Interview with **Peter Orris**
May 19, 1986
Production Team: B
Camera Rolls: 411-414
Sound Rolls: 1352-1353

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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 411]

[sound roll 1352]

[wild audio]

[production discussion]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: THIS IS THE START OF THE ORRIS INTERVIEW, WE'RE STILL ON CAMERA ROLL 411.

[picture begins]

Orris: Stu House was the name of the—

[sync tone]

00:00:17:00

INTERVIEWER: SO JUST GIVE ME A, AN IMPRESSION OF, OF WHO YOU WERE BEFORE YOU WENT DOWN TO MISSISSIPPI, YOU KNOW, WHEN YOU WERE 17, 18, 19 AND WHAT BROUGHT YOU TO THE DECISION TO GO.

Orris: Well, I grew up in New York City and, I was at my first year in, in college and, I suppose I, I had been raised in a family where being Jewish, was important for the fact that, it

signified being part of a group that had been subject to repression for two thousand years—and the importance of being Jewish was that, and the lessons of being Jewish was the identification with the underdog, and the identification with people that were suffering repression and, and discrimination. So that, in high school in New York City, I was involved in the movement against racial discrimination and I continued that when I went, went to college.

00:01:20:00

INTERVIEWER: HOW DID YOU HEAR, A LITTLE BIT MORE CONCRETELY, HOW DID YOU HEAR ABOUT GOING DOWN TO MISSISSIPPI? THAT BUNCHES OF PEOPLE WERE GOING AND WHAT MADE YOU DECIDE TO, YOU KNOW, TRAVEL THAT THOUSAND MILES OR WHATEVER IT WAS, AND GO DOWN BY YOURSELF?

Orris: Well, I had come into contact with SNCC organizers and members the summer before. I was working in the national office of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in 1963. And I was 17 at the time, and was very impressed with the SNCC workers that were involved in that process and in that organization as well as those that I met in Washington at the time of the march, and in going to college [coughs] sometime in the spring of my freshman year at college, four of us from the Civil Rights Coordinating Committee at the college, went to Atlanta for a regional meeting of SNCC and we heard about what was going on, we met many people that were involved in voter registration and direct action from the Southern states and it was a tremendously impressive and exciting experience. And so that—the question of why I, I went or wanted to be involved in the Mississippi Summer Project was sort of on the other, other foot. It was for me, a tremendous privilege to be allowed to participate in this movement for racial justice, it was—and at 18 years old, to be able to be involved in this kind of a struggle was just very important to me.

00:02:58:00

INTERVIEWER: THAT'S GREAT. WHAT WERE YOUR FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF SOME OF THESE SNCC PEOPLE WHEN YOU GOT DOWN TO OXFORD OR MAYBE HAD SEEN SOME OF THEM EARLIER, BUT WHEN YOU GOT TO OXFORD, YOU KNOW, YOU'RE, IT MUST HAVE BEEN SOMEWHAT A DIFFERENT SITUATION FOR YOU, THE, THE LEADERSHIP, AS ALL PEOPLE WHO HAD BEEN DOWN IN MISSISSIPPI VETERANS OF THE MOVEMENT AT THIS POINT. WHAT, WHAT ARE YOUR, WHAT DO YOU REMEMBER AS YOUR IMPRESSIONS OF SOME OF THESE PEOPLE WHO TALKED TO YOU ALL ABOUT WHAT YOU MIGHT EXPECT WHEN YOU WENT TO MISSISSIPPI, THE MAIN PEOPLE WHO STUCK OUT IN YOUR MIND?

Orris: There were different individuals who had reacted in very different ways to their experiences in, in the South in organizing, and to their experiences of [coughs] the kind of violence that they—that they were facing in different situations—

INTERVIEWER: I'M SORRY, CAN YOU START OVER? JUST MENTION OXFORD IN SOME WAY [UNINTELLIGIBLE]?

Orris: OK, sorry. All right, yeah. [Overlap]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: [UNINTELLIGIBLE]

INTERVIEWER: YEAH, OK.

Orris: Are we better? Should I look at his left eye, is that better to? No, no? [laughs]

INTERVIEWER: [laughs]

00:04:03:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, JUST SORT OF FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF GOING DOWN TO OXFORD AND—

Orris: Well, we—I arrived in Oxford, Ohio for the training session for the summer project during the first week as, and I was selected to be part of a group that was going to the southwest area of Mississippi and to do voter registration in that area. And we were a group of fifteen, fifteen, sixteen people that were set aside and we spent many hours with Bob Moses—

[cut]

[wild audio]

Orris: —and a, a variety of the other leaders of SNCC who had been in the South and been in that area.

INTERVIEWER: I'M SORRY—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: SORRY, I HAVE TO CHANGE—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: YOU KNOW, I FORGOT YOU WERE [UNINTELLIGIBLE].

[cut]

[wild audio]

00:04:46:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 3: THIS IS CAMERA ROLL NUMBER 412—

Orris: Well, we never got there.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: OH, WAS THAT FOR—

Orris: I went down there to put a radio in what's his name farm, Lee's farm—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 3: THIS IS CAMERA ROLL 412

Orris: —they didn't got down into that area until what's his name, Marshall Ganz—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 3: CONTINUATION OF SOUND REEL 1352—

Orris: —and who else went to McComb?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 3: —INTERVIEW WITH PETER ORRIS—

Orris: But our group went to—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER:—FILM FIVE, EYES ON THE PRIZE.

Orris: —Mile—Homestead.

[cut]

[camera roll 412]

[slate]

Orris: …put on a headband? [laughs]

CAMERA CREW: [laughs]

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 4: MARK.

00:05:20:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, SO JUST START WITH YOUR IMPRESSIONS OF OXFORD, WHO YOU ARE, WHAT YOUR—WHAT THE LEADERSHIP ARE TELLING YOU.

Orris: Well, we came to Oxford, Ohio in June, I think it was, of 1964. And this was the training session that was supposed to last for a week and there were two sessions to be run in Oxford at a college there. And what this was designed to do was to bring the volunteers, those of us that had never been in Mississippi, into contact with the SNCC and CORE veterans who had been there for several years and knew what we were going into and what to

expect and it was designed to acquaint us with the practical work that we were going to be doing. Those of us there the first week were to be involved in voter registration efforts and it was to acquaint us with the laws as well as the practical aspects of the voter registration. Additionally, it was to give us a feeling of exactly what kind of a tense atmosphere we were going in, what kind of violence that we should expect and how to attempt to avoid the violence, and also nonviolent resistance or rather nonviolent responses to violent situations and so that we were—and had played acted in Oxford, Ohio situations where angry groups of people, mobs would be attacking us and how would we handle ourselves in that situation, in situations where our life was threatened and a whole variety of these situations which the experienced SNCC workers were sure that we were going to meet during the time in the summer and they wanted to guarantee that we were going to respond in a nonviolent manner and respond in a manner that would be most, most helpful for our safety and, and those around us. So that was what was happening during that first week in Oxford, Ohio. Then a group of us were assigned to go to the southwest Mississippi area which was an area that at the time had the most violent tradition in Mississippi and, and a farmer there had been killed a short time before for being involved in voter registration efforts and the violence had been ongoing in that area. And so those of us that were going to that area spent extra time on both the techniques of voter registration and the question of nonviolent response to violent actions—as well as we were then asked to go to Washington to make a direct appeal to the Attorney General, Nicholas Katzenbach and others in the government that they should pay special attention to what was happening in Mississippi this summer as we felt and—or the organizers felt that our lives would certainly be at risk for engaging in this activity.

00:08:36:00

INTERVIEWER: GIVE ME JUST A FEW SENTENCES ON SOME OF—HOW YOU FELT WHEN YOU FIRST MET SOME OF THE LEADERS OF SNCC. WHAT DID YOU THINK OF THEM AS A GROUP?

Orris: I had first met some of the leadership of SNCC in 1963 at the national office of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom and I found them to be some of the most impressive people that I had ever met. These were people that had strong beliefs, had strong beliefs about the, the importance of equality, about the importance of confronting hate, the importance of enfranchising the disenfranchised, all of the ideals that our country was founded on and were placing their bodies on the line and risking violence if not death for their beliefs, and were doing it time and time and time again. And responding in—to the kinds of violence that they were facing in a nonviolent manner, in a manner that was resolute but that was not one of hatred or—good enough.

00:09:46:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, THAT WAS GOOD. DESCRIBE HEARING ABOUT THE DISAPPEARANCE OF GOODMAN, CHANEY AND SCHWERNER. WHAT, WHAT WAS YOUR INITIAL REACTION? WHEN YOU HEARD ABOUT THE THREE, AND IF YOU COULD MENTION THE—

Orris: We, those of us that had gone to Washington, they were going for the southwest area of Mississippi returned to Oxford, Ohio to the training session for—at the middle of the second week of the training session and we just drove in, excuse me, we'd driven thirty hours from Washington straight and we then arrived in Oxford, Ohio late one evening to find the camp, the, the, the college and all in, in the college, in a state of, of, of extreme remorse and where everybody at the school and the organizers, the SNCC organizers with experience in Mississippi were all, at that time, already sure that the three were dead, and that they had been lynched by people in the area in Philadelphia. And that's when we first heard about it. That—

00:11:05:00

INTERVIEWER: WHAT WAS YOUR INITIAL REACTION, YOUR VERY FIRST REACTION TO THAT NEWS AND WHAT IT MEANT FOR YOU AS A VOLUNTEER AND THE PEOPLE DOWN THERE WITH YOU?

Orris: Well as I say, we came into the, the college after nightfall and we drove up to the, the dormitory area. And in the front of the dormitory area there was a large circle of volunteers and SNCC organizers and they were in the dark and they were singing freedom songs, and they had linked arms, and they were, and we asked what had happened and they described it to us and, and described the situation. And our reaction was horror we had—I'd met two of the, the workers during the week before, briefly, but they were one of us and we felt that this was wha-the worst that we had expected and the sorrow that went through the camp and ourselves was profound and—

00:12:15:00

INTERVIEWER: DID YOU HAVE SECOND THOUGHTS ABOUT STAYING IN MISSISSIPPI AFTER HEARING ABOUT IT?

Orris: No. Our questions at the time were how could we bring another thousand people down with us? We knew this was a, a possibility to happen if not a probability within Mississippi.

INTERVIEWER: COULD YOU START OUT BY JUST MENTIONING WHAT WE'RE TALKING ABOUT—I KNEW THERE WAS A POSSIBILITY THAT—

Orris: During the three or four months of organization and recruiting of volunteers, as well as in Oxford, Ohio at the training session, it was very clear to all of us that violence and death was a possibility in Mississippi, if not a probability, during that summer. And when this became a reality we realized that the only response that we could make to that was to redouble the efforts and bring down more volunteers, put more of a light on Mississippi because the murderers had to be found, they had to be revealed, they had to be punished. The thought of going back did not enter anybody's mind

00:13:23:00

INTERVIEWER: LET'S CUT FOR A SECOND.

[cut]

[wild audio]

Orris: How about opening the windows? That, that's not possible?

[cut]

[sync tone]

Orris: Or buy an air conditioner? [laughs]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 3: WE'RE RIGHT ON STORROW DRIVE.

Orris: She needs an air-conditioner. [laughs]

CAMERA CREW: [LAUGHS]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: YOU TALKING TO ME?

Orris: You seem to be the man with the money. [laughs]

INTERVIEWER: ARE YOU READY TO ROLL?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: YEAH.

00:13:44:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, I'M SKIPPING FORWARD JUST A LITTLE BIT BUT NOW DURING THE SUMMER WHAT, WHAT ACTIVITIES WERE YOU INVOLVED IN? I KNOW YOU WERE IN SOME OF THE MORE CONDITIONAL, BUT WHAT DID YOU DO DURING THE SUMMER?

Orris: Following the disappearance of Goodman, Chaney and Schwerner, there was a decision made by the SNCC leadership that those of us that were going to go to the southwest area of Mississippi shouldn't go right away. That the situation was too tense and the possibility of, of, of mass violence and, and many more deaths was present. So they decided that we should go in the interim to Holmes County in the Delta and do the voter registration that we were going to be doing in the southwest, in that area initially. So that's where we went to, we went to a town called Mileston, which was outside of Tchula, in Holmes County in the Delta of Mississippi. And we spent two to three weeks there working on voter registration and what that meant was that we would be going to peoples' houses who we knew were not registered to vote but were certainly eligible to vote and we would go and begin to talk to people about the Freedom Dem-the Freedom Democratic Party, about

registering to vote, about the programs that were being put forward, about being ready to drive people to the, to the courthouse and go with them while they registered and—

00:15:19:00

INTERVIEWER: WHAT COMPREHENSION DO YOU HAVE OF, OF LOCAL BLACK MISSISSIPIANS, WHEN YOU WENT DOOR TO DOOR? WHAT KIND OF RESPONSES—

Orris: Yeah.
INTERVIEWER: —NOT JUST TO THE VOTER REGISTRATION, OR TO ONE SPECIFIC THING OR ANOTHER, BUT IN GENERAL?

Orris: Well, we went, as I said, those of us who were going to the southwest area decided—those of us who were going to the southwest area were assigned to Holmes County after the disappearance of the three workers because of the fears for massive violence in the southwest area, and we worked on voter registration in Holmes County, which meant that we would go to peoples' houses that we knew were eligible to vote but were not registered. And we would sit and talk with people about registration, about what the process involved was, about what kind of support we could give them, because there was a great deal of fear as many of these people knew they had a right to vote, but were intimidated and prevented from voting by the local power structure—the sheriff, the police—

[cut]

[wild audio]

Orris: —the judges and others. So we spent a good deal of time talking with people about that, urging them to come to mass meetings—

INTERVIEWER: EXCUSE ME, WE HAVE TO CUT. WHAT I'M TRYING TO GET AT IS BOB AND UNITA AND OTHER PEOPLE HAVE TOLD US STORIES ABOUT, WELL FIRST OF ALL BOB WE INTERVIEWED JUST EARLIER TODAY TOLD THE WHOLE STRATEGY OF—

Orris: Oh, now I’m nervous again, you see? Every time you do that. [laughs]

[cut]

00:16:46:00

[camera roll 413]

[slate]

INERVIEWER: OK, SO WHAT—

[cut]

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: OH, SORRY, I DIDN'T MEAN TO—

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: SECOND.

00:16:55:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, WHAT I'M TRYING TO GET AT IS, IS JUST HOW YOU AND, AND OTHER VOLUNTEERS WERE TRYING TO BREAK DOWN SOME OF THESE BARRIERS THAT HAD BEEN THERE FROM, FOR HUNDREDS OF YEARS.

Orris: In—when we were doing voter registration and would come to a new farm house, there were—there was an unwritten agenda that had to be gotten through before one could even discuss the, the rudiments of how do you register to vote-because of the fear, because of the terrorism that had been produced by the Klan and the, the power structure in these areas. These individual farmers and their families, were very worried about voter registration. They understood well how to protect themselves on their own land or in their own homes, or they, they could not fully protect themselves on their own land and their own homes, but they had an area that they at least stood a better chance at protecting themselves and their family than if they ventured out into the political domain of, of being involved in voter registration. So—and additionally, because there was safety in these black communities in the, in the rural farming black communities many family members never ventured out for any kind of interaction with the whites in Mississippi, purely, maybe interaction in a store or something of that sort, and then retreat to, to the safety of the black community. We felt that, as, as volunteers there-we, we did not breathe easily until we were back in the relative safety of the black farming communities, in Mileston for instance. So when we'd go to a new farmer's house, the first problem was that we were white, northern and of, there on, on, on a mission so to speak-all of those things were fraught with dangers for the people that we were talking to. And the initial response that we would get would be frequently you, you'd come there, and the first thing was, ***people would be sitting down and you would say hello and you'd shake their hands. Now that was an unusual thing for a white person to do to a black person in Mississippi at that time.*** The next thing was that, that you would avoid a situation in which you were standing over and talking down to people—a frequent kind of a situation, a, a body message about the power relationship there. So we would always sit down, we'd sit on the, the steps, walking up to the porch, and either be on an equal eye level or on a, on a lower level. We were much younger than many of the people we were speaking to and it was necessary to establish a relationship or an understanding of the respect that we paid to them for their age and for their situation an—in this setting. Because that unwritten agenda of having to establish that relationship of equality and our respect for them which was so contradictory to what they got from whites in Mississippi on a routine basis that, that was the

first difficult thing to get, to get over in these discussions. ***Frequently, people would respond by not looking us in the eye. At the end of every phrase there would be a ma'am or a sir depending on, on who was there. And they would say yes to everything we said. We'd say, "Would you like to be involved in the voter registration project?" "Will you go down to vote?" "Yes, sir." And we knew we were not getting across. We knew they were just waiting for us to go away because we were a danger to them, and in many ways we were. We had much less to risk than they did. This was their lives, their land, their family and they were going to be here when we were gone***, so that, yeah—

00:20:56:00

INTERVIEWER: GREAT, CUT. THAT'S GREAT.

[cut]

[wild audio]

Orris: Don't say it—ok.

[cut]

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: IF YOU CAN, JUST GIVE US A LITTLE LEAD—IN LIKE YOU KNOW, AS A SUMMER VOLUNTEER FOR—

Orris: At, at—during this time of, of working as in voter registration and later on when I was involved in installing citizen band radios in cars and farm houses which we put in these vehicles to, for the protection of our workers so that we would have nobody out of touch. The way the three in Philadelphia who were murdered were out of touch. During that period—well I was 18, and I, I, no, it's not the way I—wait, wait—

00:21:49:00

INTERVIEWER: LET'S CUT FOR A MINUTE.

Orris: Go back—

[cut]

[wild audio]

Orris: —I'll take it.

[cut]

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: OK.

Orris: I was 18 years old and I was in Mississippi and it was a very different environment to the environment that I grew up in in New York City and I found it very attractive. As I said, we felt safe and at home in the, in the black community, in black farming communities, but there was the rural lifestyle of the white community as well, was a very attractive kind of an environment and many of us I think, fell in love with the state in many aspects during that summer. And one of the ways that, that I sort of expressed that at the time I guess was we all wore jeans I had jeans and a large belt buckle, I had my T-shirt, and I rolled it up at the, at the shoulders, and I wore my cowboy hat. And I thought I looked like most of the other young guys in Mississippi at the time. I'm, I suppose I may not have. I had no beard. [laughs] But I—that was I suppose that was my way of identifying with people in Mississippi—both black and white. Even then I thought it was very important if we could, that we had to try to relate to the white community that we had to try to begin the process of breaking the monolith of the white community and fighting for—fighting fo—breaking the monolith of the white community and trying to attract a section of the white community, especially the youth, toward the struggle against racism. SNCC had leadership from the South, white leadership from the south a minority of whites of course, but who had been in the leadership of SNCC for years and the, the courage of, of those SNCC organizers who had left the white community and—but were still attempting to organize, to develop movements against racism in the white community was also very impressive to me. And it was clear that we were not going to make headway in Mississippi just from organizing in the black community and demanding the attention and support of the North. It was clear that we had to be able to relate to the white community and that we had to be able to make it clear to elements within the white community, that it was in their best interest to end this racism, that the reason they were dirt poor was because they couldn't get along with the, the blacks down the block that were also dirt poor, and that somebody was making a buck out of it and it was clear to us then that they were making a buck out of it, off both the black and whites in Mississippi, and we wanted to try to find a way to relate to the whites on the same kind of basis.

00:24:55:00

INTERVIEWER: OK CUT, THAT'S GOOD.

[cut]

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: JUST GONNA DO FOUR MORE QUESTIONS. WHAT KINDS OF THINGS FROM THE SUMMER MADE A, MADE A BIG CHANGE IN YOUR LIFE AS TO WHO YOU WERE, HOW DID YOU CHANGE FROM WHO YOU WERE IN THE BEGINNING OF THE SUMMER TO WHO YOU WERE AFTERWARDS?

Orris: The summer of 1964 in Mississippi changed me considerably. It changed me because I

now had a security in my beliefs and that I was willing to put my life on the line for my beliefs. That was a security that was important in the next several years. Many activities of the student movement in the next several years back at Harvard and, and various places around the country and SDS, were stimulated by the fact that people were proving their radicalism, and felt the need to prove their radicalism. Those of us that had been in Mississippi did not have that need. We knew where we stood and we knew what we were ready to do for our beliefs. The other thing that the Mississippi summer did for me was and for many of us who returned to the northern college campuses afterwards, it changed the parameters of struggle for us. Prior to that point, we engaged in various kinds of debating activities, we may have demonstrated but that was the range of our activity. Following the Mississippi summer, nonviolent direct action became a weapon in our armamentarium to a—a, a weapon in our struggle to draw attention to the questions that we thought were of burning importance. In California it was manifested at the free speech movement, led by veterans from the Mississippi summer. In Boston and at Harvard it was manifested by demonstrations around the war in Vietnam early in 1965, that were nonviolent direct action demonstrations that we felt comfortable with and we understood the issues and how to be involved in it.

00:27:15:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, THAT'S GOOD. CUT.

[cut]

[camera roll 414]

[sound roll 1353]

[slate]

INTERVIEWER: OK, I'M GOING TO SKIP AHEAD, ACTUALLY—

Orris: Ok.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWR: —I WANTED YOU, I WANT TO GET AN IDEA OF WHERE YOU, WHAT YOU'RE THINKING AFTER THE WHOLE EXPERIENCE OF ATLANTIC CITY. YOU'VE GONE UP THERE—

Orris: Do you want me to describe that Boardwalk scene? It's, if you'd like that on the film or not, no?

INTERVIEWER: YES, WELL, WELL GIVE ME A LITTLE BIT OF THAT, THEN LET'S STOP, THEN I WANT TO GO TO AFTER THE WHOLE THING BUT JUST ON THE BOARDWALK, JUST A FEW SENTENCES, WHAT WAS IT LIKE BEING THERE, YOU'RE OUTSIDE THE CONVENTION, YOU'RE, YOU KNOW, YOU COME ALL

THIS WAY AND YOU SPENT THE WHOLE SUMMER ORGANIZING FOR IT. SO PUT US ON THE BOARDWALK.

Orris: Are we going?

00:27:51:00

INTERVIEWER: WE'RE ROLLING NOW.

Orris: Ok, in August of, the end of August of that year, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party challenged the seating of the regular Democratic Party at the Democratic Convention in Atlantic City and many of us came up to Atlantic City to aid in that challenge and part of that—those activities in Atlantic City, took place on the Boardwalk in front of the convention center, and it was a very surrealistic kind of setting—Fellini movie, for want of a better word. There we were in a, in a, in a circle on the Boardwalk in a vigil of maybe thirty or forty of us sitting down and one person speaking at, at a time. Or just sitting there and, and in a vigil with signs, and around us were these merrymakers for the convention and vacationing in Atlantic City. And we had just returned from Mississippi, from the kinds of violence that we were seeing that summer, and the kinds of intimidation and there we were sitting and, and very serious about what we were about and about the importance of the Democratic Party to respond to the challenge and the need for racial equality in Mississippi in, amongst these balloons and cotton candy and noise makers and, and this, and as night fell, I'll never forget sitting on the Boardwalk as the night fell like that and people were all around us and we were sitting in the middle—a very strange, strange situation.

INTERVIEWER: OK, LET'S CUT FOR A SECOND AND JUST—

[cut]

[wild audio]

INTERVIEWER: —LET'S JUST ROLL, A LITTLE BIT OF THAT AND THEN—

[cut]

[sync tone]

00:29:46:00

INTERVIEWER: —I STILL WANT A LITTLE BIT OF WHAT YOU THINK AFTERWARDS, I MEAN IT'S TRUE A LOT OF THE DELEGATES WERE, HAD EXPECTED TO GET. I MEAN A LOT OF PEOPLE EXPECTED THE DELEGATES TO GET SEATED AND THEY WEREN'T, AND THEY HAD A LOT OF DISILLUSIONMENT BUT NOT EVERYBODY FELT THE SAME WAY, ALL DIFFERENT LAYERS.

Orris: There was a tremendous support amongst the delegates of the Democratic Convention for the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. In fact, the night that Ms. Hamer and the other delegates four delegates came and took the seats without being given the seats took the seats that the Mississippi delegation had abandoned, there was a tremendous uproar in the hall when they walked in and everybody stood and cheered and clapped because the delegates thought that in fact these seats had been given to the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and they realized the righteousness of that situation. But in fact, that was not the case and that was another demonstration by the MFDP and the seats were not given to them, and a very insulting compromise was offered based on the cruel realities of Mr. Johnson's realpolitik and not based on the righteousness of the cause or the necessities that we knew existed in Mississippi. And so we were very disappointed that the Democratic Party had not responded in a more positive manner. Of course, in the next several years, we discovered the Democratic Party responding in equally negative manner to other righteous causes such as the war in Vietnam and other situations.

00:31:32:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, DO YOU SEE ANYTHING IN RETROSPECT WHICH MIGHT BE INTERPRETED AS, AS THE COMING DISTURBANCE OF TENSIONS THAT HAD ALWAYS EXISTED IN THE MOVEMENT BETWEEN BLACK AND WHITES, SPECIFICALLY BETWEEN PEOPLE AROUND STOKELY OR PEOPLE WHO WERE BEGINNING TO THINK THAT THERE, THERE COULDN'T BE ANYMORE PROGRESS WITH AN INTEGRATED CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT. DID YOU EVER SEE ANY SIGNS OF THIS THOUGHOUT THE SUMMER TENSION AND—

Orris: There was during the Mississippi summer there was the feeling on the part of some SNCC organizers that this tactic of involving for a brief period of time northern students, predominantly white, was not a healthy tactic. And specifically, it deprecated the efforts that many very courageous black organizers and black citizens of Mississippi had been making for many years. And even those that said it was important and it would rivet the attention of the country and therefore was helpful, were also—felt emotionally that this should not be, the country should be riveted when a black citizen of Mississippi is terrorized for trying to register to vote. And I must say, that was not just a feeling on the part of SNCC organizers or, and I, and I don't think it was a black white split either. Many of the whites involved in the process felt the same thing and we knew that this was a tactic and that there were reasons for it. In Atlantic City, following the offer of this to symbolic delegates and no real power there was a large debate within the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party delegation as well as volunteers, as well as SNCC organizers, as well as a variety of other ci—civil rights leaders who were at Atlantic City that issue broke down as to whether or not those two symbolic delegates should be accepted or rejected and SNCC and the Freedom Democratic Party people from Mississippi, by and large felt that they had to be rejected. Many of the civil rights leadership who had ties to the Democratic Party, and fe—felt and counseled, that in fact they should be accepted and that was an important stake. That was not a black white difference or, or division. And I, just as one example, I remember as one of the volunteers, or one of the whites involved with SNCC at the time getting up and speaking very passionately about it, Rita Schwerner, Schwerner's widow, got up and spoke very passionately against the

acceptance, as did Moses, Bob Moses, who was the leader of SNCC in Mississippi and the MFDP.

INTERVIEWER: OK, LET'S CUT.

00:34:56:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

Orris: It was a lovely Spain, right? Three people died, that's all right? How many people did they leave over in Spain? They left many, many more in Spain.

[cut]

Orris: How many left in—

[sync tone]

Orris: —Vietnam? You know.

00:35:10:00

INTERVIEWER: BUT IT GIVES PEOPLE AN IDEA OF WHAT WE'RE TALKING ABOUT, WHAT MISSISSIPPI MEANT TO A LOT OF PEOPLE.

Orris: The—to be, to be able to participate in the in the movement in Mississippi in '64 and, and, and thereafter, was a, was a exhilarating experience, despite all of the problems, despite all of the tensions, despite all of the threats of violence, and the actual violence that occurred—it was, it was an exhilarating experience. It was, it was the Spain, Spanish Civil War for our generation at that period of time. We were able to express the highest ideals of, of, of our country, and express it in a way that called upon our fellow citizens to support those ideals. It was the highest expression of patriotism, and, and, and just to be in—involved and allowed to participate in that was for an 18 year old, very heady, wonderful ab—ability.

INTERVIEWER: GREAT, CUT.

Orris: I got the patriotism in! Ha! [laughs]

CAMERA CREW: [laughs]

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:36:24:00