MEMORANDUM

To: Tim West

Fm: Joe Sinsheimer

Re: Interviews with Claude Sitton and Bill Minor

Dt: November 9, 1998

Enclosed are two items:

An interview with Claude Sitton, a former reporter for the New York Times. Based in Atlanta, Sitton was responsible for covering many of the major civil rights stories in the early 1960’s including the events in Mississippi. In the interview, Sitton 1) discussed the “disappearance” of three civil rights workers during the 1964 Freedom Summer Project 2) the violence associated with SNCC’s voter registration activities in McComb, Mississippi 3) and the response of the U.S. Justice Department to major events in Mississippi.

Also enclosed is an interview with William Minor, who was the Jackson, Mississippi correspondent for the New Orleans Times Picayune during the early 1960’s. In the interview, Minor 1) talked about the difficulty of covering civil rights stories for a southern newspaper during that period 2) former U.S. Justice Department official John Doar’s role in Mississippi 3) the 1963 race for governor in Mississippi and 4) the role of the White Citizen Council organizations in Mississippi during the late 1950’s and early 1960’s.
Interview with Claude Sitton
Raleigh, North Carolina
January 22, 1985

Joe Sinsheimer: Well I had a friend of mine at the (New York) Times--my best friend from high school now is up there--go through your clip file, so I think I know kind of where you were that summer but why did you go to Oxford Ohio?

Claude Sitton: Oh you did. Well, you know, this was preparation for the big show in Mississippi. And you ought to go back in those clips, if you are interested, and I did a couple of situations on Jackson and on Mississippi in the late spring (of 1964). You know there was Jackson and Thompson's tank, the mayor of Jackson, you know, got this damn tank and boy the whole state was really getting revved up and it looked like war. Well, the troops were being trained in Oxford so naturally I went to Oxford.

Sinsheimer: Okay. And did you stay then the whole week?

Sitton: I think, as I recall, I was there about three days. Three or four days.

Sinsheimer: And you left with the first group (of volunteers)?

Sitton: No, no I left, came back to Atlanta, cleaned up some stuff in the Bureau, and then went on out to Jackson. Went out to Jackson on ... I can't recall now, Saturday I guess and was there Sunday when the first group arrived. Of course I say the first group arrived, actually they had sort of been drifting into the state, even from, some of them didn't go to Oxford.

Sinsheimer: Right.

Sitton: Some of them just came from other states in there. And they had been drifting in the whole weekend before. And of course some of the them, I believe (Mickey) Schwerner, I think Schwerner had been there for some weeks in Mississippi.

Sinsheimer: He had been there, yeah he had been there before....

Sitton: He had been working there.

Sinsheimer: Yeah he set up a community center in ... where would that be.

Sitton: In ... Meridian.
Sinsheimer: Meridian right. Well let's, let me back up back to the training sessions. In your mind who were the dominant figures in terms of SNCC? In terms of who was...? I guess what I am trying to differentiate is were the messages, the SNCC messages getting across to the kids and were some of the SNCC people better at it than others?

Sitton: I can't remember.

Sinsheimer: You can't remember.

Sitton: No it was too long ago.

Sinsheimer: Was your impression that the kids understood?

Sitton: No. I think there was a lot of idealism, but I don't think most of those kids had any idea what they were getting into, none what so ever. And there is, you know, they came from a different culture there was no way to tell them so that they could understand what it would be like.

Sinsheimer: You use the word "middle class stamp," I thought that was pretty good.

Sitton: Yeah.

Sinsheimer: From a different culture.

Sitton: Really yeah. Upper class, you know, many of them were from better schools in the East, from very affluent families, just couldn't tell them what it is like in rural Mississippi.

Sinsheimer: So you were in Jackson when you heard that Chaney, Schwerner and Goodman were missing?

Sitton: Right.

Sinsheimer: And then you drove to Philadelphia the next day when they were still missing.

Sitton: Right. Spent the night in Greenwood and then drove from Greenwood over to Philadelphia. Right. Ran into Cecil Price, talked to him and then went to the jail and talked to the wife of the jailor. I think the jailor was sick or something. She was running the jail as I recall. Talked to her, talked to some other people around there and then went to talk to the sheriff. What is the sheriff's name?
Sinsheimer: Rainey?

Sitton: Rainey, Lawrence Rainey yeah. And I guess I stayed there two weeks maybe. Finally after it looked like no progress was being made I left. Went back to Atlanta and then I came back to Mississippi and I was in Jackson working on a magazine story for the Times when the bodies were discovered, or rather when the informer led the FBI to the bodies up there in the dam outside of Philadelphia.

Sinsheimer: Then did you stay in the state after you finished those stories.

Sitton: For awhile I think, I don't remember.

Sinsheimer: I know you did a story on the McComb Freedom House being bombed. Do you remember that?

Sitton: Yeah.

Sinsheimer: Do you remember talking to Dennis Sweeney?

Sitton: No.

Sinsheimer: Well you know that story right?

Sitton: Yes. See I had been in McComb, I had been in McComb when was it ... '63, '62 or ... '63 when Moses and two or three other SNCC guys were working down there in that southwestern corner of Mississippi and that was a very, very interesting time. That was the time of the Freedom Rides. I happen to be there for the Freedom Rides. I heard this group from Southern Louisiana State were coming in from New Orleans, Baton Rouge, to McComb and so I drove from Jackson down to McComb and was sitting in the bus station when they arrived.

And a riot broke out. Things really got tight in McComb for the next, oh for the next week. It got so dangerous that merchants there in the city were calling and telling salesmen who were coming through don't drive into town, stop at the Holiday Inn on the outskirts of town I will come out and pick you up. It is just dangerous for a stranger, white or black, to come into this town.

Fentress who, he is now dead. He was with Time Magazine, he covered the White House for Time until back about four or five years ago. Fentress was there with me and Fentress and a Life photographer were walking up the street and two toughs just set upon them and knocked the photographer through a plate glass window and beat up Fentress.
But Fentress and I were there the first day when the Freedom Riders arrived, sitting in the cafe that served as the bus station drinking coffee. And the bus pulled up, and this big, tall, black basketball player came through the screen door there. And just as he walked inside this group of whites jumped up from a table and attacked him. And he jumped over the glass ticket booth where they sold bus tickets, and landed on the counter of the cafe and hop-scotched down the counter and then leaped from the end of the counter to a table, and then hop-scotched back up a series of tables and went through the screen door without even opening it. And there was, you know, just a flash riot like that.

And so after it was all over Fentress and I walked out and the FBI, the FBI agent had been sitting down the street in a car with several other FBI agents. They knew this was going to take place. So he came up and wanted a fill-in on just what had happened. So we filled him in. But the next morning the McComb Enterprise Journal reported that two FBI agents sat in the cafe drinking coffee while the riot took place around them. Fentress and I had on London Fog raincoats and hats and they thought we were FBI agents.

Right (laughter). That is great.

But while I was there I decided to, I knew that Bob Moses and these other fellows were running this voter registration drive over there in Amite County, Liberty (Mississippi). So I went over and talked to them and talked to some other people there. And I went down and met a fellow named E.W. Steptoe. Steptoe was a black farmer, owned a little piece of land, I think like seventy-five acres or so down there in the southern part of the county. And Steptoe-- see the county had a majority black population at the time, not a single black was registered-- and only Steptoe had really dared to try.

And Steptoe lived right across the road from a white legislator. Steptoe and a fellow named Herbert Lee and a couple of other Blacks were hauling Moses and the SNCC workers around the county at night to, they would go around and visit with people and try to encourage them to vote. And word got out and a campaign of terror was launched by some of the white farmers including this legislator (E.H. Hurst) whose name escapes my memory.

And so the legislator met Herbert Lee in front of the cotton gin downtown, downtown Liberty one day, and shot him dead right there. And I don't think there was even an inquest, nothing was done about it. The
legislator told everybody that Lee came after him with a tire iron. Anyway he shot and killed Lee. Well, this legislator (Hurst) as I said lived right across the road from Steptoe. In fact he and Steptoe had played together as boys, as young kids. And Steptoe was sort of leading the voter registration campaign along with Moses. And Steptoe was also President of the Amite County chapter of the NAACP. And there he was living right across the road from this murderer who killed Herbert Lee. That is the kind of irony that you would run into there. But I always had much more admiration and respect if you will, for people like Steptoe than I had for some of the big names in the civil rights movement. Steptoe and Medgar Evers who was shot and killed over there in his driveway in Jackson, there was real bravery, God. And I asked Steptoe, talking to him, I said, "Mr. Steptoe, why do you keep on? You may get killed." And he said, "Well," he said,"I thought about quitting but if I don't get my rights my life won't be worth living." And I thought the old man spoke the truth there. Mississippi, deep south Mississippi near a town called Liberty.

Sinsheimer: What did you think of Moses?

Sitton: Well I guess Moses in those days came as close to being a saint as any of us ever do.

Sinsheimer: Why?

Sitton: Well, you know, here is a person with obviously great intelligence, who could of, not only that he was a Black, he could have been very comfortable, lived in very comfortable circumstances in New York or Boston or what have you. And yet he had given up all of that, and here is was down in south Mississippi; his life in jeopardy every minute, every hour of the day; trying to get people who were poorly educated and probably had no great understanding of democracy, of what they might do even if they got the vote; trying to teach them a little bit about our way of government; and to try to persuade them to overcome their fears and go down to the Courthouse and attempt to register.

Sinsheimer: Did you ever go with them to the courthouse?

Sitton: No, not in Liberty. As I recall when I was there, you know, I was there three days, I don't think anyone tried to register in those three days. I do recall going down and talking to the-- it is part of this story as a matter of fact-- to the registrar in Tylertown, another county over there right next to Amite. And this registrar, one of the SNCC kids
Sitton (cont.): had walked in one day with, bringing a local fellow to register. And the registrar pulled out a .38 (caliber) pistol and hit him on the head with it. So I went in to ask the registrar, you know, why he was attacking people who came in to register to vote. And I got the usual business about these "outside agitators," and so forth. And we talked for awhile and he said, "Say where are you from anyway boy." And I said, "Well, I from Atlanta." And he said, "Atlanta, that is damn near north of the Mason-Dixon line." (laughter)

Sinsheimer: So then you were really covering the whole South for the Times?

Sitton: Yeah, that was my responsibility, the whole South. By 1964 I had some help, John Herbers was working with me then out of Atlanta and sometimes out of Memphis.

Sinsheimer: He would file stories as well?

Sitton: Yeah. Herbers was originally, was from Mississippi. He still works for the Times, works out of the Washington Bureau. And then right before I left Roy Reed came to work in the Atlanta Bureau.

Sinsheimer: Were you in Mississippi for the Freedom Election in 1963? The mock election?

Sitton: Yeah, but I am not sure. I am not sure.

Sinsheimer: That was when Bruce Payne ... do you remember that whole incident.

Sitton: Yeah, right.

Sinsheimer: He is over at Duke now.

Sitton: Oh is he ... oh sure I know Bruce. In fact Bruce's wife, or former wife, worked here for awhile.

Sinsheimer: Oh yeah? I am trying to pick out some of the other events that you might have covered.

Sitton: See what I would do, whatever the top story in the South was at that time I would be on it. I remember I was covering the New Orleans school desegregation story and one night I got a call from Charlie Sherrod. And he said that the SNCC headquarters, I think it was over in Tyrrel County at Sasser, had been fired into-- buckshot--- and he said one of our boys is wounded and
Sitton (cont): he is bleeding. And I said well have you called a doctor. He says no. I said well have you called the FBI. He said no. I said well by God what are you doing calling me in New Orleans before you call a doctor and the FBI. He said well you will do something about it. Well I did. I went, you know, I couldn't get a plane out that night, but the next morning I caught a plane out and went over to Albany and got a car and drove and did a story on this attack.

They were burning churches down, and everything.

Sinsheimer: Did you ever talk at length with John Doar?

Sitton: Oh sure I know John Doar well. I knew him well.

Sinsheimer: Moses said something to me that John Doar used to say that he felt like he was working with one hand tied behind his back. And I am curious to know what he really might have meant by that?

Sitton: Well, the problem there was the authority of the federal government in situations such as the desegregation of the University of Mississippi and some of the other things there was not very clear. Some subsequent court decisions cleared it up considerably, a great exercise of Presidential authority. But at that time they were trying to do as much as possible through state officials. And of course the state officials didn't want to do anything.

But you see the response under our system of government, government responsibility for maintenance of law and order lies with state and local authorities. And they had abdicated that responsibility when it came to anyone involving the civil rights movement. Of course the federal government used some of these old Reconstruction statutes and various other means to establish its authority and then it moved with little force. But this was a gradual process and people like Doar who had to be out in the field, and saw what was happening, and was sickened by what they saw, were frustrated and understandably so. By the restraints placed on them by the administration.

Now I would say that not until, not until the Birmingham riots did the Kennedy administration really wake up to the seriousness of the problem.

Sinsheimer: I was going to ask you ... the question is when you use the word "constraints," is whether we are talking political or legal. Right isn't that ...
Sitton: Well, Doar was, you know, employed by the Justice Department and he had to do what Burke Marshall told him to do. And even Burke Marshall, whom I know, both Marshall and Doar were dissatisfied with the FBI's performance. The FBI was very reluctant to become involved at all in the civil, in the enforcement of civil rights. That all changed with the Philadelphia slayings. Lyndon Johnson laid the law to J. Edgar Hoover, and J. Edgar Hoover was in Mississippi the next day. Flew in there on his government jet. Put Roy Moore in there, his special agent in charge. Brought a number of agents in from other states and really got active. Spent the money necessary to buy the information to led to the prosecution of the Philadelphia slayers.

But before that-- see FBI agents worked very closely, did then and still do, with local officials on auto theft, kidnapping, things of that kind, where the local authorities can be of great help to the FBI agents in performing their enforcement duties which are rather limited. So they didn't want to do anything that would anger the local authorities, so when it came to civil rights they came out. Time and again I knew of cases, of incidents, of planned demonstrations, events that would likely lead to violence in violation of federal as well as state law. And the FBI knew about them too. And the FBI just didn't turn up. They weren't there when it happened.

Sinsheimer: Do you know some of the names of some of the people that were working for Doar.

Sitton: I have forgotten. I would know them if you recall them but I can't off hand. I dealt with Doar, I dealt with ... . I will tell you who would be a good source for you ... He is the editorial page editor of the Philadelphia Inquirer now. Ed Guthman.

Sinsheimer: He worked for the Justice Department?

Sitton: He was Bobby Kennedy's spokesman when Kennedy was Attorney General. He was actually there at the desegregation of the University of Mississippi.

Sinsheimer: Were you in Atlantic City for the 1964 convention?

Sitton: Yes.

Sinsheimer: Okay. Were you following the Mississippi story or were you ... ?

Sitton: Ah more or less, but I was covering the entire South, all the Southern delegations. And someone was doing sort of
Sitton (cont.): color for the Times, and they really handled the demonstrations. And some of the stuff that took place within the Mississippi delegation between the Blacks who had come up there and the whites who were on the delegation and so forth, didn't really come out until after the Convention.

Sinsheimer: When you heard about the compromise, the two seats, did you expect that that had any hope of being accepted or?

Sitton: I don't recall.

Sinsheimer: So then wait, you left the Times in '64?

Sitton: I left the Times in '64, no I left the South in '64 and went to the New York office as national editor. I was national editor from '64-'68. See I was the editor with responsibility of coverage of the civil rights movement, and you know, everything else in, all the other domestic news at the Times. Now Washington, they are not in the field.

Sinsheimer: Did you talk to the Governor of Mississippi during that period?

Sitton: Which one?

Sinsheimer: Barnett?

Sitton: Barnett? Oh sure. I had known Barnett when I was covering the South.

Sinsheimer: Right. What did you think of him?

Sitton: Oh he was a real clown. Shrewd and foxy in some ways but a real clown. There is a great story about Barnett and it is true. They had a trustee prisoner named Cowboy Dale Morris-- have you heard this?

Sinsheimer: No.

Sitton: Up at the plantation-- Parchman (prison). And so Morris kept telling the warden that he had great stud horse back in Norman, Oklahoma. And they had quite a herd of horses there at Parchman. And Morris told the warden and he said, "Warden if you will just send me back there, I'll bring that stud back here to Parchman and boy he will do wonders to that herd of horses, those mares." So finally the warden gave in and put Cowboy Dale Morris and two guards on a train and sent them out to Oklahoma. They got out there and got the stud horse and put him on freight and sent him back. And Cowboy Dale Morris turned to the two guards and said look fellows I am a trustee, how about
Sitton (cont.): letting me spend one night with my mother here. And he said you guys catch the train and I will take a plane back tomorrow so I will beat you back to Parchman. So these two guards said well okay, after all a trustee prisoner, you know.

So they got on the train, and the next thing heard from Cowboy Dale Morris was when he was arrested out in Wyoming some months later with a woman, neither his mother or his wife. And all this came out in due course in Jackson and Barnett was holding a news conference and he was asked, "Well Governor, what do you mean, here you take a prisoner from the state penitentiary, take him across state lines and then turn him loose on society." And Barnett looked at the wall and scratched his head and he said, "Well, if you can't trust a trustee who can you trust?" (laughter)

Sinsheimer: That is great.

Sitton: You know when Barnett was campaigning out there for Governor, he got his plane and walked into the propeller. It slashed him from here to here.

Sinsheimer: Really?

Sitton: Yeah. He survived.

Sinsheimer: This is a more philosophical question but one of the things that interests me is the whole-- I mean the Summer Project was a media event, and that is clear it was designed for media purposes, most people would be willing to say that.

Sitton: That is what it would be called today.

Sinsheimer: Yeah. And I guess what some of the the SNCC people would say, Mississippi SNCC people would say, is that the problem was not only in terms of media but in terms of scale, that once you do something like that you get people's minds changed, that they can't go back to local organizing. In the sense that-- well Moses was saying, for example, that Forman the next summer wanted to do a bigger one. He wanted to do a bigger summer project. And the MFDP instead of going back and doing organizing, they did the Congressional Challenge. In the sense that it had changed people's minds. I mean it just-- you took people from rural Mississippi and they formed a political party, and they went to Atlantic City and they were on television, and you were interviewing them, and your friends were interviewing them. I mean does that make sense?
Sitton: Oh sure, it is like that old song very popular after World War I that said, "How are you going to keep them down on the farm after they have seen Gay Paris." Well, you know, you take these people off the farm in the Mississippi Delta and take them to Washington, and even take them to Jackson and put them on television, give them a taste of celebrity, it is pretty dull stuff and go back and sneak around a plantation at night trying to get someone who is ignorant and probably could care less to go down and register to vote. It is also dangerous. It is much more comfortable and much more fun to be demonstrating up in Washington or even Jackson.

Sinsheimer: Let me go back to your comment that you thought the Kennedy administration changed after the Birmingham bombings?

Sitton: The big riots, you know, when King was there; King wrote the letter from the Birmingham jail; Bull Conner, the police commissioner from Birmingham turned the police dogs and fire hoses on the demonstrators. Because bombings in Birmingham were old hat.

Sinsheimer: Right.

Sitton: I worked for International News Service in Birmingham in 1950 and bombings were, bombings were just sort of a normal state of affairs there at that time. Birmingham had a long, long history of racial trouble and much of it I have always felt went back to early 1900's when there was a big strike against Tennessee Coal and Iron Company which is now part of U.S. Steel. And the whites struck, and TCI brought in blacks as strike breakers. And the whites-- Birmingham then was, still is today a blue collar city-- and blue collar whites never got over that. I think that was always a factor in the antipathy of Birmingham whites for Birmingham blacks.

Sinsheimer: If that was the turning point then, how would you characterize the government's attitude before and after?

Sitton: Well, before it was not so much apathy as just an unawareness of what it was all about, after all the Kennedy administration was very busy with some other things. It started off by stubbing its toe with the Bay of Pigs invasion, then it became involved with the Cuban Missile crisis, and there were domestic problems that it was trying to do something about, other than civil rights. And I just don't think, see the Kennedys too were from Boston, the Northeast, really had no feel for the Southern situation, and what was actually taking place. But I think, Birmingham, you know, all of this was on television and for the first time the nation as a whole saw the brutality that accompanied some of the civil rights movement incidents. And that certainly had an
impression on Jack Kennedy and on Bobby Kennedy.

Do you think Bobby Kennedy knew what he was doing? Do you think he was competent as Attorney General?

I think he became competent as he went along. He was a rather impetuous type as everyone knows, had a tendency to shoot from the hip. But he learned, he learned. He was a fairly quick study. After all he had pretty good teachers in George Wallace and Ross Robert Barnett. (laughter)

That is right. I am still trying to think of Mississippi, I am more interested in that.

Did you talk to Mary King? Do you know who she is? Peter Boylin's wife.

Right. There are some interviews, she was interviewed in the late seventies over at Chapel Hill.

Right. Tell you who else you should talk to. Bill Minor. He is in the phone book, it is Wilson F. Minor. He was at that time the Jackson correspondent for the New Orleans Times Picayune. And he later ran his own paper. But for years he has been the one person in newspaper or television or in media circles in Mississippi whom you could trust on civil rights stories. He knows everybody there, he knows the background ....

He is in Jackson?

He is in Jackson, he lives there. Wonderful fellow.

The Jackson was it the Clarion ...


The Clarion Ledger did a whole section ....

Right. I got a copy of it.

So they dug some people up, so I am hoping that ....

I found out about Steptoe from one of the women that worked on that section because she is from McComb. And I suggested that she look into the Steptoe thing. And Steptoe's kids have all turned out very well. I think four of them went to college. One of them is a lawyer now, you know, he was really a great, great man. He died in I believe 1982 or maybe '83 from a stroke.
Sitton (cont.): You know that is another thing about this book that I was referring to (before the interview). King and SCLC had very little to do with Mississippi. Very little. That was NAACP show, with Medgar Evers until he was killed and then it was SNCC. SCLC never really was active over there.

Sinsheimer: Do you ever meet Amzie Moore?

Sitton: Yeah, but not, never talked to him much. What about Henry, are you going to talk to Aaron Henry.

Sinsheimer: Yeah, I am going to look him up.

Sitton: Hodding Carter?

Sinsheimer: Where is he?

Sitton: Washington. And Carter, Carter would be good on the COFO thing and the MFDP, and Atlantic City, that sort of thing.

Sinsheimer: Okay.

Sitton: Because he was involved in that as a participant, not as newspaper man.

Sinsheimer: I don't want to take up your whole day, you have given me some good things to think about here. Thanks.

Sitton: Okay. But just remember it was an integrated movement, for God's sake. (laughter)

Sinsheimer: Right.