Interview with **Lawrence Guyot**
May 15, 1979
Washington, D.C.
Production Team: E
Camera Rolls: 9-14
Sound Rolls: 7-9
Interviewer: N/A

Interview gathered as part of ***America, They Loved You Madly,*** a precursor to ***Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965).*** Produced by Blackside, Inc. Housed at the Washington University Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.

Preferred Citation

Interview with Lawrence Guyot, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on May 15, 1979, for *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*. Washington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.

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 9]

[sound roll 7]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: OK THIS IS LAWRENCE GUYOT INTERVIEW, MALCOLM X PARK, WASHINGTON. THIS IS CAMERA ROLL TEN, SOUND ROLL SEVEN.

[hand slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: SPEED.

INTERVIEWER: YOU DON'T HAVE SPEED?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: SPEED NOW.

[hand slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: SYNC THE SECOND CLAP.

INTERVIEWER: CAN YOU TELL ME, HOW DID, HOW DID YOU GET INVOLVED IN THE, IN THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT AND NOT NECESSARILY IN THE MFDP

BUT HOW DID YOU GET IN, INVOLVED IN ORGANIZING AND WHAT DID, WHAT DOES IT TAKE FOR SOMEONE IN THE SOUTH TO GET INTO THAT?

Guyot: Well, I had, I had two forces operating that led me immediately into the civil rights movement, the Catholic Church, I happened to be born in a part of the state of Mississippi that was very Catholic, very labor union and it coincidentally is, it is the county in which the former Governor Bilbo lived in, in the adjoining county to the one I was born in. So, early in life, my father was a political leader, as, on a small scale in that town because it goes to the question of the mathematics. In Harrison County there were 119,000 inhabitants at that time and I'm talking about 1957. 100,000 of 'em were white, 19,000 were black, we could have voted five times, it would have made no difference, but because of the Catholic influence, because of the labor influence, blacks were not only allowed to vote but they were encouraged to vote and whites' candidates sought our votes. So at 17 for, for years I had been associated with my father's political activity, so at 17 I went to Tougaloo College which was a, a college that was being fought by the state, the only biracial college in the state, the only college that was really opened to political ideas even in 1957 that college was desegregating, was the, the president of that college would separate to the point from every other black college that I know at that time was encouraging and participating in the decision of which students would participate in demonstrations. So I had that influence. I also was able to learn very early that anything was possible. I mean, if, I had, I'd seen prostitutes who had been able to organize that endeavor to the point of becoming landowners. I had seen a lot of other things. I, in 1954 when the Supreme Court decision came down, I was able to discuss that immediately with a priest who was a political activist, who was openly supportive of integration but at the same time was, later, in 19, in 1954 he and I were friends and allies. In 1968 we were on different sides of who to support because we were both in the same delegation to, to Chicago. I mean, so the, the whole, I, I guess basically the reason I got involved, was because I was very dissatisfied about a lot of things. I learned early that anything is possible. And I learned that the correlation between information and power is immediate. And I kept relearning that. I mean, I have never seen, in all of my years of organizing and recruiting other people into organizing, I have never asked anyone to do anything that wasn't in their self-interest, or something that I wouldn't do.

00:03:45:00

INTERVIEWER: CAN YOU TELL ME ABOUT HOW COFO GOT ORGANIZED AND WHO WERE, WHO WERE THE KEY PLAYERS IN THAT?

Guyot: COFO got organized twice. COFO was organized in 1954 and then it was disbanded, a–quite quickly because the, the governor attempted to co-opt that organization and it, and was quite unsuccessful. It was disbanded until 1963. It was then re-established by Medgar Evers, Dave Dennis, Bob Moses, Aaron Henry, who was made the titular head of it, and the rest, the other, the, the other line of leadership was the congressional district directors. Now, the, I say it was, it was, I say it was reorganized but we prefaced the organization of that and we understood when we were organizing it that Aaron Henry would be the titular head and the spokesperson but that we, because SNCC provided more—

[cut]

[wild audio]

Guyot: —manpower than anyone else, we would determine policy. We had that fight, that internal friendly fight out in Clarksdale, Mississippi. We won, there was Reverend Smith from Jackson raised the whole question of Bob Moses, an outsider, heading up the, the field direction. We had the troops; Wiley Branton who now is the President of our—Howard University was the director of the VEP funds, and while Wiley was superficially neutral, Wiley was quite supportive of the right people on that question.

00:05:24:00

INTERVIEWER: WE'RE GOING TO CHANGE. CUT.

[cut]

[change camera roll to 10]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: ELEVEN.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: SPEED.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: OK WE ARE NOW ROLLING.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: SPEED.

[hand slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: IT CAN'T WORK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: SECOND STICKS.

[hand slate]

00:05:44:00

INTERVIEWER: CAN YOU TELL ABOUT HOW WAS COFO ORGANIZED?

Guyot: COFO was organized twice. In 1954, it was organized to deal with the 1954 Supreme Court decision. It was disbanded, and remained dormant, until 1963. In 1963, because of the work and the respect that everyone had for Bob Moses, who had been working since 1960, he was able to pull together Arnell Ponder from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Aaron Henry from the NAACP, Dave Dennis from the Congress of Racial Equality, and he was the unquestioned leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in Mississippi. He had earned that respect because of his work in southwest Mississippi and

because of the fact that he was successful in recruiting thirteen—that's an apocryphal and coincidental number—thirteen native Mississippians and myself, Lavonne Brown, Jesse Harris, Jesse Davis, Colia Liddell, Joyce and Dorie Ladner, some of the na—Emma Bell—some of the names escape me, but these were people who were young, who were tired, with relentless energy, who were committed to changing that state, and we did.

00:07:08:00

INTERVIEWER: I GUESS WE STILL DIDN'T GET OUT–

Guyot: The Council of Federated Organizations–

INTERVIEWER: OK.

Guyot: COFO is an acronym for the Council of Federated Organizations, make, made up of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the NAACP, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and the Congress of Racial Equality.

INTERVIEWER: WAS MEDGAR EVERS INVOVLED IN COFO AT ALL?

Guyot: Medgar Evers was instrument—int—integrally involved and was very definitely supportive. It is, it is amazingly—Medgar was, became convinced when we invited Medgar to a meeting in Greenwood, Mississippi. We were—see, for some thirty-two years, the NAACP had existed in Mississippi, before COFO was established and before SNCC became active. Activism, on a statewide basis, and involving people other than paid personnel of civil rights organizations, we started that. Medgar could identify with that, when he saw what we were—the kind of support we got from people in the delta, home, Greenwood specifically. I remember driving from Greenwood to Holmes County to get Mr. Hawkman Turnbo out of jail with Dorie Ladner, Dave Dennis, Medgar, myself, and we were talking—and Colia Liddell, and we were talking about how we were going to work together. Unfortunately, Med—Medgar was assassinated before that could really, before he could really continue his role in COFO, but as far as his commitment to it, there was absolutely no question about it.

00:08:44:00

INTERVIEWER: OK. CAN YOU TELL ME THAT, CAN YOU TELL ME ABOUT THE SUMMER—THE ORGANIZING DURING THE SUMMER, AND OH, NOT THAT SUMMER. THE ORGANIZING EARLIER, AND HOW YOU MET MISS HAMER, AND DID, WERE YOU IN WINONA WITH HER? CAN YOU TELL ME A LITTLE ABOUT THAT?

Guyot: Well, let me tell you. We—they were, I, I, I described the, the band of us, earlier, by this time Charlie Cobb had been added to that number. And we went to Amzie Moore's house, in Cleveland, Mississippi. Amzie, if there—other than Bob Moses, if there was one person who's responsible for the change brought about in Mississippi, it would have to be

Amzie Moore. Because but for Amzie Moore being able to influence a local NAACP leader to invite Moses to Mississippi, he wouldn't have been invited. Had Moses not been invited to Mississippi, a lot of things would not have happened. I mean, there's just no question about that. But, once we were in Amzie's house, we were in the delta. We had made the conscious move not to participate in, lunch counter demonstrations. We were gong after the vote, because that's where the power was. The, the thing that has always fascinated me about the early history of Mississippi's organizing was that Mississippi is a state where politics is very immediate. I mean, there were, everyone, people who can't read and write can define most of the roles and duties of the Board of Supervisors, because they immediately impact on their lives. So our question was, once we had gotten over the question internally of whether or not we were going to register people who couldn't read and write, then we came out down on the position that people, regardless of whether or not they could read and write–

[cut]

[hand slate]

[change camera roll to 11]

INTERVIEWER: OK. WHERE DID WE END?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: WE WERE AT AMZIE'S MEETING.

INTERVIEWER: OH, AMZIE'S MEETING.

00:11:00:00

Guyot: Right. We lived in Amzie Moore's house: fourteen of us. That was our outpost in the delta. That was where we launched out from there, from Amzie Moore's house on Chisolm Street in Cleveland, Mississippi, we moved into Sunflower, Raymond, a couple of other people moved into Mrs. Hamer's town, and once we began the whole, well the first meeting that Mrs. Hamer attended she attended because it was held in a church, because she was a go—a great gospel singer and a natural leader. She flowed out of the plantation system, she was a time keeper, a position of trust and honor if there's such in the pl—in the plantation schema. And because we were, Bev—James Bevel did most of the talking at the first meeting that Mrs. Hamer attended. Bevel was a great speaker—is a great speaker, and was a minister. So, I would have been able to use the church as a meeting place and have a minister speak the social gospel about the right, why we should register to vote, what impact that would have on our lives, influenced Mrs. Hamer and 21 other people, so she decided to go with us the next day to Indianola to register to vote. Now, ***registering to vote at that time meant that you filled out a twenty-two question questionnaire. One of the questions was, interpret any of the 286 sections of the Mississippi Constitution to the satisfaction of the registrar. Now, you have to bear in mind that some of those registrars couldn't read or write. But that didn't matter. They could still determine who should be registered if that person happened to be black, because all whites who attempted to register were registered***. After we went through the process of filling out the questionnaire, we knew that all of the applicants name

would be pla—posted in the newspaper to serve notice to their creditors and to their employers that here's someone who had done something wrong. The, on returning from Indianola, we were arrested, some of us were, the bus driver was arrested, others of us went to see about him, this sort of thing, but that was the only arrest. From that day on, Mrs. Hamer, upon returning to the plantation she was told that she had a choice. She could take her name off, and stay on the plantation, or she could leave her name on and she'd have to leave. She told the person that she'd been working to for 18 years, that I didn't register for you; I registered for me. And I think that the act of registration and making that statement was the beginning of a history that changed the South. Fannie Lou Hamer was a great woman who influenced the civil rights movement, who influenced the Democratic Party, who influenced Lyndon Johnson to the point of saying, of him calling directly while she was speaking the television networks and say look, get these niggers off. The, I'm speaking specifically about her testimony at the 1964 Democratic Convention. Mrs. Hamer was involved in the peace movement long before anyone else with the exception of Andy Young who was in the civil rights movement was. She traveled with him to involve certain segments of the National Council of Churches early in the civil rights, in the peace movement. She was early involved in the, in the women's question. Sissy Farenhold and Mrs. Hamer was the co-chairpersons of one of the first groups that was organized around, involving political activity to bring about peace and a unification of the women's question.

00:15:02:00

INTERVIEWER: WHAT, TELL ME ABOUT THAT BUS AGAIN. NOW WHY, WHY DID THE BUS, WHY DID YOU ALL GET ARRESTED?

Guyot: The bus was too yellow.

INTERVIEWER: OK, YOU GOT TO TELL ME THE STORY.

Guyot: OK.

INTERVIEWER: TELL ME THE STORY AND THEN TELL ME THAT. SAY, "ON RET…" THIS WAS ON RETURNING FROM REGISTERING?

Guyot: On returning from registering the, we were using the school bus and the driver of it was arrested; he was charged with having a bus that was too yellow. A frivolous charge, but at that time it was enough to put him in jail; we had to get him out.

INTERVIEWER: WERE ALL OF YOU ARRESTED?

Guyot: At that time, no.

00:15:37:00

INTERVIEWER: I SORT OF NEED THAT AGAIN. MAYBE YOU CAN JUST TELL ME THE FIRST TIME THAT, THAT MISS HAMER WENT TO REGISTER.

Guyot: OK.

INTERVIEWER: AND THEN TELL ME "ON RETURN."

Guyot: OK. Mrs. Hamer attended a meeting that was held in a church. Moses attended that meeting, I attended it, Charles McLaurin attended it. We sort of conducted the meeting. James Bevel did most of the speaking. Bevel, like most of the initial mob—mobilizers for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in Mississippi was a minister. Adding the fact that he was a minister and could speak about the social justification for registration, despite the state's position against it, and the fact that the meeting was held in a church, which gave that speech much more legitimacy–

[wild audio]

INTERVIEWR: –than if it were held any place else. Mrs. Hamer agreed, because of her role in the church–

INTERVIEWER: CUT. RUN OUT.

[cut]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: SPEED. ROLLING.

[hand slate]

INTERVIEWER: OK, WHAT HAPPENED THAT FIRST DAY, THAT MRS. HAMER WENT TO REGISTER?

Guyot: Mrs. Hamer went to register as soon as we left the courthouse in Indianola, the bus driver was arrested. He was charged with driving a bus that was too yellow. This was a school bus. They c—it was a frivolous charge but that's what he was charged with at the time.

00:17:10:00

INTERVIEWER: CAN YOU TELL ME A LITTLE BIT ABOUT THE ORGANIZATIONAL INTERRELATIONSHIP—THE POLITICS BETWEEN THE ORGANIZATIONS IN MISSISSIPPI THAT WERE INVOLVED IN COFO, AND WHY IT WORKED ON THE STREET LEVEL, BUT IT DIDN'T WORK ON A HIGHER LEVEL.

Guyot: It worked on a street level and it worked because we were dealing—

INTERVIEWER: I'M SORRY. CAN YOU JUST TELL ME THAT THE COOPERATION BETWEEN THE ORGANIZATIONS WORKED?

Guyot: OK. The relationship between the individuals that made up the Council of Federated Organizations worked because this was an individual relationship that was representative of an organizational representation. I mean it was Dave Dennis, it wasn't CORE. It was, it was Aaron Henry instead of the NAACP. It was Bob Moses instead of SNCC. But, but that small number of people, you didn't get into the national controversies or differences on turf, differences, differences as it relates to direct action. We were committed to that direct action. Anyone who came in with us would by definition be committed to direct action. By us I mean the, the majority of people who were doing organizing in the streets and talk—and mobilizing and that was, those of us who were committed and, and identified to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Now I think one thing that is significant about—well, later when we moved after the 1964 Democratic Convention in Atlantic City, the NAACP broke with COFO. Their position was we didn't understand the difference between protest and politics. Aaron Henry disassociated himself from the NAACP, and from, I'm sorry, from the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. And that's that simply was the way that was done.

00:19:09:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, IN TERMS OF, IN TERMS OF THAT, WHO, WHO INITIATED AARON HENRY'S BREAK WITH THE PARTY?

Guyot: The national office of the NAACP.

INTERVIEWER: OK, CAN YOU TELL ME THAT THE NATIONAL OFFICE OF THE NAACP FORCED AARON HENRY–

Guyot: Oh yeah, OK. The national office of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People made it very clear that Aaron Henry would, had a choice—either remain with the NAACP or remain with the Freedom Democratic Party. Because of the position taken by the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party which I consider the highlight of black people in this century when they had a choice to make, was, they wouldn't accept a compromise that was forged by white people and by supposedly their allies. They said no. And as a result of their saying no, the NAACP, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People said to Aaron Henry, get out. But, as a direct consequence of the delegation saying no, it led to the creation of the Equal Rights Committee which desegregated the Democratic Party. There's no question about this, about this association in this connection which led to the desegregation of a lot of delegations and I think a lot of us may have forgotten that when, when Julian Bond was fighting to have his delegation seated, he wa—he had to fight a guy named Jimmy Carter. So I think the impact of what that group of black Mississippians said in Atlantic City, even those biracial, there was a small number of whites, some of them who were later to play a key role in the Freedom—Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. Ed King, the chaplain of Tugaloo when I was a student there, was involved in that delegation, was later to run in the Freedom election and continues to this day to be supportive of that kind of politics.

00:21:07:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, CAN, CAN YOU TELL ME HOW, HOW, HOW EXACTLY DID YOU ORGANIZE?

Guyot: Oh to me this is the most important part of this interview because I am a, I was invited here today not because I'm a man of power, not because I have a lot of money, but because I am identified with certain events and certain people who have changed the South and that's why I'm here. I understand that. And what I, what I want to talk about and the reason I want to preface that question with this because to me this is the most important thing, I knew Malcolm X personally. I knew Fan—James Farmer personally. I knew Martin Luther King personally. I knew Bob Moses personally. And what I want to stress is the commonality of those people, they were simply people. They identified a problem. They wanted to become expert in—experts in mobilizing and organizing. There's no one who's listening to this who can't do the same thing. So we organized people at their frame of reference, what they were interested in, and we asked them to work in their, work with us in their self-interest. You can do that today, just like Malcolm did.

INTERVIEWER: WHAT WAS THE DEBATE ABOUT OVER VOLUNTEERS IN GREENVILLE, OR WHETHER TO BRING IN VOLUNTEERS, INTO MISSISSIPPI?

Guyot: It was, it was a debate of turf. Here was people, we had worked together. We had recruited new people and had brought them into the fold. We were organizing in, in Greenwood, we were catching hell in every form. People being arrested. People were being threatened. People were bring kicked off farms. People were being beaten. People were being fired if they even associated with us. But despite all of that we were able to get people to go down and regis—and attempt to register to vote in the Delta where there'd been a whole history of violence and deprivation and peonage really. It wasn't slavery but it certainly was peonage. So we were able to, move, then there became the question of why don't we, we conducted the freedom election and one of the lessons we learned from the freedom election in 1963–

[wild audio]

Guyot: –was that the FBI was very, very concerned about providing protection and pub—public cover to all of the volunteers who were white, who were northern and who were well, relatively well educated. We learned pragmatically that the way to bring protection to our people was to bring whites in.

00:23:41:00

Guyot: We wanted to bring the national attention to what we were doing, to protect people who we could not protect—we never lied to anyone—we never said come register to vote with us you won't get shot, you won't get fired from your job, your social security won't be cut off. It—despite the fact that social security is a federal payment, a federal fund, I saw a notice in the social security check sent out from Jackson, Mississippi, that a warning to everyone—if you register to vote, your check can be cut off. The pervasiveness of that state

in preventing political activity even of that nature was so complete it is very hard to recapture for people who wasn't involved in it.

00:24:24:00

INTERVIEWER: TELL ME WHAT, WHAT IS A POLL TAX?

Guyot: A poll tax was simply the, the payment of a certain amount of money by a certain date which allowed you to participate in elections providing you were already registered. Now, the poll tax was knocked out in 1966. But until we had a, we had quite a few counties in the upper part of the Delta that even when they were forced to register black people, they were not forced to accept the poll tax. So there were, there was two ways to prevent a person who should have been allowed to vote. OK, you're registered, but you didn't pay your poll tax. OK, I want to pay my poll tax. No, I'm not going to accept it.

INTERVIEWER: [sneeze] OK, EXCUSE ME.

Guyot: The fight about, the, the internal debate about whether or not to accept volunteers turned on the question of we had recruited people who for all practical purposes weren't very well trained but they could mobilize, they could talk to people, they could get people to do things in their interest, they could do everything that a, anyone who is supposed to be a trained organizer could do, they did and did well. But then when you start talking about bringing in white college students who can type, who can drive, who are very fluent, that is competition. That is competition for turf, that is the way it was dealt with and the first day that the vote was not to have volunteers. Bob Moses put his reputation with us on the line saying—Dave Dennis chaired the meeting the first day in Greenville. Bob Moses came into the meeting the second day and said, look I'm not going to be a part of anything that's all black. This was a position that Bob would later change, but that is a position that he took and because of the weight that he, his posi—his strength and personality that he carried in that group the position was changed, the vote was changed, and the summer project became a reality.

00:26:33:00

INTERVIEWER: YOU, CAN YOU TELL ME THAT YOU WERE THE, THE, CHAIRMAN OF THE PARTY, AND, AND WHY YOU DIDN'T GO TO THE CONVENTION?

Guyot: I wa—I was the—I'm very proud to be able to say I was elected chairman of the, I'm very proud to be able to say I was elected chairman of the state convention, state committee, state executive committee, of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. I ran, I defeated Aaron Henry in that election. And I'm even more proud of the fact that Joseph Rauh, who was later to become a representative of the Freedom Democratic Party at that Convention, was supportive, was openly supportive of Aaron Henry, even though he was supposed to be supporting us. I had the support of people and, and the reason I'm proud of that election, most proud of it, is I had the support of Fannie Lou Hamer, Victoria Gray–

[wild audio]

INTERVIEWER: Anny Devine, Peggy Connor, and others. They were the people who made it possible.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: RUN OUT.

INTERVIEWER: YEAH [laughing]

[cut]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: OK I'M ROLLING.

[hand slate]

00:27:41:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, CAN YOU TELL, TELL ME ABOUT WE, WE'RE, WHY WEREN'T YOU AT THE CONVENTION? TELL ME THAT YOU WERE PRESIDENT, THE CHAIRMAN.

Guyot: Because I was—I had been arrested in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. I was–

INTERVIEWER: TELL ME THAT YOU WERE THE CHAIRMAN FIRST.

Guyot: –in jail for picketing.

Guyot: Right. I was the chairman of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party but I could not participate in the Atlantic City delegation because I was in jail in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. I had been arrested for interfering with an officer because I was picketing in front of the Hattiesburg Courthouse for the right of black people to vote.

INTERVIEWER: WHEN WERE YOU ARRESTED?

Guyot: Two days before the convention.

INTERVIEWER: OK, WHY DON'T YOU GIVE IT TO ME AGAIN, AND INCLUDE THAT.

Guyot: The, two days before the convention the, because of the fact that local citizens in Hattiesburg had posted bond for me, and I had to go to jail rather than go to the Atlantic City delegation, despite the fact that I was chairman of the party that went to Atlantic City.

00:28:47:00

INTERVIEWER: CAN YOU TELL ME, DO WE HAVE TO STOP PLAYING?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: WE SHOULD. CUT.

[cut]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: I'M ROLLING.

[hand slate]

INTERVIEWER: OK, CAN YOU TELL ME A LITTLE BIT ABOUT WHAT THE ROLE OF THE FBI WAS IN MISSISSIPPI AT THAT TIME?

Guyot: Well the, the role of the Justice Department was quite supportive. John Doar had represented a lot of us who were arrested in Greenwood around the question of registering people to vote. But later that role shifted just before the '64 summer project I met with Burke Marshall, John Doar, Arthur Schlessinger and their role then, the shift was around us getting rid of certain, the lawyers from the National Lawyers' Guild, Ben Smith, William Kuntsler, and Arthur Kinard, who had represented us beautifully. We didn't have a problem. The Department of Justice had a problem. And we didn't care to deal with that.

INTERVIEWER: CAN YOU TELL ME ABOUT THE ROLE OF THE FBI IN THE SUMMER PROJECT?

Guyot: The role of the FBI has, has always been simply to take notes and report incidents of violence, period. Martin Luther King was quite accurate in his accusations about a lot of the FBI members in the South at that time being natives of the South and you know it's quite, to me quite significant, the FBI agent who did most of the investigating in Greenwood left the FBI in 1966 and became the prosecuting attorney. He's still the prosecuting attorney in Greenwood, Mississippi.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: CUT.

[cut]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: SPEED.

Guyot: Yeah.

[hand slate]

00:30:49:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, CAN YOU TELL ME ABOUT THAT INCIDENT?

Guyot: Right. I think, I think one indication of what the FBI's activity was like was in

Greenwood, Mississippi. We called the FBI and told them that some people were circling, circling around our office with radios and were communicating by radio and they had guns sticking out of their car windows. And the FBI told me to call back if anything happened. Before anything happened, I went out of the window, across two roofs, and down a television antenna. At the time I weighed about 250 pounds but I, I was more concerned about safety than how I looked athletically going down that television antenna–

INTERVIEWER: OK TELL ME A LITTLE BIT ABOUT WINONA.

Guyot: Winona is a very simple case of unbelievable horror and terror. Mrs. Hamer, a couple of other people were returning from a workshop. They stopped in Winona. They were arrested. When I found out that Mrs. Hamer was arrested I called over to the jail to find out did they have Mrs. Hamer. They said no, we don't have em, we don't have 'em. I said well then, then, then, then the sheriff came over and said, "Yes we have them, we got the niggers over here." I said well, you know "What's the bond?" And he said, "Well why don't you come over here and find out?" So I got some money and I went over there and tried to get them out and as soon as I was brought in I was beaten. I was taken into a room, beaten by eight people with guns, a fire, a fire was lit and then, lit and pushed in the area of my genitalia. I was knocked out. A doctor was then brought in who tried to convince me to sign a statement that I had been drinking, I had been driving. I've never driven in my life. They didn't know that and that I had gotten into trouble while in Winona. I didn't sign any of this. Then the, the most significant thing about Winona to me is that if Roberta Galla hadn't kept calling the jail to ask for me I would have been dead. I would have been killed in that jail. But there were two things that happened. Roberta calling from New York and getting people to call from California wanting to speak to me because they were moving me from jail to jail and the fact that Medgar Evers was assassinated while I was in Winona. So the, the need to not remove me at that time was something I didn't plan but I'm glad to be here.

00:33:34:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: OK EVERYONE I'M GOING TO HAVE TO CHANGE.

INTERVIEWER: OK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: CHANGING.

[cut]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: THERE IS ONE ON THE SIDE.

INTERVIEWER: OH, OK.

[hand slate]

[change camera roll to 13]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: SECOND STICKS.

00:33:45:00

INTERVIEWER: OK. WHY WAS THE MFDP ORGANIZED?

Guyot: We had conducted years of registration. We had found that our enemy was twofold; everywhere we moved and tried to move in that state, the Democratic Party was the emen—enemy. Ever since 1877, the whole question of black, white domination of the political apparatus in the state was very immediate. I mean, the peop—blacks, when reconstruction was moved out of the state of Mississippi, it was moved out with blood, and with guns. Blacks were removed from office. All of our enemies were in the Democratic Party. We had no friends in the Republican Party. There was no law that dealt with party registration. I could, you could be a member of any party. I remember the debate, the peop—when we met in Jackson to organize the Freedom Democratic Party it was Frank Smith, Bob White, George Raymond, myself, and Bob Moses. Moses' position was why don't we organize the Freedom Democratic Party, that's the logical extension of everything we've done around the vote, and if we're not successful in Atlantic City, let's disband it. My position was, because of the fact that we don't have a party registration in the state and because of the fact that there's a need to redefine what is politics and what is acceptable political activity, to cover the whole thing, just as is done in African political parties, why don't we continue it regardless of whether or not we're successful in Atlantic City? Because I was chairman of it we continued it. I think it was a master stroke and I think it created changes within the Democratic Party nationally that wouldn't have occurred for black people but for our existence.

00:35:27:00

INTERVIEWER: CAN YOU TELL ME ABOUT, WHAT WAS SO, WHAT WAS SO OUTRAGEOUS ABOUT THE—ABOUT THE REGULAR PARTY?

Guyot: Well, just its very existence. Its platform was segregation now, segregation forever. Its practice was that whites had any rights that they could define. And blacks were not even to be tolerated. That's the way it operated. So we were not prepared to be good, loyal Democrats under that kind of banner.

INTERVIEWER: OK. CAN YOU TELL ME, CAN YOU TELL ME A LITTLE BIT ABOUT AARON HENRY AND ED KING? CAN YOU TELL ME WHAT, WHAT HAPPENED TO THEM AROUND THE COMPROMISE? WHAT WAS THEIR POSITION ON THE COMPROMISE PROPOSAL?

Guyot: Well, I have to, I wasn't there, but Mrs. Hamer tells me that Aaron Henry was prepared to accept the compromise and Ed King was prepared to accept the compromise. But that Mrs. Hamer was not going to allow them to state to the press that the compromise had been accepted. And I, I believe Mrs. Hamer of the three of them, she's no longer living, but I believe Mrs. Hamer.

00:36:45:00

INTERVIEWER: OK. LET ME JUST, LET'S GO THROUGH THAT JUST ONE MORE TIME. I THINK THAT WHAT'S NOT CLEAR IS THE FACT THAT THE, ALL THE DELEGATES HAD VOTED TO TURN DOWN THE COMPROMISE. THAT'S NOT CLEAR IN WHAT YOU SAID.

Guyot: OK, OK. You ready? Mrs. Hamer described a meeting to me between herself, Aaron Henry, and Ed King in which Aaron Henry and Ed King proposed to Mrs. Hamer that the three of them, after the convention delegation had voted not to accept the compromise, that they simply go out to the press and announce that the delegation had accepted the compromise at last and the convention could move on with this business. Mrs. Hamer could not allow that. I believe that her description of the meeting was accurate and I of course wasn't there.

INTERVIEWER: TE—TELL ME AGAIN ABOUT THAT YOU WERE THE PRE—THAT YOU WERE THE CHAIRMAN OF THE COMMITTEE AND, AND, WHEN YOU WERE ARRESTED AND WHY.

Guyot: Well, OK. Despite the fact that I was state chairman of the Executive Committee of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, when its delegation went to Atlantic City, because of the fact that I had to—was arrested two days before that convention in Hattiesburg, I either had to go to jail at that time—

[cut]

[wild audio]

Guyot: —or people who had put up local residents and political supporters of mine from Hattiesburg would have lost some of their property because they'd put up some bond for me. There was no question of my ever being able to organize in Mississippi again if I did that so I had no choice but to go to Hattiesburg jail.

[cut]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: CAMERA ROLL FOURTEEN. CAMERA ROLL FOURTEEN.

[change camera roll to 14]

[hand slate]

00:38:41:00

INTERVIEWER: CAN YOU TELL ME ABOUT THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN

ORGANIZING IN THE DELTA AND ORGANIZING IN THE SOUTHWEST AND WHY, WHY EFFORTS WERE CONCENTRATED IN THE DELTA AREA?

Guyot: We were concentrating in the Delta because there was a heavy church population there, there was a, an extremely heavy black population there. The, the Delta had been a natural congressional district for quite some time. And, to me, the Leflore County was an example of what we found in the delta. The—Leflore County was 80% black but there was only one black registered voter. And none of us could find him. So we concentrated where we would make the most mileage out of the energy and out of the sacrifice that we asked people to join in us with. Because we, we mob—we mobilized around the vote which separated us from other states; other states would, segregated, were were, at, mobilizing around the lunch counter. Our position was everything that was involved, that was a problem for us was political. The o—the one thing that politicians listen to is votes. So we went out early at—mobilize—we organized for the right to organize in the political arena. And once we'd won that fight and once we'd assisted in forcing, in educating the Department of Justice for the need to the 9—for the 1965 Voting Rights Act, we helped write the 1965 Voting Rights Act in the state of Mississippi. If the Freedom Democratic Party had not challenged the congressmen from the state of Mississippi, I am convinced that the 1965 Voting Rights Act would have never passed. A lot of people, a lot of historians, L.B.J. included, like to include the Selma march as the only justification for the passage of that act. I think that's foolish. You know, all we have to do is look at the congressional record in which Congressman McClellan, a liberal Republican, said on the House floor the day that the vote was taken, we should unseat the Mississippi delegation, but we don't have to. As an alternative let's let this challenge die and let's give black people in the state of Mississippi what they have always been fighting for: the right to vote. We can do that by passing the 1965 Voting Rights Act. I think the connection between the congressional challenge by the Freedom Democratic Party—and that wouldn't have been possible if we didn't have the support of people in that state to fight for their self interest and Arthur Kinoy and Bill Kuntsler, both of the National Lawyers Guild.

00:41:14:00

INTERVIEWER: WHAT DID THE VOTE MEAN? WHAT DID THE VOTE MEAN TO PEOPLE? HOW WAS IT SO WASY TO ORGANIZE? WHAT DID IT MEAN TO PEOPLE?

Guyot: The vote in Mississippi meant everything. It meant, it dis—it determined whether or not your road would be paved, it determined whether or not a hospital would be established in your county, of—your supervisor, had 28 responsibilities. See, every—82 counties in the state of Mississippi. Each county has five supervisors. Those supervisors determine life and death. If someone's going to be pardoned from the jail sentence, if someone's going to get a job, if someone's going to get a scholarship. You talk about an infrastructure that, of that, that is, that delivers, well just as it delivered positively, it could deliver negatively. When we started attempting to register people in Leflore County, the board of supervisors cut off the food supply. So Dick Gregory started providing us with money and with food so we were able to set up an alternative food system. But the vote in Mississippi from 1961 to today

means everything because of a suit that we filed, a reapportionment suit that we—Peggy Jean Connor, God bless her—filed it in 1963 at a COFO meeting. That suit has been held in abeyance because of the brilliance of J.P. Coleman, a former governor from Mississippi, and now a Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals judge, but now the Supreme Court has ordered the state of Mississippi to desegregate the state legislature. There will be more blacks in the state legislature in Mississippi than in any of the fifty states. And the black people in Mississippi made that happen. We didn't wait for someone to help us. We helped everybody–the—the beautiful thing about my being in the movement and that I'm most proud of is we saw a problem, we ask—forced people, we convinced people about the righteousness of our position, and we went ahead and did what was an impo—what was—what seemed impossible at the time. And black politics will never be the same because we changed it.

00:43:18:00

INTERVIEWER: CUT.

[cut]

[hand slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: FOUR, FOURTH STICKS.

INTERVIEWER: YEAH, THE, ON WHAT BASIS WAS THE CHAL—WERE THE CHALLENGES MADE, BOTH THE SEATING CHALLENGE AND THE CONG—CONGRESSIONAL CHALLENGE?

Guyot: Both of them were made on the same basis—that it was the Democratic Party that had not allowed black people to, to participate in the affairs of the party as it related to the promulgation and implementation of policy for the, for Democrats–and depriving black people of the right to vote. Every, the state legislature was entirely controlled by the Democratic Party. If we were to bring about any change, we had to have access to that party. We now have it.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: CUT.

[cut]

[hand slate]

INTERVIEWER: WHY WAS THE CONGRESSIONAL CHALLENGE MORE, MORE SUCCESSFUL THAN THE CREDENTIALS COMMITTEE CHALLENGE?

Guyot: To me, if we look at history, despite my personal involvement, they were both a—astronomically successful. The convention challenge to Atlantic City changed the entire party apparatus as it related to allowing black people in. No other group did that. No other group could have done that. We did it. So that, to me, in pragmatic politics, that's success. The

congressional challenge succeeded because it forced the congress to take the least, al—the least radical of two, I think, plausible and logical alternatives. They could have unseated the Mississippi delegation, but once they did that they would have to unseat the Texas delegation, the Louisiana delegation, the Alabama delegation. They didn't want to do that. We were right on our constitutional argument and I am very proud that congress—that, that Arthur Kinoy and William Kuntsler did such an excellent job on the challenge. But, as a result of that challenge, the 1965 Voting Rights Act was passed. As a result of the 1965 Voting Rights Act being passed, 3,000,000 black people in the state of Mississ—in the, in the South are now registered to vote that weren't registered to vote. Mississippi now has more black elected officials than any other state. And when we win the Connor reapportionment case, it will have more state legislators than any other state.

[wild audio]

Guyot: [coughing]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: WHY DID YOU SAY THAT THE VOITING RIGHTS ACT WAS PASSED BECAUSE OF IT? ARE YOU OK?

Guyot: Yeah.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: OK, FINE.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: CUT.

[cut]

00:45:46:00

INTERVIEWER: AS CONCISE AS YOU CAN MAKE IT.

Guyot: Gotcha.

[hand slate]

Guyot: After Atlantic City, after our victory in Atlantic City, Allen Lowenstien, Bayard Rustin, the NAACP, and quite a few other civil rights organizations began to raise the whole Communist scare. That we were dealing with communist associates and this was foolish. It didn't mean a thing to us. We had, we had dealt with that question earlier. We were concerned about the best legal representation. We got that and we did not respond to the whole question of Communist infiltration. We thought that was foolish, irrelevant, and we went about our business of mobilizing our people to their interest. And there's a need to do that to—and there will always be as long as black people are in this country.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: GOT IT IN. [LAUGHS]

INTERVIEWER: OK. CUT.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: WE GOT THIS–

[cut]

[end interview]

00:46:47:00