

SNCC Digital Gateway: Our Voices

Lowndes County: Mass Meetings

2.1 Lillian McGill: Getting Involved in the Movement

Lillian McGill: I'm Lillian S. McGill. Born in White Hall, Alabama. Do y'all want me to tell you--February 12, 1933. Whatever else do you want to know? Is that enough?

Jennifer Lawson: So you were born in White Hall. Born here in Lowndes County.

McGill: In Lowndes County, Alabama.

Lawson: And how did you happen to become involved in the Civil Rights Movement.

McGill: From its implementation, there was no registered voters, and when they got it started, to try and go. We were told we wouldn't be, so we got together. That was the group that called the meeting together. And we got together on a Tuesday night, March 17, 1965 at Little Frank Haralson's store. And it was 27 local people. Three ministers: one was from Binghamton, New York; one was from rural Colorado; and one was from Rockville, Maryland. And there were two SNCC people. I don't know their names. It was in the book. Never saw them again after that night. They were there, but they just introduced themselves. They did nothing. And we started to determine what we would do, whether we would try to have a meeting, and if so, where we would; how many people; what we would name it. Then we elected temporary offices. I became the secretary, so I wrote the first minutes for that program. And that was on a Tuesday night. So Sunday night, they decided they would meet somewhere Sunday night. So somewhere, they got together and got Mount Gilead Baptist Church organization to let us have a meeting there, and we had that meeting. The first mass meeting was held at Mt Gilead Baptist Church, Trickam, Alabama--now it's a part of White Hall.

Lawson: And what led you--what is it in your background that would lead you to be one of the first people at the first mass meeting in Lowndes County?

McGill: First place, I was unhappy because we could not vote and there had been no voting. And people who had attempted to vote had either been run out of town, fired from their jobs. Teachers were thrown out of the city for that. And other people just didn't have a whole lot of background. First place, I had gone to business college, and I had a good background in civics and American history. And I had just come out and decided that I wanted to--but when I got home from work, my dad told me they were gonna have a meeting that night, and he and his wife was going, and I was on board. So when I got there, I was asked to come up and do the minutes, and I did.

2.2 Willie Ruth Myrick: I Just Wanted to Be Involved

Willie Ruth Myrick: Well, I was in high school during that time, during the '60s and when they, the march was getting started to come through to Montgomery and bunch of us students who, we wanted to participate in the march but of course we had to get permission from our parents to do so, and I lived with my grandparents and my grandfather drove the school bus and that was a "no no" to get involved in that "mess." As he would say, people back then would say, and I didn't have a choice but to stay in school but I sure wanted to be a part of it. And then when they started the mass meetings on Sunday evenings here in Lowndes County, my uncle, which was John Hulett, he was the leader for the county, for the Black people, and when he, when it started, I asked him if I could go. And he said yes, so I asked my grandmother and she told me "Yes, you can go," my grandfather said, "Oh no." I said, "Daddy, I'm goin." He didn't try to stop me so, on Sunday evening I looked forward to going to that mass meeting. Other young ladies my age, they was trying to do other things, but I was trying to get to the mass meeting. Because, even as a young child growing up I used to read all of the Negro Slavery books what Harriett Tubman and all of those people had published and it was just something about it that I just felt like I needed to help in some way to make things better – not that I was able to do a whole lot, but I just wanted to be involved. In whatever way I could

2.3 Arthur Nelson: Pride in Our Life

Arthur Nelson: I started out with my parents we had about five acres of cotton that we had to pick every year and you know it got to the point where as when the civil rights movement came through and we start having these mass meetings my mom would drag us to those mass meetings And upon attending those mass meetings it put a lot of pride into our life as we black and being Black Americans and from that we kind of like you know started thinking a little bit different. [...] My mom was one who was adamant about making us go. And let me tell you we went, but there were a lot of family members that lived on that plantation that did not go. I don't know whether they were afraid, but my momma was always adamant about us because we would be there and we would attend those mass meetings. And of course I remember once when after we had, my mom had gone to the mass meeting and we was living on the Bryant's plantation and the owner came by and told my dad that my mom had to leave because she was going to those meetings. Of course few years later, my aunt out of Detroit, they sent money down to buy land, and we end up buying some property we went into Montgomery and tore down old houses and we got the nails and straighten up the boards and all that and we built our home on this property that was purchased by my aunt and all the folks that live up North and we used that, used those boards to build our home. But he told my daddy he could stay, but my mom had to go because she was going to them meetings. Yep so it was very interesting.

2.4 Charles Mays: We Trusted Those People

Charles Mays: Matter of fact, you know, we were, the mass meeting was at our church, Mt. Gilliard Missionary Baptist Church, and I was part of the choir at that time and matter of fact, Stokely and Bob Mants and all those guys, you know somebody was saying last night "we trusted those people that came in here because we didn't know nothing about them." So they would come, I remember Bob and Stokely coming to my mom house and we fed them, you know and we asked them to bless the food – you know,

like, we bless the food, everybody bless the food – they didn't have any idea what that was. You know they was just young and green. And they would say, "And they don't know a Bible verse?" You know the saying, the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. Or bless this food – you know, like that. Anyway, Stokely, I remember vividly when we was at a mass meeting and he was up talking to us, 'cause we was young you know singing in the choir. I remember him telling me, "I want you to be my second daddy," you know, and stuff like that. Then he was just a personable person to talk to and he just loved us, loved us tremendously because of how we were singing in the choir and stuff and being part of the Movement and stuff.

2.5 Charles Mays: Talk about All That Stuff

Charles Mays: We got a chance to know everything, you know with the mass meeting they would talk about all that stuff. What was going on in the area, in the community and stuff. And even with forming the party, and the people running on the party on the Black Panther Party and stuff, to be to try to get elected and when I found out they had lost, you know I just thought that it was just all gone. But eventually as time went by and we continued to push for voter registration and even when I got old enough, that was one of the things that all our parents taught us was go and get registered to vote because a lot of people died that we would have that right. And so I push it today to young people and whoever hadn't done it to get registered to vote.

2.6 Arthur Nelson: The Churches

Arthur Nelson: I think the support system that we basically found here in Lowndes County and today is pretty much the churches. The churches have been a foundation of most of the support you've gotten, especially now because we don't have now, even though we are a part of fraternities we don't have chapters in Lowndes county because there is not enough brothers and were so close to Montgomery and those other areas but in Lowndes county I think the churches. [...] There will probably be a church every mile, there is a church every mile from each other. There's a church, there's a church, there's a church, you drive a mile you'll see a church.

2.7 Willie Ruth Myrick: Having Meetings in Black Churches

Willie Ruth Myrick: We had quite a few churches here in the county that was on board with the Movement and did whatever they could do. When there was mass meetings, they would open the door. We had a few churches that wouldn't because they don't want the white folks to burn their church down or whatever. But the majority of our black churches was on board. And Mt. Gilliard was the number one church. First Baptist in Hayneville was the number two church. We had the majority of our meetings there, but we went all over the county having meetings in the black churches. And like I say the majority of them was very open to them when we contacted them about having mass meetings.

Jennifer Lawson: And were people afraid to come out to mass meetings, because most of them were in the evenings?

Willie Ruth Myrick: They were at night, yes. A lot of the men would stay around on the outside to make sure that nobody was hanging around out there. When the meeting was over, when the people would come out to go home. And as a matter of fact, John Hulett, when the meeting was over, because I can say he was the leader, the other men, two or three car loads of them would get together and follow us home because we lived in the same area he and I. And they would follow us home so nobody would mess with him, because they was always afraid they was gonna do something to him.