

SNCC Digital Gateway: Our Voices

Strong People: Strong People

Clip 1 (audio) Annette Jones White “Mrs. Dora White”

Annette Jones White: So, I wanted to talk first about Mrs. Dora White. She was in her sixties during the time of the movement. She marched, she went to jail several times and she was not in very good health. Then, when the SNCC students started coming down from all of the different colleges, she volunteered to feed fourteen at her house and so I volunteered to help her, but she did the bulk of the cooking. We would get there in the morning before going out to canvas and she would have breakfast ready and she was a motherly-type lady; she was concerned that you eat before you go out. So she was just sort of hovering over the students and she cared a lot about them. Then—well I’m abbreviating, she got—became ill and she could do less and less. Then she insisted that her daughter go to jail in her place, so her daughter had to march and go to jail whenever her mother told her to because her mother couldn’t go. So then she became—she had high blood pressure and she would be just sweating in the kitchen and she was just anxious and see she had cooked from New England all the way down, she was a master cook and she had cooked for different families, she knew kosher food, she knew all of that. She didn’t want to give it up, but she had to so I took them over and I’m sure that everybody regretted the change in meals and all, but I just—she knew all of these sauces and she was making gourmet food.

Clip 2 (audio) Annette Jones White “Ms. Corinne Watkins, the Avon Lady”

Annette Jones White: Oh her name was Corinne Watkins, but they called her Corinne. She sold Avon and she would give some of the SNCC students the samples, you know, ‘cause they couldn’t afford makeup and all of that. She was—let’s see if I can do it, no I can’t do it—this is the way she walked; she had swagger and she would just strut and when she marched, she strutted. I was in marches with her, but I never was arrested during those times, but when—like somebody described her yesterday as being ample, she would take everything to jail, her toothbrushes, toothpaste, whatever you needed she had it in her bosom. See she lived on my street too. We could stand on my porch and say “hey Ms. Corinne.” She was an exuberant person... Anyway, she—Chief Pritchett knew her on sight and as soon as the marches were—you were told stop, he would say come on Corinne. You know he would single her out first, she’d be arrested first, but she believed in the movement: she loved Sherrod. We were like her children because she was older than all of us and she would go to jail at the drop of a hat. I think she—I don’t know how many times, but it was more than ten times. Someone had figured up how many hours and all that she spent in jail and she was just— every mass meeting, she was at—and she could sing too. She would sing, lead a hymn, or something like that.

Clip 3 (audio) Janie Culbreth Rambeau “Ms. Corinne”

Janie Culbreth Rambeau: Ms. Corrine, as Annette said, was very—we called her a soldier-type woman who was very bold, even back in the day when black women were not supposed to be bold. She could speak her opinion, she would talk to the children like they were hers, talked to her own folk like she owned them, white folk like she meant business and she did. Chief Pritchett and others who were in the movement knew not to mess with Corinne because Corinne would tear you off. She went to jail several times, I don’t remember how many times—

Clip 4 (audio) Janie Culbreth Rambeau “Ms. Corrine: A Blessed Lady”

Janie Culbreth Rambeau: One lady that stayed inside of mind was Ms. Corinne Watkins, who sold Avon products and she was so smart. She went to jail, she was a blessed lady as my son always said, she was blessed and so she could hide her toiletries and everything in her bosom. She could successfully hide stuff in her bosom and she was blessed and she was ready every time she went to jail. All her cosmetics, face powder, everything you need. Of course, the rest of us didn't have that. We were there without anything, you know, just wet, cold and everything

Faith Holsaert: More than ten.

Janie Culbreth Rambeau: —but I remember her in jail and the food was just so ridiculous, so terrible, it would make a hog puke, but she would tell us—say you need to eat: you don't know how long you're going to be here, you're in all kind of condition, you're going to get in your—what's going to happen to you before this is over, so you need some food in your stomachs. She would eat—she was one of the few people that I know who actually gained weight in Dougherty County Jail. She gained weight, she did. She would go to jail and she would come out talking about how much weight she gained — “I think I gained about three or four more pounds since I've been in here, I need to go back.” We were shoving those plates over to the side and not doing this, but she did, she saw about us and she was so courageous, you couldn't be scared around her. You gained courage from whatever she said because she serious about—oh by the way, church was a very important — I want to say this because a lot of people don't realize that church was a very important part of the Civil Rights Movement. She was a member of this church out in Lee County called Jordan Grove Baptist Church.

Clip 5 (audio) Shirley Sherrod “Ms. Josie Miller”

Shirley Sherrod: I can speak more to people out in the counties and there was some very strong individuals out there like Josie Miller. Josie Miller was actually my aunt and we have—we talk about Bloody Sunday in Selma, but we had Bloody Saturday in Baker County - first march. White people came out of the little stores there in Newton with axe handles and chains and everything and they were beating Sherrod so—just beat him bloody. My aunt, Aunt Josie, threw herself over him and was screaming for them to stop before they killed him. Now she was only about 5'2", 5'4", but she was a strong woman. She participated in the movement—they would threaten my uncle who would cave in and he was trying to force her to stop working in the movement, but she would not stop against all odds. She would speak up to the Gator, she'd be all in his face. He'd come out during an election, trying to get her to vote, but she let him know right up front I'm not voting for you. I remember—you know how those insurance men would come around. One of them came to her house and he's calling her Josie and she told him she was Mrs. Miller. He finally said he couldn't call her Mrs. Miller. She told him get out of her house and she called the main office. The next time he came it was every other word, Mrs. Miller.

Clip 6 (audio) Shirley Sherrod “Dorothy Young”

Shirley Sherrod: There's the Young family, Ida May Young in Worth County and Dorothy—Dorothy's story really should be told more widely. Dorothy was about twelve or thirteen—they were a really strong family: they were in Reverend Wells' Church and really strong in the movement and didn't take anything off anyone, the children didn't. So they integrated the schools and on the bus one morning, the—some white kids started messing with them and Dorothy's not going to step back for anyone, so I can't remember whether she ended up hitting one of them or just cursed or whatever, but that day when school was over, the bus didn't stop at their home. Mrs. Young didn't know where her children were, there were about four of them. She had to get CB to find out where the children were—

Charlie Cobb: This is CB King?

Shirley Sherrod: CB King. They found that those children had been taken to the Youth Development Center in Albany and we finally got the three youngest ones released—

Charlie Cobb: This is like a reform school or something like that?

Shirley Sherrod: Yeah. But we fought for a whole year to get Dorothy released. Dorothy was sent from the YDC in Albany to Sandersville, Georgia, so we were marching in Worth County and in Sandersville. We fought a whole year to get Dorothy released from the system and finally, after a year, she was. Now she ended up—they were able to get her in the Malcolm X School here in North Carolina. She went there, but it affected Dorothy: she died very young. Dorothy was—I don't think Dorothy was in her forties when she died. But that's the story that really should be told more. See y'all probably didn't even know about her, but we fought for Dorothy for years and Mrs. Young—the whole family, they were a strong movement family. Like I said, they came out of Reverend Wells' Church.

Clip 7 (audio) Shirley Sherrod “Loyola Williams”

Shirley Sherrod: You have Loyola Williams, you'll never hear of this name. She's just about a hundred years old now. She was either ninety-nine in September or—I know she didn't reach the one hundred yet. But she lives—she had nine children, worked on the farm—in fact she lived on our place in Baker County. We worked the fields together, picking cotton and doing other work on the farm and the movement started, she and Josie Miller were the two people—the two adults who were always in jail with everyone else there in Baker County. She was threatened, they told her they would cut off her - she can tell this story - her welfare benefits, she told them to take them. To this day, Loyola Williams does not miss a meeting. See when I tell you Baker County is organized, their—we call it the community council. My sister and I helped to organize this some years ago. They have people who have to attend city commission meetings, county commission meetings, board of registrars meetings, board of education meetings, they come back on Monday night and report everything that's going on and then help develop strategy to deal with it. She is there for every meeting. She's on a walker now, but she has to be picked and she has to attend those Monday night meetings; she will not miss. So this is someone who worked in the sixties and is still working today. Really, really strong woman, memory like you wouldn't believe.

Clip 8 (audio) Janie Culbreth Rambeau “Ms. Alice Porter”

Janie Culbreth Rambeau: I wanted to mention a lady, Miss Alice Porter who was like most people her age – she was an elderly woman – but she was ready to go to jail. She said she wasn't going to sit back and let these white folk do whatever they want to do. She said I want to make things better for my children and for my people and so she got ready to go to jail, she left her smaller children, her daughter—her youngest daughter was named Faith. She left Faith and Christine and her other children with her oldest son and he had to take care of them while she went to jail. She told them she was going to jail, so she marched that day and went to jail and she didn't have to worry because the children were taken care of. We need to remember that was a part of the South Georgia culture too, that you're expected – the older brothers and sisters – to care whenever mommy and daddy left.

Clip 9 (audio) Shirley Sherrod “Ms. Beatrice Miller”

Shirley Sherrod: One year—see Calhoun’s population, even today, is majority black and the numbers were like probably close to eighty percent and we decided that it was time—we had enough people registered to vote to actually get someone elected to office. So that year, we had thirteen people running for office in Calhoun County. We should have won thirteen seats, but John White jumps in there once we’ve done all of this organizing and brings—was it Dr. King’s son or someone in? You know, just for the publicity.

Charlie Cobb: Who was John White?

Shirley Sherrod: He was a state representative for a while in Albany. He was like the first one, he had been on the TV telling the news for a while and was that kind of person who didn’t do the groundwork but would come in to bring the press and then you go. It really messed with what we had going on there. So at the end of the election, only one person was elected out of the thirteen and that was Beatrice Miller. She was the coroner and she didn’t take—now she could work in these white folks’ homes, but she didn’t take anything off anyone. So she became the coroner and would curse like you wouldn’t believe, say whatever she wanted to say. At one point I guess she forgot to pay her water bill and they charged—they turned it off, that’s what happened. She came in ready to wash and no water, she went out there and took something and knocked whatever that lock was on there and turned it back on. So now the city’s got to deal with this, so they brought her downtown because she was an elected official and she’s cursing and all she just wanted – now this is Calhoun County – she wanted to make sure it wasn’t a felony; a misdemeanor she could deal with because she could stay in office. So once they—once it was a misdemeanor, she was okay to deal with it, but she told the judge anybody bring their ass out there trying to turn it back on, I’m feeling them full of buckshot. People like that – I mean they could—she served until she was ready give the office up, it was amazing that you’d have people like that who could get by with just about anything and still serve: it’s just amazing. But she—that’s the kind of person she was right up until she died.

Clip 10 (audio) Annette Jones White “Reverend Samuel Wells”

Annette Jones White: I met Reverend Wells when I was in high school. I was at my friend’s home – he lived in East Albany and she did too. We’d walk back and forth once I was invited to her house for dinner, back and forth like that. So he had just happened to be there and she introduced me to him and it was—usually when a teenager was introduced to an older person, you said “how do you do” and that was it. But he had all of these questions for me: are you a member of a church?...Anyway, so that’s when I first met him and so he thoroughly grilled me and he found out what I was studying in school, what was my favorite subject - I mean he had all of these questions. What did I want to be when I grew up and all. It was just one incident, I never saw him again until—well this was high school so I was, you know—when I saw him again I had been through college and had been put out and all of that. He was a very good organizer, take-charge person. He had answers. He could hear a problem and then he would kind of throw his head up a little bit and in a few minutes he would have a solution. He would always have a solution – they didn’t always work, but—I mean they weren’t bad solutions, you’d have to try them.

Clip 11 (audio) Shirley Sherrod “Rev. Samuel Wells”

Shirley Sherrod: In canvassing out in the counties, Reverend Wells would—the thing that really scared me ‘cause we canvassed a lot, he would be out of the car before it stopped. He didn’t have one—I mean

he would just be in that much of a hurry to get out and do the work. It just always scared me riding with him because he would be getting out of that car before it even stopped.

Clip 12 (audio) Faith Holsaert “Monroe Gaines family”

Faith Holsaert: The other little thing about Reverend Wells is that sometimes when I was going out to mass meetings in the county, he’d be the driver and I’d be in the car with him and two or three or four or whatever of the younger generation than Janie and Annette – Joanne Christian, etc., etc., - and he would just let those girls boss him around. They’d fiddle with his radio to get the songs that they liked and they’d just tease him unmercifully and he just—I—it seemed light. But what I really wanted to say is I think, for lots of reasons, one of the things that people, or a group of people that don’t always get focused on are the young women. So I wanted to mention—Shirley and others have mentioned Monroe Gaines. There were four Gaines girls: Shirley, Patricia, Marian and Peaches, who has another name apparently.

Shirley Sherrod: Norma.

Faith Holsaert: Norma. Then their cousins – They sang at mass meetings, then went out to the counties and bossed around Reverend Wells, they were just a very, very important part of the movement. I suspect that there were similar junior high school and high school aged girls in all the movements in the South who just were there canvassing, etc., etc.

Clip 13 (audio) Shirley Sherrod “C.B. King”

Shirley Sherrod: C.B., in the courtroom, there was no one like him. He could use language that the judge couldn’t understand and especially the people who were testifying. They would often have to ask the judge to make him ask them in a way that they could understand what he was asking. I will never forget, there was a case over in Ben Hill County where Mary Young was. Mary Young Cummings was becoming active as a—coming home from Howard University as a student and started going to the library with her nieces and all to try to integrate the library. She got charged with something that was—that carried a long sentence. These white people, two white people had brought charges against her and CB had to represent her. He was the only lawyer we had. He was all we had. If you were working in the movement and you got—you needed a lawyer, it had to be C.B. coming. So he was going all over Southwest Georgia representing people as they fought the system. So you had these two white people in court, they brought these charges and Mary Cummings ended up in prison for a long time. Somehow CB had guessed that this man didn’t know how to read and he—so he started asking him questions, I think he asked him or he showed him something to read, I can’t remember. But C.B. walked all the way to the back of the courtroom and asked him to read and the man was sitting there, you know, and he had to admit that he didn’t know how to read. Then the lady who had brought the charges left the courtroom, she didn’t want to have to go through what she would have to go through dealing with C.B. He was excellent in the courtroom.