

SNCC Digital Gateway: Our Voices

The Black Panther: Going Into Lowndes County

Clip 1 (audio) Jennifer Lawson “Why Lowndes County”

Jennifer Lawson: When we talk about organizing, we then as SNCC workers, we would meet, we would talk. And we would talk about what is it that we are doing and why. So we weren't sort of just saying oh, something has happened, let's go. Let's march, let's protest this. We don't like this, let's do something. We would spend time saying, what should our response be? What should we do? What is this circumstance? And what Courtland pointed out, our goal became, we kept thinking about what can we do? Here's what we have. These are our limits. What can we do? And we looked and one of the things, that in the Black Belt, what is called the Black Belt of Alabama - it was called the Black Belt for a couple of reasons. One is the soil was literally so rich and everything that it was this black soil and it was a great place for growing cotton. So that was one reason. But the other reason that it was called the “Black Belt” was because these counties, these areas in central Alabama had majority Black populations. They had majority Black populations because that's where a lot of people had been enslaved to work on those plantations and cotton farms. And so you had a large Black population there. In a place like Lowndes County, 80 percent of the population was African American. 80 percent of the population. But because of the kind of intimidation from the days of Reconstruction, that the whites there, who were the controlling group, had been so violent and so oppressive that they then there was only one person registered to vote. And he had registered in Birmingham, not in Lowndes County. And that they had literacy tests. They had all of these kinds of ways in which they would intimidate people even further about their desire to vote. We thought that it was important to take advantage of the Voting Rights Act; register people to vote. But that voting in itself was not the end. It wasn't that we sort've said, let's register, we'll have a lot of people. Today there is only one person but many years from now there'll be many people registered to vote. It wasn't registration in itself that was the goal. And as Courtland was pointing out, that what we were trying to do was change the relationship of power. Change the notion of who's in charge here. Who controls the budget. Who controls the county assets. Who is the sheriff. If the sheriff is intimidating people; beating people. Who is the sheriff? Is it possible that if the Black community is 80 percent of the population that that can change? So a Black person from this county, a local person can become the sheriff. So that was what we were setting out to do. And Stokely Carmichael, Courtland, all of us then were working towards that.

Clip 2 (audio) Courtland Cox “We were prepared to be there for the long haul”

Courtland Cox: I think the most important thing was we were prepared to stay in that community, live in those circumstances. We were there day and night. And I think people watched that and there was a sense, I'm getting back to the term freedom riders, there was a sense from a lot of people in the South - not as much later on - but in the early days, that even though we were brutalized, the Freedom Rides and the sit-ins and so forth, we kept coming back. We were prepared to be there for the long haul. And we were not going to be beaten back by the use of force. I think that probably was attractive to a certain group of people. I would say the Amzie Moore's and the Jackson's and Hulett's. I would say a Black middle class who wanted to make these kinds of changes. So these were the first people to invest in us. The Pettigrews. They were going to say, alright if they are prepared to do these things, we are prepared to be with them. Steptoe. Hartman Turnbow and so forth. So that whole group of Black people. I think

then the teachers and the professionals who had to interact with the white community, they were not going to be visible with you. They were going to be in the shadows. But they'll be you know. I just think then you had a division within the Black community where a number of people were going to be strong with you and if you didn't do anything crazy and if you were prepared to look them in the eye and deal with their dignity and eat what they're eating, to be there on an ongoing basis; they were prepared to take a chance because the situations they were involved in they wanted to change. I just think that the most important thing was that for us was that we were prepared to be there. I mean, day in and day out and be with them. So I'm not sure, at the end of the day, you don't really know how the entire community felt. But you could look at some of the stratas of people who were prepared to work with you and deal with you. And I would say particularly the Black middle class in the rural areas, who generally owned some land or had some strength. I think they were prepared to make the change.

Clip 3 (audio) Jennifer Lawson "The Freedom House"

Jennifer Lawson: It's for - the freedom house was - if you were going along Route 80 going east, then the Freedom House would be a left turn in my view and that you would go down this left turn and not a terribly long distance and there was the Jackson's house and there was the shack. And it was a true shack and it would rain inside. And at night we would sleep in our sleeping bags. We had our sleeping bags. And there would be this sort of, when it started raining, there would be this scuttle to kind of rearrange yourself away from the leaks, the many leaks where there were holes in the roof. And you do this rearranging and that we stayed there. And then in the corner - there was the front door - and in the right hand corner, that was the office so to speak. And the office had the all important telephone connection to the WATS line and stuff for the SNCC office. And also a mimeograph machine. Some kind of duplication machine. But that was like communication central in my view in that little corner of it.

Clip 4 (audio) Courtland Cox & Jennifer Lawson "Mr. Jackson"

Courtland Cox: He was a farmer. He owned land. And I would say a lot of them owned land. And so my sense was that he was a person who was prepared to fight. He was a person that - he was not going to be intimidated. He was going to be generous in terms of his time and energy and whatever resources he had. The house we described that had roof with a hole in it, but it was a place to stay. We had to go outside to get water or to go to the toilet, but it was a place to stay. We had one butane gas heater in the whole house, but it was a place to stay. And it was, for him, a big deal. And for us it was a big deal. So I just think that when I think of Mr. Jackson, I just think of strength. I just think of the ability of a person to put skin in the game. To be able to not just say, you over there. It's we; we are going to make this fight. And I think Johnny was involved a lot. Probably of all the sons, Johnny was the most involved. But I think his whole family, as Jennifer spoke earlier of, his whole family was involved at one level or another.

Jennifer Lawson: And I think of the whole family being sort of supportive and being almost like an extension in a sense. I think that it was easy enough that if you needed to ask something or needed information or needed something that you could just go over to their house. And they felt comfortable coming over and telling you or giving you information or interacting with you. Johnny was definitely one of the glue in many ways, along with Mr. Jackson.

Clip 5 (audio) Courtland Cox & Jennifer Lawson “There was a lot of chicken”

Courtland Cox: As we know, people didn’t have a lot but we were able, as I said, go to their house, get a meal. And also on Sundays at church, we were able to load up. You know, get the cake and the pie and the potato salad.

Jennifer Lawson And a lot of chicken.

Courtland Cox: A lot of fried chicken. But it was important because they - I mean Fanon talks about like being a fish in the sea, that you are able to swim in an environment that is supportive. And those kinds of things showed how they were supportive. Especially when you didn’t get the \$9.64.

Charlie Cobb: Which was most of the time.

Courtland Cox: At the end of the day, basically, the equity participation of the community was through the food and the housing and so forth. They were providing, they were putting up what they had into the discussion. And I think that while we can’t quantify it in a lot of ways - I could when I was eating. But I mean their putting their share into the discussion was really important for our survival.

Jennifer Lawson: Oh absolutely. And I remember vividly, and it was very touching to me, that when I would go - sometimes when I was working out, like when I was in Wilcox and I was working canvassing in some other part of the county and coming back to Gee’s Bend. Or if I had gone to Lowndes County to a meeting and coming back to Gee’s Bend, then I would come and they would have a plate of food that they would’ve prepared and kept for me. So that I would have food. And this was the Pettaway family, one of the family’s nearby. And they also had a gas pump and they would give me gas; they would give me free gas to gas up the car and fuel the car. So those kinds of things were absolutely invaluable as a way of them showing their support of us. And I definitely felt, I felt supported by the community in both places.

Clip 6 (audio) Courtland Cox “Bob Mants”

Courtland Cox: I think of all of us, Mants was the one who considered himself closest to the people who lived in Lowndes. And I think even before - I think for a number of us, we saw life outside of Lowndes and after Lowndes. I think Bob from the early days saw himself as being in Lowndes, being part of the community there and being part of what was going to happen in the future. So his perspective always was to view what we were doing from that kind of vantage point. Bob, if he would get into arguments with us, particularly Stokely, who was a lot of flair. Stokely was well loved particularly by the women in Lowndes. But well loved. Bob always presented the community view. That is this is who he is.