEN CARE OF AND WHAT HAD YOU MISSED. I'M NOT SURE IT'S AN EASY QUESTION TO ANSWER IN A MINUTE.

Carey: That's a pretty tough one isn't it?

INTERVIEWER: YEAH.

00:27:28:00

[cut]

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: NINETEEN.

Carey: I think that the end result of the say ten years ending in 1965 was that on the surface we made a lot of changes. The nation would never be the same again. Blacks and others would not have to go through the same humiliation about being rejected in public places and yet I'm not certain sometimes that we really changed all that much. I can find places in North Carolina today where sharecroppers still grow up and live almost as they did fifty years ago. And, you know—

00:28:21:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

—the kind of freedom that was being sought wasn't something that could be just taken at any given time. It has to be taken over and over again. And I guess that, in some ways, some of the big celebrations like the March on Washington may have been almost anti-climactic because what they did was convince people that the problems had all been solved and now we can go back home and relax and as a matter of fact that isn't quite the case. You've still got a lot of very subtle problems even today, not only in the South, but throughout the country and they are very hard to attack.

INTERVIEWER: STOP PLEASE. THAT WAS SUCH A TERRIFIC ANSWER, THANK YOU.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:29:21:00

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