

Interview with **James Farmer**

November 1, 1985

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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*.

00:00:03:00

[camera roll 312]

[sound roll 1307]

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: THREE-TWELVE, TAKE ONE.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: OK, FINE.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: I'LL, I'LL LET YOU KNOW.

James Farmer: [coughs]

INTERVIEWER: OK.

Farmer: [coughs]

INTERVIEWER: OK, ON THE SIT-INS. WHAT EFFECT DID THE SIT-INS IN THE EARLY '60s HAVE IN THE MOVEMENT AND ON THE, YOU KNOW, PEOPLE IN THE UNITED STATES.

Farmer: Well, the southern student sit-in movement which began in 1960, February 1st in

Greensboro, then spread throughout the South, made the movement a mass movement, and took it out of one locality, the Montgomery bus boycott, for instance, had been in one city: Montgomery. But the southern student sit-in movement spread into dozens of cities throughout the South. And local people and students in those cities were involved in it.

00:00:56:00

INTERVIEWER: GOING TO THE KENNEDY ADMINISTRATION, AFTER KENNEDY HAD BEEN PRESIDENT FOR SAY SIX—THE FIRST SIX TO EIGHT MONTHS WHAT CONCLUSIONS WERE BEING DRAWN ABOUT HIS ADMINISTRATION'S COMMITMENT TO CIVIL RIGHTS? HE'D NOW HAD HOW A LITTLE TIME TO SHOW HIS, HIS COMMITMENT?

Farmer: Well, many of us felt that his commitment to civil rights was merely political. In other words—

INTERVIEWER: I'M SORRY, I'M SORRY. START, JUST MENTIONING KENNEDY.

Farmer: Yes, *many of us felt that Kennedy's commitment to civil rights was political, that it was a device to get him elected, because in the first six to eight months, he had done very little. Let me illustrate that. During the campaign, he had indicated that there was one whole area of discrimination that the president could wipe out with merely a stroke of the pen. And that was the area of public housing discrimination, and, if elected, he would use that stroke of the pen by issuing an executive order that would do the job. Well, we waited for more than a year for that stroke of the pen, then decided that his pen must have run dry.* Though we started what we called an "Ink for Jack" campaign, and sent bottles of ink to the White House. Then his pen suddenly became active and he signed an executive order.

00:02:16:00

INTERVIEWER: NOW WITH THE FREEDOM RIDES, WHAT WAS THE BACKGROUND OF, OF THE STRATEGY TO START THE FREEDOM RIDES? I'M THINKING MORE OF THE, THE WHOLE GANDHIAN PHILOSOPHY OF NON-VIOLENCE. WHAT WAS BEHIND THE FREEDOM RIDES?

Farmer: Yes. Well as you know, a—CORE was organized in 1942. I had a major role in that, and we organized CORE as an interracial organization to use the Gandhian technique of non-violent direct action in fighting against all forms of racial discrimination. In—that was 1942. In 1947, CORE and a sister organization, the Fellowship of Reconciliation had a kind of a Freedom Ride. It was called the Journey of Reconciliation, in which the riders, black and white, went through the upper south, not the Deep South, and tested only the seating on buses. This was in response to a Supreme Court decision in the Irene Morgan case in 1946, saying that segregated seating of interstate passengers was unconstitutional. Well, they were unsuccessful in that ride. Some of them were arrested in North Carolina and served thirty days on the chain gang as a result. Now when I became national director of the organization that we had set up in 1942, and I became director of it in 1961, there were letters on my desk

from blacks in the Deep South who complained that they tried to sit on the front seats of buses or to use the bus terminal facilities without discrimination or segregation and were beaten or jailed or thrown out or all three of those things. And this was in spite of the fact that the Supreme Court had said they had every right to sit anywhere they wanted to on a bus or to use the bus terminal facilities without segregation. But those Supreme Court decisions had become merely scraps of paper gathering dust, cobwebs over them. They were not being enforced. So when I went into my little CORE office, my small staff and I sat down to ponder the question of what we ought to do about this. First we had to ask ourselves, why is it that the Federal Government does not enforce Federal law over those conflicting state and local laws? Federal law said that there should be no segregation in interstate travel, the Supreme Court had decided that. But still state laws in the southern states and local ordinances ordered segregation of the races on those buses. So why didn't the Federal Government enforce its law? We decided it was because of politics, because the administration in Washington feared that the southern Democrats might take a walk at the convention. That is, pull out of the convention and run a candidate of their own, as they had done in 1948 when they ran a candidate on the States Rights ticket, hoping—expecting not to defeat the Democrats, or not to elect their candidate, but rather hoping to throw the election to the Republicans and thus to teach the Democrats a lesson.

00:05:44:00

INTERVIEWER: WHAT ABOUT THE “GREEN BOOK” THAT THE NAACP HAD PUT OUT ABOUT—THE GREEN BOOK. THE BOOK THAT THE NAACP HAD PUT OUT ABOUT TRAVEL IN THE SOUTH? DO YOU KNOW ABOUT THAT?

Farmer: I'm not familiar with the Green Book. No.

INTERVIEWER: OK.

Farmer: But may I go on with the, the, so we, if, if we were right in assuming that the Federal Government did not enforce Federal law because of its fear of reprisals from the South, then what we had to do was to make it more dangerous, politically, for the Federal Government not to enforce Federal law than it would be for them to enforce Federal law. And how would we do that?

We decided the way to do it was to have a group, an interracial group, ride through the South. This was not civil disobedience, really, because we would be doing merely what the Supreme Court said we had a right to do. The whites in the group would sit in the back of the bus, the blacks would sit in the front of the bus, and would refuse to move when ordered. At every rest stop, the whites would go into the waiting room for blacks and the blacks into the waiting room for whites, and would seek to use all the facilities, refusing to leave. And, we felt that we could then count upon the racists of the South to, create a crisis, so that the Federal Government would be compelled to enforce Federal law. And that was the rationale for the Freedom Ride.

00:07:19:00

INTERVIEWER: WHO WAS ON THE FIRST BUS, BASICALLY? WERE THERE SOME PEOPLE FROM THE—

Farmer: Not really. We recruited a small group of thirteen persons, carefully selected and screened, because we wanted to be sure that our adversaries could not dig up derogatory information on any individual and use that to smear the movement. Then we had a week of arduous training to prepare this group of thirteen for anything. They were white, they were black, they were from college age up to the sixties, age sixty-one. One professor from Wayne State University in Michigan, Dr. Walter Bergman was sixty-one. His wife of approximately the same age. Others were college students. Now two of them, at least, two of them were person who had participated in the sit-in movement, John Lewis, for example, from Nashville, who at that time was a Bible Student in Nashville. And Hank Thomas who was a senior at Howard University and had participated in the sit-ins in Washington, DC. Others were white, who were professionals. One was a former Navy combat captain, World War II, who, who dedicated himself to the tactic of nonviolence in this demonstration.

00:08:59:00

INTERVIEWER: NOW WHEN YOU—INITIALLY, BEFORE YOU BEGAN THE RIDES, YOU CAN—YOU SENT LETTERS TO VARIOUS PEOPLE IN THE JUSTICE DEPARTMENT.

Farmer: Ah, yes.

INTERVIEWER: WHAT WERE YOU EXPECTING THE LETTERS TO DO?

Farmer: Well, here I think we were trying to follow the Gandhian program. Gandhi had insisted in his technique in India, that we should always advise our adversaries what we were going to do. We should be open and above-board, nothing should be hidden. We should tell them in advance what we were going to do, when we were going to do, how we were going to do it. So following that leadership of Gandhi's, I sent letters to the President of the United States, the Attorney General, that was President Kennedy and his brother Robert Kennedy, the Director of the FBI, Mr. Hoover, the Chairman of the Interstate Commerce Commission which regulated interstate travel, the President of Greyhound Corporation and the President of Trailways Corporation since those were the two carriers that we were going to use this project. I must say that we did not get a reply from any of those letters.

INTERVIEWER: WERE YOU ANTICIPATING VIOLENCE ALL ALONG?

Farmer: Yes, we expected that there would be violence when we reached the—

INTERVIEWER: WE'LL, WE'LL STOP NOW TO CHANGE ROLLS.

[cut]

00:10:30:00

[slate]

[change to camera roll 313]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: SPEED. CAMERA ROLL THREE-FOUR—THREE-FOURTEEN.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: THANK YOU. CAMERA'S READY.

INTERVIEWER: OK, SO WE'LL START WITH—YOU'RE WRITING LETTERS.

Farmer: [coughs]

INTERVIEWER: OK, GO AHEAD.

Farmer: Want me to go ahead?

INTERVIEWER: YEAH YOU—JUST START WITH THE—

Farmer: Yes, we wrote letters.

INTERVIEWER: YES.

Farmer: Mmm-hmm. Yes. We wrote letters in advance of the Freedom Ride. This was following the Gandhian program of advising your adversaries or the people in power just what you were going to do, when you were going to do it, and how you were going to do it, so that everything would be open and above board. I sent letters to the President of the United States, President Kennedy, to the Attorney General, Robert Kennedy, the Director of the FBI, Mr. Hoover, the Chairman of the Interstate Commerce Commission which regulated interstate travel, to the President of Greyhound Corporation and the President of Trailways Corporation. Those were the carriers that we would be using on this bus ride. And I must say we got replies from none of those letters.

00:11:39:00

INTERVIEWER: NOW WHEN YOU BEGAN THE RIDES WERE YOU ANTICIPATING VIOLENCE FROM THE VERY BEGINNING?

Farmer: When we began the ride we had been told by social scientists and by activists in the South that we could anticipate violence. We might even face death. We were told that the racists, the segregationists would go to any extent to hold the line on segregation in interstate travel. So when we began the ride, I think, all of us were prepared for as much violence as could be thrown at us. And we were prepared for the possibility of death.

00:12:21:00

INTERVIEWER: HAD YOU EXPECTED PROTECTION FROM THE GOVERNMENT?

Farmer: *We had hoped that there would be protection. Indeed, that was one of the reasons that they sent me, a letter to the FBI. We had thought that the FBI would provide protection for us, would see to it at each stop that we were not brutalized, or killed. But that did not happen.* Quite to the contrary, at each stop in Alabama, we found a mob waiting for us. And the mob had been advised in advance by police officials according to testimony before a Senate Committee on Internal Security those police officials were members of the Klan and had turned our itinerary over to the Klan, and thus we had a warm reception waiting for us at every stop in Alabama.

00:13:15:00

INTERVIEWER: SPECIFICALLY, WHAT HAPPENED IN ANNISTON AND IN BIRMINGHAM TO THE FREEDOM RIDERS?

Farmer: Yes, oh, oh, in Anniston, Alabama, when the first Freedom Rider bus arrived there was a mob of men, white men, several hundred, standing there at the bus terminal waiting for the bus. And the members of the mob had their weapons in plain evidence, pistols, guns, blackjacks, clubs, chains, knives, all of them in evidence. The Freedom Riders made a decision on the spot that discretion was the better part of valor in this case and that they were not going to test the terminal facilities at Anniston. To do so would have been suicide. They told that decision to the driver. The driver prepared to drive the bus on. Before the bus was pulled on, however, members of the mob took their sharp instruments and slashed tires. The bus got to the outskirts of Anniston and the tires blew out and the bus ground to a halt. Members of the mob had boarded cars and followed the bus and now with the disabled bus standing there, the members of the mob surrounded it, held the door closed, and a member of the mob threw a fire bomb into the bus, breaking a window to do so. Incidentally, there were some local policemen mingling with the mob, fraternizing with them while this was going on.

00:15:04:00

INTERVIEWER: WHAT ABOUT BIRMINGHAM? THE OTHER BUS?

Farmer: Yes, well the bus had went through Birmingham and there was similarly a mob, but a smaller one. Jim Peck, a white Freedom Rider, was in charge of the testing then. And as soon as he left the bus and began to—heading toward the black waiting room he was encountered by several ruffians. And they dragged him out into the alley and beat him into a bloody unconsciousness, leaving him apparently for dead, lying in a pool of his own blood. Peck had 53 stitches taken in his head subsequently.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: WE NEED TO CHANGE.

INTERVIEWER: OK, WE'LL STOP RIGHT THERE.

00:16:03:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

INTERVIEWER: —GOOD JOB, YES, OF THE ILLUSTRATIONS YOU'RE GIVEN ME—

Farmer: what about it?

INTERVIEWER: IT'S GOOD. YOU'RE BEING SO SPECIFIC WITH THE ILLUSTRATIONS WHICH IS REALLY GREAT BECAUSE A LOT OF PEOPLE HAVE NO IDEA WHAT BRUTALITIES—

Farmer: Yes, yes.

INTERVIEWER: THE SPECIFICS OF IT. THEY JUST HEAR PEOPLE WERE BRAVE.

Farmer: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: HOW.

00:16:20:00

[cut]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: SOUND ROLL THREE-O-EIGHT.

INTERVIEWER: GOOD MEMORY.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: OK, MARK IT PLEASE.

[sync tone]

Farmer: Going over it in my mind so often.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: OK.

INTERVIEWER: OK. SO, PICTURES OF THE BUS BURNING AND, AND THE MOB VIOLENCE THAT WENT AROUND THE WORLD. CAN YOU TALK ABOUT THE INTERNATIONAL IMPACT OF THE FREEDOM RIDES?

Farmer: Oh, it was tremendous—the international impact of the Freedom Rides was tremendous. I think the photographs of that burning bus at Anniston was on the front page of every newspaper in the world. It seemed so to me. And, as soon as the photograph came out I saw it in the *Washington Post* and immediately called my staff members in New York and asked them to get a copy of that photograph and superimpose it on a photograph of the Statue of Liberty in the torch of Miss Liberty and to use that composite photograph as the symbol of the Freedom Ride from that point on, and that was done.

INTERVIEWER: THAT'S GREAT.

Farmer: I, I should add that, this was the biggest news of the day. It monopolized the television news every evening and the headlines of newspapers, not only in this country, but in Asia, in Africa, and in Europe.

00:17:44:00

INTERVIEWER: NOW, AFTER THESE EPISODES OF VIOLENCE, WIDELY PUBLISHED VIOLENCE, WOULD YOU SAY THE KENNEDY ADMINISTRATION ACTED TO THEN AID THE FREEDOM RIDERS?

Farmer: After the widely publicized violence of the Freedom Riders in Alabama SNCC, SNCC persons from Nashville, under the leadership of Diane Nash went in to pick up the baton where it had been dropped by the first thirteen members of the CORE Freedom Ride and to go on. They did that after checking with me to make sure that, we had no objection to SNCC joining forces with us then. *It was at that point, after the SNCC students from Nashville went into Birmingham, that Bobby Kennedy, the attorney general, became really involved in it. Drivers walked off the job and would not drive the bus, and Kennedy got onto the phone and called down to the bus terminal demanding that they find a driver. Where is Mr. Greyhound, he stormed, can't he drive a bus?* And so on. It was then that he sent his Assistant Attorney General into Birmingham to try to minimize the violence that was taking place, and that Assistant Attorney General was beaten himself by the mob as he sought to save a, a young black woman in Nashville from being beaten by the mob.

INTERVIEWER: JUST TELL—MENTION SEIGENTHALER'S NAME.

Farmer: It was Seigenthaler, yes, yes. Bobby Kennedy sent an Assistant Attorney General, John Seigenthaler, to Birmingham and this very courageous official of the Justice Department risked his life to save a black girl from being beaten by a mob and he himself was beaten.

00:19:45:00

INTERVIEWER: NOW, AFTER THE VIOLENCE, DIDN'T CORE DECIDE TO STOP THE RIDES?

Farmer: No. No, CORE did not decide to, CORE did not decide to stop the ride. In Montgomery, after the SNCC riders went to Montgomery from Birmingham after having been bloodied in Birmingham, young CORE riders moved in from New Orleans to join them in Montgomery. And, I joined them in Montgomery after burying my father who had died in Washington. Robert Kennedy, the Attorney General, then called Dr. King, who had come into Montgomery to speak at a rally that we were having on behalf of the Freedom Riders. Robert Kennedy called Dr. King and asked him to intercede with me as the CORE Director to try to get me to halt the Freedom Ride and have a cooling off period. After consulting with Diane Nash and—of SNCC and other Freedom Riders, my decision was negative on that and I asked Dr. King to tell Bobby Kennedy that we'd been cooling off for three hundred fifty years. And if we cooled off any more, we'd be in a deep freeze, and the Freedom Rides would go on.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: WE HAVE TO CUT.

00:21:21:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

INTERVIEWER: OK, WE'LL TAKE A LTTTLE BREAK THEN.

Farmer: —well, originally from South Carolina and Georgia. But he was a southerner and he said, no, you'll meet massive violence in Alabama, and he thought Mississippi would be worse if we got that far.

INTERVIEWER: WHAT DID, WHAT DID HE SAY ON HEARING THAT YOU WERE GOING TO GO ON THE FREEDOM RIDES?

Farmer: Well he studied the itinerary and he said, well, you'll be all right through Virginia and North Carolina and, I think, even South Carolina, possibly Georgia, but 'Bama, they'll take a potshot at you there, and I hope they miss. Said, I don't think you'll reach Mississippi. If you do reach Mississippi, then you'll think Alabama had been purgatory and Mississippi was Hell because it will be even worse. Said, I am certain you won't get to New Orleans. I wish you would not go on this ride, but I know you will and I hope you survive it. Those were his words, I think verbatim.

INTERVIEWER: ARE YOU GUYS GOING TO ROLL?

00:22:27:00

[cut]

[slate]

[change to camera roll 314]

Farmer: All right.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: CAMERA ROLL THREE-FOURTEEN.

INTERVIEWER: HOW ARE YOU HOLDING UP?

Farmer: Oh, I'm, I'm all right.

[sync tone]

Farmer: Just tired, but otherwise all right.

INTERVIEWER: OK. [pause] OK, I WANT TO JUST GO BACK A BIT TO THE PART WHERE YOU WERE TELLING US ABOUT DIANE NASH GIVING YOU A PHONE CALL.

Farmer: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: IN THE MIDDLE OF THE RIDES.

Farmer: Well, after the first group of Freedom Riders had been clobbered in Birmingham, it was clear that they could not go on. Because some were still suffering from smoke inhalation from that burning bus at Anniston, others had been so badly bloodied in Birmingham, and in the hospital or had just gotten out of the hospital. I was at home in Washington after having buried my father. I got a call from Diane Nash, who was a leader of the SNCC student movement in Nashville, and Diane asked if I would have any objections if she took or sent some of the young SNCC students into Alabama to pick up the Freedom Ride where the first CORE group of 13 had left off. Now, we had that kind of relationship with SNCC before they would go into a CORE project they would seek our permission, before we would go into a SNCC project we would do the same. I told Diane that I felt it might be suicide. And she said, of course, we realize that. We're not stupid. She said, but we can't let them stop you with violence because if we do then the movement's dead. Anytime we start something, all they'll have to do is roll out the violence and we'll roll over and play dead. She said, Jim, please, let me send in fresh troops to pick up that baton and run with it. I said, by all means do, Diane and I will double back and join you right after the funeral, which I did.

00:24:35:00

INTERVIEWER: TELL ME ABOUT YOUR FATHER'S PREDICTION WHEN HEARING YOU WERE GONNA TAKE THE FREEDOM RIDE.

Farmer: Yes, while the Freedom Riders were undergoing their week of intensive training in Washington in preparation for beginning the ride, my father was in the hospital terminally ill of cancer in Washington, DC. I went to see him and told him of the Freedom Ride and gave

him a copy of our itinerary explained what we were going to do and how we were going to do it. He pondered it for awhile, studied the itinerary, and then said, well, son, I think you will be all right through Virginia and North Carolina and maybe even through South Carolina, possibly through Georgia, but not in Alabama. In Alabama, they will take a potshot at you. I hope they miss, but I seriously doubt that you will reach Mississippi. If you do, you will think that Alabama was purgatory and Mississippi is Hell because that will be even worse. He said, I am certain that you will not reach New Orleans. It had been our plan to arrive in New Orleans on May 17, the anniversary of the Supreme Court School Desegregation decision.

00:26:03:00

INTERVIEWER: NOW GOING TO MONTGOMERY. CAN YOU DESCRIBE THE SCENE AWAITING YOU AT ABERNATHY'S CHURCH? WITH MOBS AROUND—SURROUNDING THE CHURCH—SHUTTLESWORTH CAME TO GET YOU THROUGH?

Farmer: Yes. I—after the funeral of my father in Washington, I flew to Montgomery. I'd been in constant touch by phone with the Freedom Riders, with Diane Nash, and the others. And learned that they were there in Montgomery. A rally had been planned at Ralph Abernathy's church. Dr. King was flying in from Atlanta for that rally and Abernathy was going to speak there too, so was Wyatt Tee Walker, who was Executive Director of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. When I arrived at the airport in Montgomery, Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth was there to meet me. He was an associate of Dr. King's and a very courageous man by the way. He drove me in his car toward the church telling me we would be encountering a mob because there were hundreds of white men marauding through the streets beating up blacks whom they'd see in the streets and that mob was approaching the church, and probably would be holding the church under siege. His prediction was correct. As we approached the church; a mob blocked the car and began to rock it trying to turn it over. Fortunately, Shuttlesworth had enough traction to get the car in reverse and back away from the hands of the mob. He tried another approach through another street toward that church and had the same result. He then stopped by a black owned taxi stand to inquire how we could out flank the mob and get to that church and he was told that he should take the—drive around to one side of a graveyard, park the car, walk through the graveyard, and try to enter the church through a back door. And we tried that, however, the mob had gotten there first. And the back door was blocked by members of the mob. Shuttlesworth, who didn't know the meaning of the fear [sic], it seemed to me. He was a man of great physical courage—said, well, Jim, I've gotta get you to that church so we're gonna have to walk through that mob. I said, we're going to have to do what? [laughs] He repeated it and proceeded to walk through the mob. Now, Shuttlesworth is a rather small man, slight, not too tall and he walked through the mob, saying, out of my way, step aside, let me through, and the members of the mob complied with [laughs] his request. They stepped aside and here was big me trying to hide behind Fred Shuttlesworth as we walked through the mob. I don't know if I can tell you how we described that scene to each other. I told Shuttlesworth that really that was the, "Crazy Nigger Syndrome" of, you know, member of the mob says, don't mess with that nigger, he's crazy. And that's the reason we got through, well, we rapped on the

back door of the church and the door was opened and we were in and once in the church I met with Martin King and Ralph Abernathy and Diane Nash and we discussed the plans for the rally and it was at that point that Martin Luther King received a call from Bobby Kennedy asking that we halt the Freedom Ride.

INTERVIEWER: GREAT. OH, JUST ONE, ONE—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: CAN WE STOP? CAN WE CUT ONE MINUTE, PLEASE?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: SURE.

00:30:12:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

INTERVIEWER: OK WE'LL STOP. WE'LL TAKE—

Farmer: We're gonna stop again?

INTERVIEWER: YES. IT'S SUCH A GOOD STORY. YOU NEED TO TALK ABOUT IT—

Farmer: Yes—well, you know, I, I'm non-violent in CORE demonstrations and that period is over, but so I says, you comin' over here? He says, yeah. When you coming? He says, might come tonight. You know, all right, come if you want to, but if you do come don't bring pajamas, but be prepared to stay. [laughs] He hung up. I haven't heard from him since. I had three Great Danes at the time who would announce their entry before they got shot and that would give me time to prepare.

INTERVIEWER: THAT'S AMAZING.

00:31:13:00

[cut]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: MARKER. SOUND FIVE.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: OK. LET ME ASK YOU A QUESTION. TELL ME, IN THE BOOK YOU MENTIONED YOU HAD FIRST A LITTLE HESITATION ABOUT GETTING ON THE BUS IN MONTGOMERY AND, EASY TO UNDERSTAND WHY, BUT TELL ME THE STORY. WHAT ACTUALLY GOT YOU ON THE BUS?

Farmer: Well, frankly I had decided that I was not going to take that ride from Montgomery to Jackson because I was afraid, I was scared. I didn't think the buses would arrive in Jackson safely. I, I had all kinds of excuses; my father had just died, and the family needed me then, two deaths in the same week would have been a bit much for the family. Furthermore, I had been away from my office for 6 weeks now and the desk was piled high with correspondence and people had a right to expect replies to their letters and be angry with CORE, angry with me, angry with the movement if they didn't hear from us, and in addition, somebody had to be there to raise money to keep the movement going to fuel those buses. Someone had to be free to call the President, to call the Attorney General, to meet with the FBI, to do all the necessary things. So I had cataloged all those excuses why I wouldn't go. None of the students, these were the SNCC students and the few CORE stu—students from Nashville—from New Orleans who had joined the SNCC people they never asked me if I was going they merely assumed that I was going because, after all, it was my project, I'd started it and I'd come back to Montgomery to join them and why else would I come back if I wasn't going to ride with them? Well, that morning that the buses were to depart for Montgomery, for Jackson, I went down there. Now, I had not planned to go on the ride, but in the back of my mind there was some ambivalence. Maybe I would go, maybe I would find some stiffening of the backbone and would get on the bus, so I had packed my bag and put it in the trunk of rental car that CORE had rented, just in case. But I really went down to say goodbye to the students who were going to ride to Jackson and I reached my hand through an open window, I guess there was no air conditioning on that bus, the window was open, to shake hands with a young CORE girl from New Orleans—Doris Castle who was 17 years old at the time. Her eyes were wide with fear and I reached my hand through to shake hands with her. I said, well, Doris, have a safe journey. And after the Freedom Ride we'll get together in New Orleans or someplace and we'll have a big bowl of, of crab gumbo and we'll talk about the Freedom Ride and we'll discuss the next step what we oughta do from here. She looked at me with total disbelief, she said, but, Jim, you're going with us aren't you? I said, well no, Doris, you see, and then I went through the whole catalog of reasons of why I could not go. I said—

00:34:37:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

Farmer: —but I'll be with you in spirit. Don't worry not all of us can be on the front lines and the trenches. Some of us have to be back doing the dull routine work, you know. Doris said just two words and it was in a stage whisper, she said, Jim, please. Well, that was more than I could bear.

INTERVIEWER: OK, WE'LL I'M SORRY.

00:35:00:00

[cut]

[slate]

[change to camera roll 315]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: CAMERA ROLL THREE FIFTEEN.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: BRING IT UP

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: SOUND SIX.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: THANK YOU. YES.

INTERVIEWER: OK, SO YOU'LL START THERE WITH THE—

Farmer: OK. So I went down to see them off and to say goodbye to them and reached my hand through open window to shake hands with a young CORE girl, Doris Castle, who was then 17 years old from New Orleans. And I said, well, have a safe journey, Doris, and after the Freedom Ride we'll get together in New Orleans and talk about the ride, discuss the next steps. Well, she looked at me in total disbelief and said, Jim, please, you're going with us aren't you? I said, well, Doris, no, I can't go, and I went through the whole list of excuses why I could not possibly go at the time and she whispered, in a stage whisper, Jim, please. I could not stand that. I then said to a CORE aide, get my luggage and put it on the bus, I'm going. And I got on the bus. They were scared too, but I saw something besides fear in their eyes, I saw fierce determination to do what they thought had to be done, and I gained courage from them.

00:36:22:00

INTERVIEWER: WHAT ABOUT THE RIDES FROM—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: PLEASE HOLD.

INTERVIEWER: OK, WE'LL JUST HOLD FOR A SECOND FOR THE SIREN.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: HOLD.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: GO AHEAD AND CUT.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: NO, NO YOU CAN ACTIVATE THAT.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: OK.

INTERVIEWER: OK. WHAT ABOUT THE ACTUAL RIDE FROM MONTGOMERY TO JACKSON? WHAT WAS IT LIKE BEING ON THE BUS? WITH THE FEAR—

Farmer: Now, *that ride from Montgomery to Jackson was like a military operation.* The Kennedy's had moved, our theory had been right that once we made a crisis or in other words allowed the racist to create the crisis by bloodying us, then the Federal Government would have to move, it would have to provide protection, and it did. Bobby Kennedy had persuaded Governor Patterson of Alabama to declare martial law and bring in the National Guard. Kennedy had also sent in US Marshals. *Now, as we rode on the bus, there were Alabama National Guardsmen on the bus with us, about six of them, with bayonets fixed on their rifles. There were helicopters chopping around overhead. There were police cars screaming up and down the highway with their sirens blaring,* there were Federal, State and County police—so this was a military operation.

And that did not, ease our fear, if anything it increased it. We didn't know which way the National Guardsmen would point their guns in the event of a showdown, a confrontation. *We got to the, the border between Alabama and Mississippi and saw that famous sign, "Welcome to the Magnolia State," and our hearts jumped into our mouths.* The bus pulled off the road, stopped, the driver left the bus, another driver got on. The Alabama guardsmen left the bus, the Mississippi national guardsmen replaced them. The Alabama Director of Public Safety came onto the bus and whispered something to one of the reporters—by the way, reporters were there too, because this was the big story of the day and they wouldn't miss it, even though they were risking their lives. The Director of Public Safety whispered a message to him and he then passed that message onto other reporters on the bus. All but one of the reporters left the bus then. I asked the remaining reporter what the message had been. He said, the Director of Public Safety of Alabama has told us that he has received word from usually reliable sources that this bus is going to be ambushed and destroyed inside the Mississippi border.

00:39:05:00

INTERVIEWER: AND?

Farmer: Well, the bus moved on across the Mississippi line and shortly we passed through a heavily wooded area like forests on both sides with great oak trees growing up out of the swamp, moss hanging from the branches, and we could practically see Harriet Tubman more than a century ago tramping through the swamps with runaway slaves as they ran from bloodhounds. And you could hear the baying bloodhounds. But I shook my head and came back to reality *and there were Mississippi National Guardsmen flanking the highway, at this point, with their guns pointed towards the forests on both sides of the road.* And as the bus barreled along, an official of the National Guard shouted, through a bullhorn, look behind every tree. Apparently this is where they had expected the ambush, but the ambush did not materialize *and the bus proceeded on into the environs of Jackson and then Jackson. Now, as we got to the suburbs of Jackson, one of the Freedom Riders broke into song. And this was as it had to be. I can't sing – I wish I could, but his words went something like this: [sings] "I'm taking a ride on the Greyhound Busline, I'm a'riding the front seat to Jackson this time. Hallelujah I'm a'travelin' Hallelujah, ain't it fine? Hallelujah I'm a'travelin' down Freedom's main line."* All the Freedom Riders picked up the chorus: "Hallelujah I'm a-travelin', Hallelujah I'm a travelin' down Freedom's main line." Then we pulled into Jackson itself and there was almost a deathly quiet. Nobody was on the

streets. We pulled up to the bus terminal and there was a crowd of men, white men, standing there and we, of course, thought this was it. I said to myself, well, this is what we came for, we can't sit in here and hide. Let's go. So I began the procession down the steps of the bus to the ground. One SNCC girl from Nashville followed me once we stepped to the ground, she latched arms with me and we faced the crowd. The crowd did not attack. They just stood there looking at us and I couldn't read their faces. I said to her, Lucretia, let's march, let's walk. So we walked towards the crowd and instead of attacking, they parted and made a passageway for us. They knew where we were going, into the white waiting room and the passageway led right into that waiting room. Once we were in the waiting room, I learned that the crowd was, was not a mob, that it was plainclothes policemen, it was Federal agents, FBI, State police, and County police and so on, and newspapermen, media persons. In the waiting room there were very few people, no passengers, a few newsmen, with cameras. I said to my companion, are you thirsty? Now that you mention it, she said, yes. How about some white water? And she and I walked over to the water fountain with a sign over it, "White Only," and both of us sipped white water. Then we headed toward the little dining room or restaurant, I asked if she would join me for dinner, it would be a pleasure. Blocking the door leading into the little restaurant was the Police Chief of Jackson, Captain Ray. And he said, where do you think you're going? I said, my friend and I are going in here for dinner. Move on. Where? I asked. Out he said. I refused on grounds of the Supreme Court decision in the Boynton case and that decision had, of course, banned racial segregation in terminal facilities used by interstate passengers. He told me again, move on. I refused again. He asked if I understood his order. I told him I understood it perfectly. He said, well, I'll tell you one more time, move on. One more time I refused, same reasons. He said, well, you're under arrest. Follow that police officer and get into that patrol wagon. I asked what the grounds were, what the charges were, he said, disobeying an officer, disturbing the peace and inciting to riot. Lucretia and I turned and followed the officer, got into the patrol wagon, and the other Freedom Riders who were on the bus did the same. Being pointed in that direction by Captain Ray's darkening forefinger, you're under arrest.

00:44:45:00

INTERVIEWER: NOW, JACKSON JAILS A, A LOT OF PEOPLE AND THE MOVEMENT HAD SAID THAT WHEN THEY WERE JAILED IN PARCHMAN THAT WAS A REAL TURNING POINT FOR THEM THAT MANY OF THEM, EVEN THOUGH THEY WERE NEW TO IT, FELT AFTER THE EXPERIENCE OF PARCHMEN THAT, THAT THEY WERE THEN MOVEMENT PEOPLE AND THAT IT HAD SHAPED THEIR LIFE THAT EXPERIENCE. WHAT WENT ON IN JAILS, WHY WAS IT A VICTORY EVEN THOUGH YOU WERE IN THE WORST JAIL IN MISSISSIPPI?

Farmer: There was a sense of victory among the Freedom Riders in the jails. We were moved from jail to jail because we really literally filled up the jails. We filled up the city jail. We were moved to the county jail. We were moved from there to the county prison farm and from there to Parchman State Penitentiary of Mississippi, the maximum security unit. Freedom Riders were still coming in. My office was recruiting Freedom Riders from all over the country, black and white, giving them quickie [sic] training sessions in New Orleans and

in Chicago sending them into Jackson Mississippi. Other Freedom Riders were just boarding buses on their own and coming down to Mississippi to be a part of this movement. Now the sense of things in the jail was that we had Mississippi on the run and that meant—

00:46:08:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

Farmer: —we had racism and segregation on the run. But—

INTERVIEWER: WAIT. HOLD IT RIGHT THERE.

Farmer: —in our struggle for freedom. Yes, particularly in reference to the Freedom Ride, I don't remember how it was worded now. I looked for that, that cablegram in the CORE archives which are on microfilm at Princeton and several other places. I haven't been able to find it. Probably some CORE staff member who had a better sense of history than I, [laughs] walked away with it. But it—there was such a cablegram.

INTERVIEWER: WHAT ABOUT OTHER, MESSAGES OF SUPPORT LIKE IN THE US FROM OTHER ORGANIZATIONS, I MEAN, ASIDE FROM THE OBVIOUS.

Farmer: No, I don't re—

INTERVIEWER: ANYBODY ELSE?

Farmer: I don't recall any. I replied to Mao of course, rejecting his, his offer, saying that we were quite capable of handling this situation ourselves, thanking him for his offer. [laughs] I don't know if the other, other civil rights leaders got such cablegrams from Mao, or not, and I'm curious as to why he sent it to me if he didn't send it to the others.

INTERVIEWER: THAT'S CURIOUS.

Farmer: Because we had no, no working relationship with the Maoists.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: PROBABLY, PROBABLY SAW THAT COOLING OFF STATEMENT, YOU KNOW. [laughs]

Farmer: Ah! Maybe he did, and said, "Ah, real Maoist." [laughs] Boy, those were the days, we didn't sleep. We didn't need sleep. We just kept going.

00:47:52:00

[cut]

[slate]

[change to camera roll 316]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: SOUND ROLL THIRTEEN TEN.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: CAMERA ROLL THREE SIXTEEN, SOUND SEVEN.
MARKER.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: THANK YOU.

INTERVIEWER: OK. SO, GIVE ME A LITTLE IDEA OF WHAT IT WAS LIKE IN
PARCHMAN IN THE MIDDLE OF THE—ONE OF THE WORST JAILS IN
MISSISSIPPI.

Farmer: Yes, well, in Parchman, the male Freedom Riders were in one cell block—horseshoe shaped cell block, very large one, this is maximum security unit. And we sang, this was a way of keeping our spirits up, we sang the freedom songs and they wanted us to stop singing. They wanted us to stop singing because they were afraid that our spirit would become contagious and the other prisoners would become Freedom Riders as a result of our singing. So they threatened to remove our mattresses. Now the mattresses were the only convenience we had in those little cells. They were our link with civilization, so to speak. Everything else was cold and hard and there was a mattress which was no more than an inch and a half thick and straw, but it least it was something. And they said, if you don't stop singing, we'll take away your mattresses. Well, that was a real threat, you know, you have nothing left to sleep on then. People were quiet for awhile, until finally Jim Bevel, who was a Bible student at the time and a Freedom Rider, made a little speech pointing out what they're trying to do is to take your soul away. It's not the mattress, it's your soul. Then everybody said, yes, yes, but we'll keep our soul. One Freedom Rider then yelled, guards, guards, guards, and the guards came dashing out into the cell block to see what was wrong, he said, come get my mattress. I'll keep my soul. And everybody started singing, "ain't gonna let nobody turn me 'round, turn me round, turn me round, gonna keep on a-walkin', gonna keep on a-talkin', keep on walkin' to the promised land." And they came in and took the mattresses away and people sang as they had never sung before. We thought that we were winning the battle, they were on the run. And, many of the Freedom Riders then, had never been active in the movement before, but they had read about the Freedom Ride, seen it on television, and decided they had to do something so they'd come down there. They'll never be the same again.

00:50:27:00

INTERVIEWER: THAT'S GREAT. CAN YOU GIVE ME, JUST BRIEFLY, STILL IN
THE PRISON AT PARCHMAN AND, AND AFTER THE FREEDOM RIDES JUST A
LITTLE REACTION TO SOME PEOPLE. I'LL JUST CALL OUT THEIR NAME AND
YOU JUST TELL ME A LITTLE SOMETHING ABOUT THEM.

Farmer: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: OK. WHAT ABOUT DIANE NASH?

Farmer: Diane Nash, one of the great women of the movement—an unsung hero or heroine.

INTERVIEWER: REVEREND VIVIAN?

Farmer: C.T. Vivian, a man of great courage and insight and perception.

INTERVIEWER: OK. WHAT ABOUT BERNARD LAFAYETTE?

Farmer: Ah, Bernard Lafayette we called, while we were in jail, we called him “Little Gandhi,” and that is what he was. He was a disciple of Gandhi’s and even looked like Gandhi at that time.

INTERVIEWER: WHAT DID HE ACT LIKE IN, SAY, IN PARCHMAN?

Farmer: He acted like Gandhi, like Gandhi would've acted and I think he was pattern—patterning his life after Gandhi. He was the one who was thinking and who was feeling and who was speaking out on the moral issue involved—every time an issue came up.

INTERVIEWER: WHAT ABOUT STOKELY?

Farmer: I saw Stokely for the first time in the Hines County Jail. After we had been transferred back to the Hines County Jail from the prison farm. Here was a young man, tall, thin, rather aesthetic looking, who had come in on the Freedom Rides. He had a quick smile and it was a contagious smile. He seemed very modest and rather humble. After talking with him for a few minutes, I decided that this young man was going nowhere, because he was too gentle and too kind to cope in this rough-and-tumble world. That was Stokely Carmichael. [laughs]

00:52:14:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, ONE, ONE OTHER QUESTION YOU MENTIONED SOMETHING ABOUT THE FREEDOM HIGHWAYS. I'D NEVER HEARD ANYTHING ABOUT THAT. WHAT WAS THAT?

Farmer: In 1962, the year after the Freedom Ride, CORE decided that it had to do something to keep up the momentum it couldn't coast on the basis of the Freedom Ride. So the program we decided on was what we called the Freedom Highways campaign. In other words, to try to do on major highways what we had done on interstate travel, that is, to desegregate those highways, to desegregate the eating establishments and the sleeping establishments: Howard Johnsons, Holiday Inns and the other motels and inns. We desegregated Route 40 that skip of road between New York and Baltimore and Washington, which had been notorious in

discriminating against blacks, even Africans. It created international incidents. We desegregated that after a major campaign where CORE people came in from all over the country in their cars stopping at every eating establishment on Route 40 and sitting in when they were refused service. Finally the managers got together and agreed across the board to open up. We had campaigned in the state of North Carolina where, at one point, we had more than 3,000 students in jail in Greensboro, North Carolina. The leader of that campaign, who was Chairman of the Student Chapter of CORE in Greensboro, was a young man, who was an honor student, quarterback on the football team. His name was Jesse Jackson. We had the campaign throughout the state and we did succeed in desegregating the eating establishments and the sleeping establishments on the highways there. Unfortunately, there was no publicity outside the state of North Carolina.

INTERVIEWER: OK, GREAT. CAN WE CUT FOR A SECOND?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: SURE.

[cut]

00:54:20:00

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: SPEED. SOUND EIGHT.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: OK, WITH THE DISAPPEARANCE OF SCHWERNER, CHANEY, GOODMAN, GIVE ME A VERY BRIEF ACCOUNT OF WHAT HAPPENED WHEN YOU FIRST GOT THE CALL THAT THEY WERE MISSING.

Farmer: It was 2 or 3 O'clock in the morning when I got a call from one of the CORE staff people in Meridian, Mississippi telling me that Schwerner, Goodman and Chaney had gone over to Philadelphia, Mississippi in Neshoba County to view the remains, the ruins of a church that had been burned out. The church in which they had conducted voter education classes. They had not returned to Meridian. They'd intended to be back by sundown the previous night. So my staff person called me and told me that they were missing. And I should come down immediately. I told them I would be on the next plane down. I called Dick Gregory, in Chicago, woke him up—he had just gotten back in he country and was jet lagged and everything else but his reaction was, hey Big Daddy, what's happenin'? And then I told him what had happened and he said, when are you going, and I said, next flight: 7 o'clock in the morning. He said, well, I'll get the first plane I can get out of Chicago and I'll meet you down there. Well, he and I in Meridian went to Philadelphia in Neshoba County and actually talked with the Sheriff, Raney, and his deputy, Price, about the disappearance of my three staff members, Schwerner, Goodman and Chaney, and they of course denied they knew anything about it they had arrested the men for speeding they claimed and finally had taken them out of jail and headed them back toward Meridian. Well, we learned later from

grapevine information what had really happened. That they had been taken out and turned over to a mob and Chaney had been beaten to death, and the other men shot once in the heart. We turned the information over to the FBI and the FBI soon located the bodies.

00:56:31:00

INTERVIEWER: WHEN YOU INITIALLY HEARD THEY WERE MISSING, DID YOU KN—KNOW THEY WERE DEAD OR DID THE PEOPLE DOWN IN MISSISSIPPI, THE CORE WORKERS DOWN THERE—

Farmer: Oh, I had a gut reaction that they were dead. I tried to avoid that conclusion, however, when my staff member said, they're missing, I said, well, maybe they just stopped over to visit friends and were tired and decided to stay over until morning. And he says, no, no, Jim, you know, people don't do that down here. If they are to be back by sundown, they are back by sundown or they call and let you know why they are not going to be back. So there has been foul play. And I knew that that was the case.

00:57:10:00

INTERVIEWER: OK. IN THE MOVEMENT AT THIS POINT IN '64, IN REACTION TO ALL THE VIOLENCE THAT THE—THAT HAD BEEN INFLICTED ON THE PEOPLE, THERE ARE PEOPLE WHO ARE, WHO ARE ALREADY SAYING VERY CLEARLY THAT THE MOVEMENT HAD TAKEN ENOUGH AND THAT THE END—THERE WAS A LOGICAL END IN NON-VIOLENCE, PEOPLE LIKE MALCOLM AND, AND OTHER PEOPLE. WHAT WAS GOING ON THERE?

Farmer: Yes, it was clear that non-violence as a tactic was losing ground because of the massive violence that we had encountered in the South. Not only Malcolm X was saying this, but some of the CORE and SNCC activists were saying it. When I had to get out of a town in Louisiana, Blackamon, Louisiana [sic], in the back of a hearse to escape a lynch mob that was screaming for my blood, one of the young CORE staff fellows who was with me, Ronny Moore said, when we arrived in New Orleans, Jim, we love you dearly and we'll go with you through hell and high water, but next time when we go through a night like that, we're going to have hardware with us. I'd like also to point out that Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap Brown were at one time dedicated SNCC staff persons in the Deep South committed to non-violence and following it. But their heads were beaten so many times that they gave non-violence up.

INTERVIEWER: OK. THEN JUST ONE MORE QUESTION. WAS THERE ONE PARTICULAR MOMENT OVER THIS WHOLE PERIOD IT SEEMS TO CONSIST OF, OF A NUMBER OF LIFE OR DEATH MOMENTS, WAS THERE ONE MOMENT THAT, THAT EXPRESSES A REAL TURNING POINT FOR YOU?

[cut]

[end interview]

00:59:04:00

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