MEMORANDUM

To: Tim West

Fm: Joe Sinsheimer

Re: Leslie McLemore Interview

Dt: October 8, 1998

Enclosed is an interview with Leslie McLemore who was vice-chair of the Mississippi Democratic party in 1964. McLemore’s interview focuses on 1) McLemore’s work for the MFDP during the summer of 1964 2) the leadership qualities of Robert Moses 3) Bob Moses’ relationship with Amzie Moore 4) the leadership qualities of Ms. Fannie Lou Hamer 5) Martin Luther King’s role at the 1964 National Democratic Convention 6) and Aaron Henry’s role at the 1964 National Democratic Convention.
Interview with Dr. Leslie McLemore
Jackson State University
Jackson, Mississippi
February 14, 1985

Joe Sinsheimer: Dr. McLemore if you would like to start with your story
of how you became involved in SNCC and the 1964 Summer
Project, we can just take it from there.

Leslie McLemore: Mine is going to be very brief to tell the truth because
I was not in a very intimate day-to-day basis, I was
really not involved in the Summer Project on a day-to-
day basis. Essentially what I did, just for background,
I graduated from Rust College in Holly Springs, Mississippi
in May of 1964. I had worked as a field secretary for
SNCC off and on between '63, well I guess the later part
of '62 is when I first met Bob Moses. And prior to meet-
ing Bob, at Rust I was the first president of the college
chapter of the NAACP at Rust. So I kind of got my initial
start through the NAACP as president of the first college
chapter at Rust College.

And came to Rust in 1960, I came to Rust in 1960. Some
of the upper class students were leading strikes on campus,
were meeting, boycotts at the local theater downtown that
was segregated. It had a balcony section for blacks and
a lower section for whites. And I got involved in that.
I finished high school in 1960, so I came to Rust in the
fall of 1960. So I really sort of got involved at Rust
except in high school I was involved in a kind of indirect
way, you know. It wasn't sit-ins and it wasn't directly
civil rights, but it was protest stuff. It had that kind
of mind set.

So it didn't take much, Rust was just a good place
to go to get involved. But I got involved in SNCC in '63
and really came on board as a kind of a paid SNCC field
secretary in 1964. And I was recruited to work with the
newly formed Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party in
1964. When the Democratic, when the Freedom Democratic
Party was formed in April of 1964-- it is a little known
fact-- but I was then a senior in college and I was
elected, in the summer of '64, I was elected the vice-
chairman of the party. A lot of people write that Fannie
Lou Hamer was the vice-chairman of the party. Fannie Lou
Hamer was the vice-chair of the delegation that went to
Atlantic City, New Jersey. The chair of the Party was
Lawrence Guyot, and Guyot did not go to Atlantic City
because he was in jail and decided to opt to go to jail
as opposed to going to Atlantic City. And the chair of
the delegation going to Atlantic City was Aaron Henry,
okay.

But I was elected vice-chair, I had just graduated
from college in 1964. So I was recruited, after ... I
was trying to decide whether I was going to work for SNCC
that summer, the Summer Project, or get a job job until I was off to graduate school. What I did, my home town was a place very close to Memphis, so I got a job working in a roofing factory and worked there for three weeks. And Frank Smith who was working for SNCC, who is now with the D.C. city council in Washington, persuaded me to come work with the FDP (Freedom Democratic Party).

So I went to New York and I worked with Frank Smith, Walter Tillah, and of course Ella Baker was the prime mover, Ella Baker headed the office, she was in charge of the operation. And the primary responsibility of the D.C. office of the FDP was to lobby people on the hill, was to go around to the caucuses and primarily to the state conventions, and lobby those delegates and get them to support the FDP.

So that is what I did essentially, I went to the hill, talked to selected members of the Congress, talking to ______ from Wisconsin and Edwards from California, and people like that. And then I traveled around to a number of the state conventions, talking about why the FDP ought to be seated, and why the segregated delegation should not be seated. And in a very real sense, I finished college I guess at a fairly old age, I was twenty-three when I graduated. And by this time I was approaching twenty-four, so I traveled around with Frank Smith, Walter Tillah and Ella Baker. And I was the only Mississippian on the staff. Part of the whole thing was that here was a bona fide Mississippi, you know, young college guy, southern accent, bad grammar and the whole bit, so I came across as being genuine. You know I was the, I was the kind of younger, not as sophisticated, Fannie Lou Hamer version of telling the story kind of thing.

So I did that, I did that and then I worked in Atlantic City. I was a kind of advance person. The other person that came on board later on was Charles Sherrod from south Georgia, who is now on the city council in Albany, Georgia and who was head of the Albany project. Charles Sherrod came up to work. So I traveled to Atlantic City initially with Charles Sherrod to lay the foundation, to do the organizing. And that meant cultivating the locals, talking with them about the FDP, because the FDP was coming. Going to help secure housing, setting up the office, you know, getting the telephones in, with a guy named Jack Mennis who was a white guy in New Orleans who was working for SNCC.

And I did that, I was a kind of advance man, I would go and make speeches at the local churches. Again, the selling point that I had been involved in the movement in Mississippi, was a genuine Mississippi product, spoke Mississippi, you know, looked Mississippi
and the whole bit. So I was convincing. You know I could sell the whole idea that I am from Mississippi, and that this is a worthy cause, and here is this young skinny kid who is a brave, courageous fellow up there. So it was part of the whole thing.

Sinsheimer: Right.

McLemore: Obviously this is a good bit of hindsight, but that is the basic reason I was there, you know. And it was effective from the standpoint of people knowing that this guy is a genuine Mississippi product.

And then during the summer of 1964 I came to Mississippi several times, because I participated in the delegate selection process. I was elected eventually a delegate, went to the District meeting in Greenville for my congressional district, got elected there. Went to, came to the state convention and then was elected vice-chair at the state convention, and then was also elected a delegate. So I was a delegate from Mississippi in 1964.

And what I did in Mississippi was the same kind of thing essentially. It was to go around from place to place, from community to community, talking about the FDP. Prior to that in 1963 I had been a part of the Freedom Vote campaign when I was at Rust College. And I was one of the, I was like the north Mississippi organizer or something like that. I was still in school, enrolled in school, I wasn't going to class a whole lot, but I was enrolled in school at least. But I carried ballots around to different counties, like Tate county for instance, where it was very rough in the sixties. Had people voting in churches, voting in their homes. Went to my home county county, De Soto county, which was just as rough. Getting people to vote in the black community, you know, in churches and night clubs, juke joints and places like that.

And then talking about the FDP, talking about the Summer Project. So I worked a bit in voter registration, but in one sense I was like on the national staff so I was not here on a day to day basis. You know from reading and talking to people, and if you had the occasion to talk with Bob Moses you talked really to the person who was the architect of this whole thing in a very real sense, but from my perspective as a Mississippian, the Summer Project for the first time on a large scale basis demonstrated to black people what they could do, or what they could accomplish. That is from my perspective, and this is just my own very personal view of this thing, if it did anything for the people of Mississippi, black folk of Mississippi, and white people too, it
McLemore (cont.): demonstrated what one could do and I think for white Mississippians, what it did for those people who were conscious enough to realize, is that once black people obtain more flexibility, any kind of measure of freedom, that it gives them more freedom, it frees them too. It allows them to in an open way associate with black people, it allows them in a very genuine way to identify with the causes of black people. And I think it forced some people to begin to empathize with black people in a genuine kind of way. And I am talking about a select few, but I think it did that.

Obviously, again from an internal standpoint, it produced more people with the kind of sense of self and rhythm that Fannie Lou Hamer had. Fannie Lou Hamer as you well know, started in '62, got involved in the civil rights movement because she attempted to vote. But I think what it did on a kind of mass level, it made people appreciate their own potential power in a way that they had not done before on a mass scale. You had the example of Fannie Lou Hamer, Annie Devine, people like that. But I am saying that I think in a very genuine sense, it gave more people that kind of spirit. It helped to infuse ordinary people like Hollis Watkins had been infused already and energized by the movement. I had been energized by the movement, felt a greater sense of worth and all that. But I think ordinary Mississippians that the Freedom Summer did that.

Obviously the attention helped some too. I mean clearly the state was a focal point in 1964. It placed a great deal of visibility here. And on the other hand it also pointed out I think in a very real sense the limits of other people doing things for you in a funny kind of way. I think it inspired people to the point they could feel a great deal more self-sufficient and independent. And then on the other hand it demonstrated to black Mississippians, and the people from the outside, white and black and Bob (Moses) included, that there is just a limit to what you can do for other people. That it is much more genuine if they do it for themselves, that it is much more lasting if they do it for themselves.

And if you look in this state now at a kind of balkanized politics, at a balkanized civil rights movement, in places where it really caught hold with the locals, where they began to make some decisions for themselves, began to speak up, began to participate actively in the civil rights and political processes, you still have remnants of that. You have strong, a strong kind of political base. Obviously a good example would be Holmes County. Holmes County was somewhat different too, we did have, we still do have a number of black landowners but on the other hand you had people there making decisions.
McLemore (cont.): I mean the Freedom Schools actually took hold. The Freedom Schools worked in Holmes County. In Humphreys county, the Freedom Schools worked in Humphreys county. Freedom schools worked in Jefferson county. Where people really began to speak up for themselves, so there was that remnant of organizational skills that were left there. That did not take hold in so many other places. You know one could do regressional analysis or something, and say if you look at the level of income, the wealth of the county, if you look at the history of political participation in the county, if you look at the level of education in the county, that these things would be obvious.

But in one sense they were not so obvious. Because then you, you know, what we looked at in recent years obviously, if you look at the SES of black Mississippians, the voter turnout is much higher than one would expect from an economic class like we have in this state. Although it is not what it should be, but if one thinks about the SES and compare the SES here with say Massachusetts or New Hampshire or Connecticut, a better example, is that you will find that these people vote at a higher level. I mean people who don't suppose to have an interest in voting because their economic lot is just simply too meager for them to be concerned about kind of civic issues. Okay. But I think that is a part of the history of this state, it is a part of the whole struggle of this state, that I think contributes to why people turn out in larger numbers than they do in ordinary states, turnout.

So to go back is to say that in Holmes county and Humphreys county and in Jefferson county, where the movement did take hold is that some of it can be explained in education and land ownership, but all of it can't be explained like that. Because in spite of having all the black landowners you still have a very poor county, you see, and the movement took hold their. And you have some other counties where you have a larger number of black people, not quite the landownership but you had the numbers, and it just never took hold. Tunica, Sunflower, what have you. Not even in Sunflower, the county where Fannie Lou Hamer was reared. Where she worked, where she lived, and where she died. She was really more effective outside of Sunflower county than she was in Sunflower county.

And I guess if history is fair in the long run she could have very well been more effective outside of Mississippi than she was in Mississippi. From the standpoint of their being a massive uprising, or a massive awareness on the part of black people because of the presence of Fannie Lou Hamer. So many of us paid lip
service to Fannie Lou Hamer. I mean she was a great lady, courageous woman, ahead of her time, innovative, analytical, not formally educated but just fantastic, you know. We gave her plaques, you know. But in terms of people looking at her life and saying okay her life stands for something, her life really means something. (Break)

So what her life meant in symbolic terms did not transcend into concrete action. You know if you have read something about Fannie Lou Hamer, you know she was instrumental at least, was one of the organizers of a co-op in Sunflower county, they still have a daycare center in her name. She was instrumental in really starting the daycare center. She was instrumental in starting food and clothes drives for people in that county and Mississippi in general. Obviously Sunflower people benefited from it probably more than any other people. And she did a number of other things. She really tried to do the economic development bit. Fannie Lou Hamer didn't have a background in accounting and she relied on people so often that did not have backgrounds either, or were not really true to the task, and eventually it primarily failed. The pig farm that you probably read about, all these things.

And what I am really trying to suggest, I am simply saying, the bottom line was none of us really, too few of us really, used her example to put in place something very, very concrete, that would really help improve the life chances of black Mississippians, and white Mississippians. And so from one perspective that was a real failure. We have a lecture series here at the University (Jackson State) in her name, you know. They have, I am a member of a group of political scientists, we have a Fannie Lou Hamer community service award. You know it goes on and on. But you really find more of that outside of Mississippi than you do in Mississippi, you see. So the legacy of Fannie Lou Hamer is not quite profound as it should be in this state.

So the Summer Project, again, really helped to inspire people on that kind of Fannie Lou Hamer level. But on the other hand it also just raised a whole lot of questions about organizing, and the proper way to do it, and how do you transfer to people responsible roles? How do you convince people that they ought to be doing it themselves? How do you imbue them with that spirit of wanting to do it without outside help? Without someone looking over their shoulder? You know on reflection the philosophy was very good, the philosophy was very good, "let the people decide," "let the people do it for themselves," but the tragic mistake was this,
Maclemore (cont.): is that did not come into vogue until around 1963. I mean in all deference to Bob (Moses) and his humble manner. But that really was not a part of what Bob was about until much later. I am talking about a short period of time, but now it is, two years could be much later when you are starting. So I am saying that I think we could have done, SNCC could have done a much better job of transferring the decision making power and processes to local people early on. And I think that was a tragic mistake, because on the other hand when Bob and SNCC pulled out, when SNCC changed direction people really not been prepared, I mean collectively had not been prepared to take over all of these responsibilities. But it was a fantastic idea, it was a concept whose time had come. But what I am suggesting is that I think a mistake was made is that initially it should have been letting the local people decide. I mean not just making decisions and factoring the local people in, not just leading demonstrations, but helping, letting the local people have to plan those demonstrations. But of course the down side to that is that it takes a hell of a lot of patience to do that. Because you are talking about people who have simply not had a history of organizing on that level, not a history of standing up to white folk like that, so that posed a real problem. So I am not belittling what occurred, I am just simply saying in retrospect one can see the questions raised, there were more questions raised than answered. That is probably always the case (laughter). But there were more questions raised than answered. And the tragedy there if we had been much more forward thinking we would have had more people involved.

Because I think the people that you have been interviewing, I think some of us are probably examples of folk who got the spirit, who were imbued with the idea and wanted to work, and some of us are still doing some things, elected positions or what have you, community organizations and being involved. But we could have had much more of that, and we would have had a much bigger impact. There is of course the whole other side of this piece, is that we never succeeded having to organize white folk. We never succeeded in having to organize white folk, poor or any other kind. Which was one of the noble purposes of SNCC and then of course the spin-off SSOC, was to try to organize the white poor. Never got off first base.

Sinsheimer: Why do you think that is?
McLemore: Well, primarily because, primarily because of racism. And let me explain that. I don't want to leave it like that, because it is much more complicated than that. Obviously racism was a factor, and still is a factor. But it was because the whites who were for organizing white people in the community, really had a much greater interest in organizing black people. And to be very candid and very frank with you, they felt much more comfortable in the black community. You know black folk are not as, black folk are not as hostile. And the ones that organized and got accustomed to staying in the black community in Sunflower city or in McComb, he or she didn't really want to venture over to the white community. Because you know obviously you know they had been identified and then labeled now, these folk are "nigger lovers." You know, I am not going to listen to a nigger lover, this person comes in out of Berkeley or out of Michigan or out of Massachusetts some place, new on the block and says I am going to organize the white folk. White people would say, "Oh you are from that other group over there." They had been stigmatized already in one sense. And it is just very difficult to overcome that stigma, but also it was just simply very difficult years of racism and having this mind set in the white community about the black community. So it just posed, it posed a genuine problem. 

But I think that was one of the great, one of the great failures. I think the idea was an excellent one. You know and it was not new with us, obviously people had been thinking about it and talking about it for years. The labor movement, you know, pioneered the model. But it just simply didn't work very well. It worked better for the labor movement in one sense, in certain places, because you did not have the black aspect. There was not that equal effort to organize black people and to organize white folk. West Virginia and Kentucky and places like that where they were fairly successful. Tennessee. But here you had the duality, organize whites and organize blacks, and trying to get the two to see eye to eye, and understand the common circumstances, and the common environment that they were all a part of, it was very difficult to convince of that. And because of these factors and I am sure several, several others they were not, they were not nearly as successful as they had anticipated. You know SSCO in theory is still around, but has not met with a whole lot of success. So the circumstances, the environment contributed greatly to that not being able to occur.

But from another level, obviously you look at the Summer Project and all the spinoffs that I am sure you have written about, read about, thought about. The PDP going to Atlantic City, New Jersey clearly was the big dramatic spinoff, because, it was dramatic because to the nation, the nation saw it. Fannie Lou Hamer's searing testimony before TV cameras and a captured
nation, and Lyndon Johnson interrupting it. And it being shown later on national TV repeatedly. It captured the imagination of a lot of people. That was definitely, obviously a spin-off. And of course from that spin-off, the one concrete thing that came out of that would be the rules change of the Democratic National Convention. And eventually the modernizing, moderating movement of the Republican Party. I mean so you had that kind of spin-off.

And other spin-offs too. People who came to Atlantic City became very active in the women's movement who then in '64 were here organizing Atlantic City, that became, you know ... The whole peace movement, some of those people went on to work in the peace movement, the movement of the anti-war issues and effort. So the spin-offs were really profound.

Of course in 1965, in January the challenge to the Mississippi Congressional delegation, one event that has not been given the visibility that it actually deserves, because it was just a daring challenge. I mean for awhile there we didn't have representation in the U.S. House of Representatives. I think again it raised the consciousness of a lot of people across the country as to what was happening in Mississippi. It in one sense demonstrated how a fairly well organized small group of people could challenge the basic center of power in this country. I mean that was instructive. It was a spin-off of the PDP challenge of '64, the idea generated from that. Joseph Rauh, as you well know, was the attorney of record in 1964, and Stavis and Kunstler and people like that in 1965 worked very hard on the congressional challenge with the support of some of the liberal members of the U.S. Congress. But, you know, the spin-offs were in one sense fantastic from one perspective and moved to take on a life of their own too once they developed. But so many of the people that were involved later on were here in '64. But then the ideas that were generated in '64 and '63, you know, sort of took wings in one sense too as a result of 1964.

Because if we look at the impact on higher education in the country, you know, it led to the developing of a whole new area of social science really. The civil rights movement is increasingly being taught now as a legitimate topic within itself. The women's studies programs picked up, you know, more life. Peace centers that some colleges started. And even on a high school level the text books changed in higher education, text books changed in high schools and elementary schools across the country somewhat because of that. So the implications, you know, are just all around. Obviously they are topics within themselves but I think so much of it— not to ever emphasize
McLemore (cont.): it, you know, the case— but I think so much of what
did occur later on had its very beginning here in '64.
And of course when you put '64 in the proper context
you can go on back and back as you were talking earlier
on (laughter). But I think in terms of highlighting one
major event, that '64 does lend some focus to a number
of the other things that occurred.

Sinsheimer: Right.

McLemore: Yeah. You started to ask me a question.

Sinsheimer: I was going to ask you who were the chief organizers
other than Guyot of that '65 challenge. Well, the person—
(Lawrence) Guyot and ______, the lawyer,
Kunstler, another lawyer. The person that really did
a lion's share of the work on the national level was
Michael Thelwell. Mike Thelwell is the former chairman
of the W.E.B. Du Bois Afro-American Studies Department
at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. He is
a Jamaican by birth, graduate of Howard University and
the University of Massachusetts MLA Program.

Sinsheimer: Do you know where he is?

McLemore He is at the University of Massachusetts in the Afro-
American Studies program. Mike was concluding his work
at— in fact I think Mike had graduated from Howard—
but was still in D.C. Because after he went to Massa-
chusetts we were in fact at graduate school together
up there. But Mike was like the center piece in a very
real sense of what was going on nationally. And prob-
ably has— not to be too kind to him— probably has
the best grasp. I wrote a dissertation on the FDP and
it has a chapter on the '65 challenge. But mine was from
afar more or less. I spent some time on the hill lobbying,
but I was back in graduate school. But let me give you
Mike Thelwell's number just in case you want to call him
at some point.

Sinsheimer: Okay.

McLemore: At the University the area code is (413)545-1304. And
Mike's home number, same area code, is 256-0218.

Sinsheimer: Great.

McLemore: And I think for a good treatment, a good analytical
picture of the '65 Congressional challenge that Mike
would probably be the one best person that can help you
now. Because he was really on the hill on a constant
basis. He was getting in touch with the support groups
across the country on a daily basis. And really was kind
McLemore (cont.): of a chief architect of that whole effort, of putting on Ella Baker and people like that. But just on a day-to-basis of people involved of still sound mind and body, Mike is probably the best person to talk about that particular thing.

Sinsheimer: Okay, right. Let me just ask you a few questions here. One of the things I am trying to figure out is this notion of Moses with a capital M.

McLemore: Yeah.

Sinsheimer: And its-- I mean I have talked to him and obviously some of the qualities are still there. But a lot of people risked a lot of things and put a lot of things on the line, and he was one of those. But why, why is his name, why do you think he became nominated to that status?

McLemore: Well, first of all if you have talked to him and you have probably heard people say, the man is absolutely brilliant. He is absolutely brilliant in a humble kind of way that is just unusual. And he had read (Albert) Camus. And he read probably twice as much as all of us put together. He has this uncanny knack for being able to apply what he had read to real life situations, that he had a way of converting theory into a kind of pragmatism in one sense that was unusual.

And in one sense Bob was just supremely naive about people and it was naive but then it was also a profound faith in the basic goodness of human kind. That was not fake it was not false it was genuine. So it in one sense becomes this great understanding of human kind, of people and appreciating people, but it also bordered on being naive too, in terms of the level of trust and faith, and just one's expectations of the people to achieve, the people to succeed in spite of the odds. That was an aspect of Bob that was unusual.

And it was not how he exhorted you, because he did not exhort except in very rare, rare situations. But it was how he lead by example, by how he performed by example. It was not you know, "Hey, look at me I am Bob Moses and I am the leader," but it is I wouldn't ask you to do anything in the world that I wouldn't do. In fact I will do it first, to show you that I will do it. But not to show you I will do it, but because I want to do it. And if you elect to do it it is fine, but don't let me push you.

One of my concerns was that I wanted to go to school and be in the movement. And I was never pressured by Bob. Some people told me that I ought to make a decision about whether I wanted to go to college full-time or be in the civil rights movement full-time, you know. Bob said, "No, that is your decision." I respected him for that. So all these people that were telling you that you ought to come
McLemore (cont.): to come full-time, they are out here full-time and ain't doing a damn thing, you see. So it was that kind of encouragement, that kind of example.

And I think obviously as time passed on, you know, Bob's dimension took on greater and greater, you know, it just became all out of proportion. But at bottom he was just simply very noble, courageous person, has a great deal of dignity and integrity. And one could see that. And people picked up on it.

And then Bob has this fantastic quality that most people who are as bright as Bob and who had Bob's exposure, Bob has this fantastic quality of listening to people. He would listen to these unlettered, uneducated people, these young green horned activists, civil rights people, he would listen, he would listen to us. He would listen to people.

And of course he was not much older than most of us anyway, but you know when you talk about him, people would think this guy Moses must have been an old man. I heard people say-- all my students when I talk about the civil rights movement, you know, and people who have heard about Bob Moses-- some friends of mine who were my contemporaries from other places who did not grow up in Mississippi-- when they hear about Bob Moses one of the things they always say to me is that "McLemore, I am just absolutely amazed. I though Bob Moses would be an old man with a white beard all down to the floor and all that. And this guy is as young as I am, you know." And that is the amazing part. But Bob gave of that kind of rhythm though. He came across as being so much older than the rest of us. And it was because he had thought so hard, I think, and so long. And he was just simply endowed with a great mind.

(inaudible portion--laughter)

But he was able to take the basic postures, basic positions of indigenous people. He was able to listen to them. (Short interruption) He had that fantastic ability. Just take the ideas of people and develop the ideas, to make whole sentences out of them, paragraphs, pages, and concepts, and action plans; and then have the generosity to say to them, you know, this is what you did. This is what you said. This is the extension of what you were talking about. And most people don't quite have that ability. And they are, and when they have it, they are too selfish, you know. They say oh no, it is mine. And in one sense it is, but you know (laughter). It takes quite a person to say to another person, oh yeah-- take a very rough handed idea and make sense out of it, and give it some form and shape and substance. It is what Bob was able to do. And then people respected him for that. Because he didn't commandeer ideas, he didn't steal them, he didn't
McLemore (cont.): take them away, he let people say, "Oh yeah." And then would give people responsibility. Would say I am just one of the crowd, one of the bunch. Of course the more he denied it, the more he was elevated, you know. Because people would say, "Oh God, this guy is putting me on, you know."

Sinsheimer: Right.

McLemore: But I think as I look at it, these are some of the qualities that Bob-- I am not capturing the full Bob Moses. I didn't know him as well as some people. Obviously I am not endowed with all the analytical skills to come up with all different angles though. But he struck me as that kind of person. You wouldn't know that he had at that point in time a Master's degree in Mathematics and had been teaching at a prep school in the country. And had come from a background from some conflict and all that. Blue jeans never quite looked right on him but ... (laughter). But you know that was Bob Moses. You could tell he wasn't a typical farmer all right, but ... (laughter) he was still one hell of a guy. But he blended in.

And I think, you know, when you talk to Bob and talk to people, Bob had a great respect, for instance, for Fannie Lou Hamer and Amzie Moore. I think Amzie Moore really was to Bob a father figure in a genuine way. He (Bob) of course like C.C. Bryant a whole lot, a lot of respect for Mr. Bryant, still has of course. I think with Amzie there was a special kind of chemistry between Amzie and Bob Moses. And I can't capture here, nor any other place to tell you the truth, but just from seeing it and observing it and then hearing Bob talk about Amzie. And at Amzie's funeral to hear Bob talk about Amzie. Because it had been some years since I had seen Bob or, you know, had seen Amzie too in fact. I had seen Amzie a couple of years before he died. But it was a special relationship there, and I could detect that from the first time I met Amzie Moore in 1962. Some of us went to Dorchester, Georgia to a citizenship training workshop that SCLC sponsored in Dorchester, south Georgia, almost South Carolina actually.

Bob Moses was responsible for a lot of people going over and we met at Amzie Moore's house in Cleveland. And in fact when we got to Dorchester Andrew Young and his wife Jeanne and ____________, were the people running the workshop, along with Dorothy Cotton. But I could tell then that the relationship between Bob and Amzie was something different. And I think what Bob liked so much about Amzie, one of things was that Amzie started organizing black folk in Mississippi in
McLemore (cont.): the forties and fifties when it was very unpopular. And Amzie had a quartet a singing group that would travel from church to church. And Amzie was one of the vice-presidents of the NAACP later on. And was a member of the NAACP then and was a postal worker, worked for the federal government. So he had a secure job in one sense, they couldn't come outright and fire him. But they made life miserable on the job, but what Amzie did was to use the guys of the quartet singing from church to church as a means to organize people, to solicit memberships to the NAACP, to explore issues, to become parts of court cases, and what have you.

And use that organizing ploy, and it is not uncommon it has been said-- at some point I am going to try and write something about Amzie-- it was not uncommon in some cases for him, for Amzie to have five to six hundred people in a church on Saturday night or on Sunday afternoon, Sunday night, you know, incredible. In the Delta, different towns in the Delta. The local power structure assumed that these were quartet singing and something that people would concern themselves about in the black community. But Amzie Moore was organizing people. Laying the kind of foundation so when Bob Moses came to Mississippi to do some organizing, is that here is a man who has a history of organizing. Here are communities that really have been organized in one sense. And often people ask the question why certain things occur in Mississippi. We have been damn organized to death. You know from some point in time from Reconstruction on, there has been somebody organizing somebody in Mississippi. Because of the large number of black people and the Mississippi mystique, and the myth of Mississippi, you know. So its always new, but so much of its because it is a part of the product of the organization and organizing that had occurred in this state.

So Bob came and met Amzie and here is a man that had been doing some organizing and here is a man that could point to some of the skeletons, there is a man that can give you contacts here and there. And here is a man who was damn courageous. So I think in one sense that could explain some of why Bob and Amzie really hooked up, of course then Amzie was at bottom just a damn decent human being, you know. A kind of uncommon kind. And that makes for a good relationship. But Bob used so much of what Amzie taught him by example, but also the history of what Amzie had done as a way to help organize the state.

So he went to the common people, he went to the ministers, he went to the churches, he went to the basic foundations in the black community. (Break)
Editor's Note: (After the break to change the tape, a short discussion followed regarding Bob Moses' presentation at a civil rights conference sponsored by the Smithsonian in February of 1980. The tape resumes with McLemore discussing his reaction to the presentation.)

McLemore:
I mean Bob is still Bob. Because you know that thing (the conference) I was there. And the thing that kept running through my mind— you know Bob is unpredictable— the thing that kept running through my mind was what is Bob going to do—now (laughter). You know, I mean because I remember time and time again in the past where Bob would always do something unconventional that came off really as just being a stroke of genius. And what he would do so often was just so much of a given. It was so simple, it was just there.

But he would just take— like the kids (Moses had asked all the children at the conference to join him in singing Freedom Songs) and that prayer. It just makes something, I mean touching and significant out of it that very few people would think about. You know most folks were thinking how can I quote somebody, how can I be really heavy and deep and philosophical. How can I demonstrate that I am this person. But this guy takes the resources that he finds right there. That is why he was so good with these people in Mississippi, these indigenous folk. He just simply took the material that he found. Its like, you know, if you are in a land where you have nothing but wood and no bricks, you don't try to build a brick house you build that wood house right? You use materials that you find on hand. That is what Bob would do.

And the Smithsonian example is an example of Bob taking the resources there and helping to influence a generation of kids to come. Just saying, "Hey, this is our future. Get them involved. They can teach us something." You know, yeah, we give lip service to this all the time, this guy just ups and does it. You know you are standing right there. Incredible. (laughter)

So I remember after that I just simply said, people were so overwhelmed and so struck by it until I said in the back as I recall, "You know I know Bob doesn't like this, but I think Bob deserves a round of applause." And people said yeah. It was that kind of thing though.

Sinsheimer:
It makes me happy to hear this because I thought it was a trip or something, yeah I am glad to see that everybody else had that reaction to.

McLemore:
Yeah. Yeah. It was just, this is really incredible. And one of the guys I was down there with was born in South Carolina and just left here yesterday, is the godfather of my son, was with me. And he is an historian. Wrote some stuff on slavery and Jack Johnson and stuff like
McLemore (cont.): that. He was there and he had never met Bob Moses before. Read about him, you know, talked about him in his classes. And he was with me. And we left the Smithsonian going some place to get a drink or something, and he just, he was dumbfounded. Tony said, "Oh man, did you see that." I said, "Yeah, I saw it." (laughter) I mean it just simply struck him and we went, I was staying with him, and we went home that evening to his house and he was telling his wife __________ about it and describing it to her.

Sinsheimer: Damn, really?

McLemore: And there was no way you could sort of recapture that thing though, you know. It just, it stuck with him to the point that, "Man this is absolutely fantastic." You know if you hadn't been there it is hard to believe it, you know, just to recreate it. But Bob used to do that all the time. Not that same thing, but just the uncommon in one sense, but also very common in terms of what was there, using the ability of people there already. People that were there already, the resources were there. And he just simply utilized them. So it was just simply amazing.

But Bob had that kind of... Bob had, Bob has that kind of uncommon ability. So it is a special gift. The guy is not only brilliant but he is just a humanist too. It takes an incredible human tough to be able to do that. And Fannie Lou Hamer who was on the educational spectrum just a world apart from Bob, but a person who was of the soil, of the people, who emerged from the people, was able to relate to the ordinary people, and on the other hand, like Bob, was able to communicate to educated people. And they appreciated her and liked her in spite of her broken verbs. Because they liked her for the wisdom that she brought to things, for the courage that was demonstrated through her __________, which is on another level, just like Bob. On the other hand she didn't have the formal education of Bob, but she was able to communicate to a variety of publics, I guess that is what I am saying. And to be convincing in either setting. Because, you know, clearly part of her great demand across the country was from people who were articulate, and educated, and well-groomed and everything else, you know. But she related and had something to say to people. And Bob just the reverse. Formally educated but could say something to these indigenous Fannie Lou Hamers of the world. And was convincing. And she could say something to the Bob types and be convincing and totally inspiring.
McLemore (cont.): Because at bottom what she was, she was really inspiring to people, inspiration. Help people, I guess, to visualize things that they had not visualized before, of the movement directions that they had not anticipated. In a very real sense she was remarkable in her own way.

You know as I get older and think about these things, it, to have worked with Bob and Fannie Lou Hamer for instance as examples-- there are other people to, Charles Sherrod for instance, or what have you-- it was just a fantastic occurrence. And to think in Fannie Lou Hamer's case, you know, this daughter of sharecroppers could emerge from another plantation and have the impact on a country that she had. And to have the impact on this racist state that she had. It is incredible because it, because you know people have tried to replicate Fannie Lou Hamer all the time. I mean she inspired so many local women to get up and want to sing like Fannie Lou Hamer and speak like Fannie Lou Hamer, but they didn't catch on. So not to sound superstitious or overly religious, but clearly there is a special kind of chemistry there, that maybe can not be explained in ordinary terms, I mean it can not be explained in sort of ordinary ways. Because it takes something special for people to place their faith and hope in you. That's a major responsibility too, but to be able to have that kind of ability to link up and communicate with people, its something very special. And in this case Ms. Hamer or in this case Bob Moses, clearly Bob has that and Ms. Hamer had it.

I think even now in spite of, you know, Bob as you point out, he will politely answer your questions and all that. And will deny and try to be as humble as possible. Now in one sense I think that Bob's talents are going to waste. He is very much involved in the school movement up there (Boston) I know, his daughter is in school he was saying. And he has been involved in the PTA because the McArthur thing (grant) had some freedom not to have to go to work so he can go over there and teach some mathmatics, and become very much involved about the curriculum in school. But on the other hand Bob has such tremendous touch with people, you know it is a shame that he is not more out in the public domain, you know. Obviously he would disagree with me, but you know that is just my opinion of it.

Sinsheimer: Yeah, I probably, I do share that. I kind of asked him about it, I said do you ever fell "yearnings," you know, and he said, "My world is just very small."
Sinsheimer: But in fact quite a few people who know or understand, or whatever, feel that way. It has been about two years, it was last year in December, maybe fifteen months between I saw him (Bob Moses), and each time I see him, maybe it is just a product of him knowing me, but each time he seems more worldly than he was last. I think he is moving out a little.

McLemore: I am glad to hear that.

Sinsheimer: Yeah, I think he is. Though he spends a lot of time with his family, his wife is in med school.

McLemore: Right. Med school, okay.

Sinsheimer: Last time he just cooked dinner while we talked, which was fine (laughter). Though trying to transcribe a tape ... he was making bread in a metal bowl with a metal spoon.

McLemore: Yeah. Yeah. (laughter)

Sinsheimer: You should here it on tape. Other than that it was a real good talk.

McLemore: Yeah.

Sinsheimer: But the other thing is that, it happens a lot, but he just exhausts me. To the point where I am just overloaded. After a while I am glad I have the taperecorder.

McLemore: Yeah.

Sinsheimer: In fact his opinion of history... I remember one of the first talks I had with him he said he didn't believe in history, but this last time he was saying that he felt it was really important that the history get written. Not necessarily that I write it, but ... (laughter). I won't say that he at all directed that to me.

McLemore: Yeah.

Sinsheimer: Let me ask you one more question. You give such good responses that I should ask any more. And that is about (Martin Luther King's role at the (1964 Atlantic City ) convention.

McLemore: Okay.

Sinsheimer: And the way the delegation received all the pressure that was directed ...

McLemore: Okay.

Sinsheimer: I can't, you know, and Hollis was real good about just saying about-- I mean everyone has levels of experiences that
Sinsheimer (cont.): they have been through.

McLemore: Of course that is true.

Sinsheimer: And he (Hollis Watkins) was saying that I grew up in McComb (actually Summit) and went through a lot of things. But he says, he said a lot of times I have to sit and say there are a lot of people below me, can I really make decisions for them? Anyway, he was real good about getting that across to me.

McLemore: Yeah.

Sinsheimer: So I have no idea of knowing ... it seemed from the historical perspective that there was a lot of pressure, I mean they were throwing the heavyweights at the delegation. Is that what happened?

McLemore: Oh yeah. They were heavy all right.

Sinsheimer: King especially interest me, the dynamic that he would have had, because he didn't spend a lot of time in Mississippi.

McLemore: Right that is true.

Sinsheimer: Well?

McLemore: Well, let me try to be as candid with you as I can. with the understanding that this is from clearly from my own personal perspective of this thing. You know you understand at this point in time twenty-three years old, hadn't been out of Mississippi a whole lot, I had been a student leader on campus and involved in the civil rights movement, and this was really fairly for me very high level politics; didn't quite understand a lot of the internal action, I mean I really didn't.

I am now for instance chairman of the Hinds County Democratic Party. And I will tell you very frankly is that I don't really have a good feel for some of the internal nature of politics, it really turns me off. So I am not the kind of nose-to-the-grindstone type, I mean I love politics but it doesn't consume me. I am going to run for office again for instance. But I like it, you know, but I am not that type person who stays abreast of everything going on political.

Sinsheimer: A hack?

McLemore: Yeah, that's right. Or everybody's position on the issue. And feel is if I ought to know every member of the-- we have a thirty-six member committee-- you know I don't really feel as if I ought to know every-
body's position on the issues. I know the members fairly well now because I am in the capacity of dealing with all of them as being chair of the Party. And I am really not as "political" as I should be. I am the county chairman but I really not buddy buddy with a lot of the elected official, I am not buddy buddy with the governor, I don't make an effort and never have.

So I say that to talk about '64 is that this probably was to shape me for years to come. Because then I was really not a part of the ... always liked to step back and try to look at what is going on. Although I am a part of it I am not consumed by it, I am never consumed by politics to that level. I like to be able to say at some point maybe I want to reflect and write a note or two about it. (Break) So I always try to step back, just a bit to make sure that I have some sense of my bearings, you know.

Understand now, and I am sure that you do understand that the PDP delegation was a SNCC delegation. Understand that. That Aaron Henry was the leader of it and had a number of NAACP types in there, in fact I was an ex-NAACP chapter president right. But my loyalties had definitely shifted to SNCC, no question about it. But there were some people in there who were NAACP types in 1964. Strong NAACP supporters. But they were in a minority. That this was a SNCC delegation.

Sinsheimer:

How much of a minority?

McLemore:

Twenty percent, twenty-five percent of it was NAACP perhaps. Of the other seventy-five percent would have been if you had to go through the litmus test, they would have been SNCC all the way. Okay, so understand that. I mean I think it is important. Because this was in theory a COFO operation: SNCC, CORE, SCLC, NAACP, the Masonics down the street. Hey it was basically a SNCC delegation. So many of the delegates were unlettered, had not gone to Rust College like I had. Some of them understood politics much better than I did, but we were influenced by Bob (Moses), were influenced by Donna, Bob's first wife. People like that. We were influenced by those hardened, seasoned, veteran SNCC field secretaries, Stokley Carmichael. We were influenced by those people.

So Martin Luther King was in that sense a fly by night person, you see because he had not spent a lot of time in Mississippi. He did not know the members of that delegation, he did not know the delegates personally as Bob did or as Aaron Henry did. Aaron Henry of course was the chair of the delegation. He was elected chair
McLemore (cont.): because we elected him chair. We could have elected Mickey Mouse chair. But it so happened it was Aaron Henry, because we had the votes. Henry had the visibility, who invoked a name recognition on the NAACP board I think back then, the national board then. President of the state branch (NAACP), still is as you well know.

So we elected him because of that. So Martin Luther King was at that time a national political figure, I mean he was the biggest name in the world. So it was natural then that King would be a part of a decision-making cadre, but of course, King was there in part because of labor. You know Walter Ruether and the UAW basically footed the bill for Martin Luther King. I mean a lot of his money came through Ruether, therefore his decisions on occasion I am sure were tainted by the Ruether influence. Which is natural, I am not belittling that, I am not playing it down, but I am just pointing out that, you know, when we put this thing in context here is Martin Luther King the great civil rights leader, great humanitarian, great human being, but who was being financed by labor and who is is base a trained theologian and a Baptist preacher. And a damn good one. Who didn't quite understand politics nearly as well as he understood the ministry and the gospel, listening to the political types who were saying these people should accept a compromise. Because the compromise is one of the greatest that is going to happen to them and one of the greatest things to ever happen in this country.

I mean how can you expect as a guy at the Boston Globe now who was with the Clarkdale Register then said, "How could this rag tag group of Mississippians go up there and expect to change the rules of the national convention overnight. It was incredible in one sense, that you have this motley group of poor Mississippians with a few token whites in there saying that we want to be the legitimate Democratic Party of Mississippi. Just think. And in some quarters before that you know people were laughing. Can't be serious. I went to some of the state conventions across the country (where) they said, "Do you really think I am going to challenge you. Come on you can't be serious?"

So I am saying is that to us it was a serious venture and it is very well that we didn't know as much about politics then as we know now, because we would have never gone. Some of us would never have gone. Oh God, this is ludicrous.

Sinsheimer: Right.
McLemore: So given the context, given Martin Luther King's training, given his background, given his political allies. Until he, he couldn't conceive either that these people ought to be a legitimate delegation, because on other hand they have said to you for years that we are going to change these rules, and if they don't ship up and shape up down there in Mississippi, you will be the legitimate delegation. So they would promise you all these great things, they are going to seat you as honored guests on the floor of the convention, give two of your comrades at-large status, and tell them that they can sit in the Michigan delegation. I mean what more do you want?

And you have people looking at politics per usual, because you are talking about elected leadership. I remember being in a room where Martin Luther King was there and late Congressman Dawson from Chicago, puffing on his cigar, talking about growing up in south Georgia and how far he had come through the Democratic Party, and I have been in politics all my life and you all have been in politics a few months and you have done all these fantastic things. And you don't wish to accept the compromise. What is wrong with you folk, you must be crazy." Bayard Rustin, a veteran of many political wars, saying, "Hey what you all have done is incredible. Why don't you enjoy this, why don't you accept this." So King was really toting the party line. He was carrying the party line. That is what he was doing.

And I am not sure that even Martin Luther King understood all of the ramifications of it. I am sure that he did not. Because of his training, because of his background. I remember riding from one hotel to the other with Ralph Abernathy and Martin Luther King and some other people I can't remember now. It was my first close up encounter with King and I was really impressed. Because I am going to the meeting of the big folk and I am a member of the delegation, I am vice-chairman of the FDP, and I was there in that capacity listening to all the arguments to and fro. And was impressed with the people I saw. On the other hand I was unimpressed because they were asking us to compromise. And to me, just from my own personal framework, I thought we had worked too hard to compromise.

But then it showed you that is was a SNCC delegation, even people who didn't know who never thought about it-- when Bob and Sherrod and Frank (Smith) and Donna Moses would go from bench to bench, and Cleve Sellers telling people, "Don't accept the compromise, don't accept the compromise."

We were in this church in Atlantic City, Reverend Neal's church. And this is where we had the big meeting of the delegation. Big meeting of all the support staff people. That means SNCC field secretaries, a few CORE people. All of the big heavy hitters on the stage. I remember for the first time I saw Coretta Scott King on stage, Martin Luther King, James Forman, everybody making speeches to and fro, most of them making speeches in favor of the compromise. And the SNCC people going from pew to pew saying, "Don't accept the compromise." So
before Martin Luther King could make his eloquent remarks, I mean our minds had been made up for us. The ones who felt as if, you know, maybe we should accept the compromise. Because they had said, "Don't accept the compromise." And seventy-five percent of the people said no. Joyce Ladner wrote an article about the cosmopolitans and the locals and the ruralists and talking about the differentiation in the delegation and stuff. But the point was that these people basically adhered to Bob Moses and the SNCC folk and the CORE people up there in the Fourth District, up there in Canton, said, "Now we are not going to accept the compromise." So there was really nothing that Martin Luther King could say because he had not been on the scene on a full-time basis, he did not know the delegation, he did not know the SNCC people, there was disdain for King on the part of some SNCC people anyway, because so many of them were doing the work in Alabama and Georgia and King was getting the credit for it. SCLC was getting the credit, primarily King.

So you had that working too. It was not just-- it was the compromise of course, but it was also the folk coming out in favor of the compromise."I mean we don't have no great respect now for Bayard Rustin. We don't have no great respect now for James Forman, Martin Luther King, because we are what Howard Zinn called the battle-scarred youngsters. We have been in the trenches in Mississippi, and Georgia, Alabama, Arkansas, and Louisiana. We have been on the firing line. We have been getting our asses beat, you know. And these people have been in front of the TV lights, the New York Times, you see." So there was that antagonism there. Some people may not admit it, maybe most of them would admit it now, but that was a part of it too. So it was King the person too that people reacted against, you see. Because he had not the kind of homework that we had done. But he was walking in and the TV cameras were following him to the bathroom. No TV cameras followed anybody else, you know. Fannie Lou Hamer had gained some notoriety then, but basically the Ivanhoe Donaldson's of the world, and the Stokley Carmichael's of the world, you know, nobody followed them. So there was that resentment.

And I am sure that King understood some of that. You know because they had begun-- it had started earlier-- referring to King as "De Lawd," L-A-W-D, as you well have read. But that was a part of it. But I think at bottom Martin Luther King really did not understand the nature of what was going on. And even if he did I think there were just the financial ties that had an impact too. That I am not saying that he would have done differently if he had not had the money, but you never know. I am just saying that is out there for the
McLemore (cont.): public record. And it is something that one at least has to consider.

Sinsheimer: Do you think the outcome would have been different had the offer been the delegation pick the two members? Do you think that .... I mean that seems ... ?

McLemore: Yeah. Well, you know it would have been-- I am not thoroughly convinced how differently it would have been, but I am thoroughly convinced that there would have been more discussion, serious discussion of the compromise if we would have selected the two persons. And the two from the selection process, they just did a bad job of selecting Aaron Henry who again was not liked by the SNCC staff people, not liked a whole lot by Fannie Lou Hamer because he kept pushing the compromise and she really didn't like him then. And a lot of folk listened to Fannie Lou Hamer. And Ed King was white. And I don't think there was any resentment against Ed, but if they were going to select a white person the delegation would have preferred electing Ed and not the committee saying we will accept Ed King and Aaron Henry.

So yeah, in one sense, But I think it is really hard, but I think in the long run, we probably would have not accepted the compromise though. But I know it would have been much, much more acceptable if the delegation had selected the two at-large delegates. But I think and the people on the other side now think, realize that that was a mistake.

Sinsheimer: So Henry was pushing for the compromise?

McLemore: Oh yeah. He was pushing for the compromise and although it becomes sort of murky, because at times, you know, he jumped from one side to the other. Yeah, he was pushing for a compromise. The NAACP people were pushing for the compromise, the labor people were pushing for the compromise, because these people were the, you know, were the practicing politician types. I mean politics was so new to most of us and we didn't know that we weren't playing by the rules of the game. We figured because we gone and organized and worked and got shot at and beat, and all this kind of stuff, that we deserved to be seated, and recognized. And accorded all the honors, including the red carpet. But Aaron (Henry) was for it and tried to influence some people and turned off Fannie Lou Hamer, turned the SNCC people off. And that is just as an organizing aspect of it, I mean after that there was always bad blood between Aaron Henry and the rest of the SNCC people.

I mean that compromise was the dividing line for so many things that occurred. After that people stopped
McLemore (cont.) speaking. I mean it, you had a whole turn of events later on, SNCC becoming much more black power oriented, putting white people out of SNCC--go and organize white people. I mean that--great friendships that had been built up. It became just so personal. In one sense it was not a reflection on the whites in SNCC, but it was just a by-product of being so turned off by the establishment. People began to read so many things into what happened to the compromise. So I think on King's part, and in all due respect to King and his great memory, was that I don't really think he understood all the ramifications of it, of the compromise.

Because on the other hand if you read some of the things he said, you know, he started off with this great apology, great introduction on the great sacrifice that people in Mississippi had gone through. And how hard they had worked. And they deserved to be seated.

Sinsheimer: What do you think the best things to read ... I mean I have read a lot.

McLemore: Well, let's see there was the ... you have gone through the Nation and the New Republic of that era I am sure.

Sinsheimer: Right.

McLemore: There was the article in something like the Progressive Wing. You have read the thing that Thelwehl and Guyot wrote? Okay. Have you read the piece in something called the New Leader.

Sinsheimer: No.

McLemore: Okay, that is what I am thinking about now, it was divided into progressive delegation, the progressive and the conservatives. And talking about the delegation and talking about the Atlantic City Convention. It is in the New Leader so it must be around 1964-65, article in the New Leader. Okay, there was the article by Jack Minnis, you read it right?

Sinsheimer: I don't think so.

McLemore: M-I-N-N-I-S.

Sinsheimer: I know the name.

McLemore: Okay, Jack Minnis had a piece in that same journal Freedonways as I recall, talking about the PDP and the delegation and all that. Frank Smith had a little piece in something called the Liberator, that talked about the whole thing to. Those are some things that I found
McLemore (cont.): fairly cogent.
Sinsheimer: Okay. All right. You have been great.
McLemore: Very good. Very good.

End of interview.