

SNCC Digital Gateway: Our Voices

Lowndes County: Come Out Fighting

3.1 Ethel Williams: How the Jackson Family Became Involved

Ethel Williams: But anyway, we got involved through John. And when Stokely and Bob Mants and the others came to the county and talked and talked to John, and John talked to Daddy and Mama. Daddy agreed. They don't have anywhere else to stay. My brother had a vacant home down there which is SNCC. He was not here. Bill had gone to California, and there wasn't anybody staying it. It was not too run down. It was not too up to par, but it wasn't anybody living there, so you know how that was. Daddy said, "Well, I'll let them stay over there. I don't owe George Beers anything." That was the man who we had the cotton gin. You'd take your cotton to the gin and get your money, so Daddy did not owe George Beers, which meant that our property was not in debt to anyone. So he stepped out on that.

3.2 Wendell Paris: Subject to Get Shot or Shot At

Wendell Paris: What impressed me most was that the community—White Hall—that was incorporated later as White Hall—but the White Hall—it was called White Hall at that time. It just wasn't incorporated. But the White Hall community was organized to the point that you had to let them know who you were before you were able to—what's that highway number? Is it 81 or something?

Jennifer Lawson: If you were on 80, then this was 23. 23 was what's now called Freedom Road, right?

Paris: Is this—well, whatever this road is

Lawson: 80 is the main road between Montgomery and Selma.

Paris: Yeah, but that's the main route east and west, but when you turn off on the White Hall road—

Lawson: That's 23. Freedom Road.

Paris: Yeah, well when you turn on Freedom Road, you had to blink your lights and blow your horn. If you didn't blink your lights and blow your horn, you were subject to get shot or shot at. [29:09] Because they were coming and shooting and you know, needless to say, wasn't anything going to be done about white people shooting at us, but the Lowndes County community, especially with Mr. Mathew Jackson and that extended Jackson family were providing protection to all of the civil rights workers. In fact, Mr. Jackson told me one time, he said, "Well, SNCC is here, and we're glad to have them come, and they fall under my protection because they're on my property. So anybody that comes on my property falls under my—I am there to protect them." So I just really appreciated that because here was Sammy's death, you know. When Sammy got killed, Jim Forman said to five of us that went to Washington to protest, well just to protest generally, what was happening here, he said, "Well make sure you say to

them, from now on out, we will protect ourselves. We have been asking for federal protection for civil rights workers, I think since the Albany campaign, maybe '62 or something." And needless to say that federal government never provided it. So Forman said to us, "Be sure and say to them, from now on, we will protect and defend ourselves." So that was right in line, in line with me. You know we've been hunting and stuff all of our lives. I killed my first deer when I was age 12, so I'm pretty familiar with guns. But all of that was happening in Lowndes County.

3.3 Lillian McGill: Building the Lowndes County Freedom Organization

Jennifer Lawson: And then how were the, how were the candidates now moving forward to the point that we now have the Lowndes County Freedom Organization, and there's the talk of political party, how did that discussion go?

Lillian McGill: Well, we had to have our meetings separate for those. And our offices were separate from those, although they belonged to each one. They were not interchangeable for those organizations. And we had our election for the persons that were going to hold those positions, and Mr. Sidney Logan and Mr. Jesse Favors ran for the sheriff. And of course we had our others. Ms. Alice Moore and all of them running for tax assessors and various ones. But nobody won that year. But it was at least on the book. And after we had gotten our numbers on and our cats up, and they were taking them down and you had to re-keep on drawing them. They would take 'em down at night, and you all would put them up in the daytime. But in the meantime, we had people who decided then that we would get ready for the next year. And they came in the next year, and we realized we weren't going to be able to, our people weren't going to cooperate because some of those that were in there because they were on other folks' place. They were being told where, when, and how, and someone had been good. I can't do that. Even had some folk got some things last year, we went to 'em and asked 'em to vote for some of our people. "Oh no. You don't tell us who to use our votes." You didn't tell them how to use it. You just asked them. And of course, that didn't deter me at all because the first place, I was glad they were gonna vote. And when we got our first persons in, the first it was temporary, then we got our full people in. I was just really happy. Alma Miller from down at Fort Deposit, at Calhoun, was one that came in, and she was the tax collector. It wasn't just tax collecting, it was tax assessor. Trying to get which one in. Alice Moore as tax assessor.

3.4 Willie Ruth Myrick: I Admired the Devil Out of Them

Jennifer Lawson: You mentioned Willie Ricks, who was a part of SNCC—the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Did you have much contact with the SNCC people?

Willie Ruth Myrick: Yes, I dealt with them almost on a daily basis and I thought it was the best thing that could have happened to Lowndes County, for them to come in here and just put everything else aside and come to Lowndes County to help us to make things better. And we as a people in Lowndes County, we did everything we could to make lives better for them in Lowndes County, I, number one, admired the devil out of them, I really, truly did. Because here these people here, and they're gonna do what it take to help us to get ahead. And I thought it was the best thing that could have happened to us.

Lawson : Now you mentioned the, that in the original election, and this was an election original after people got registered, the Voting Rights Act, and won the right to vote—not won the right to vote but could exercise the right to vote—that people lost, what was the mood then? Do you think people felt discouraged that the black panther party didn't work or –

Myrick: No, they was more eager than to win elections than ever because they saw what Black people could do and that motivated the people to get up then and do something. And when we had the next election, that was when Sheriff Hulett ran for sheriff, and Willie McGhee, he run for county coroner and Abna Miller ran for circuit clerk and Frank Myles Jr. ran for county commissioner, Mr. Charlie Smith ran for county commissioner, and it was, everybody was enthusiastic about getting these Black people elected to office.

3.5 Regina Moorer: Come Out Fighting

Regina Moorer: So the Black Panther became like the symbol for the Lowndes County Freedom Organization, so when Black people could not register to vote, or could not participate in democracy in this county the way they wanted to, instead of trying to continue to ask the existing political parties to recognize them and to acknowledge them, they thought, why not just start our own political party. And the symbol of that political party became the Black Panther. And I remember my mom telling me the story of the Black Panther being chosen as the symbol because, if you know anything about the mannerism of a Black Panther, their kind of mild, not necessarily meek, but they're not as intimidating as they appear unless their backed into a corner, and if they are backed into a corner then they're going to come out fighting. So that symbol kind of embodied the spirit of the people of Lowndes County. We're not here to cause trouble. We're not here to necessarily cause disruption but if you keep pushing us into a corner, we're going to come out fighting.

3.6 Wendell Paris: Might Miss the Powder, but Get the Lead Right Back

Wendell Paris: If you're coming at me, I have a right to defend myself, and that was really made clear to me—engrained in me—based on the Lowndes County Movement. Did SNCC say go into the California with unloaded guns? Hell, no! Because we knew that if you were carrying a gun, you better have it loaded. Don't you go anyplace with unloaded guns, so you know, that's a California thing. In Alabama we had loaded guns, and we were going to always shoot back. If you shot at us—this came out of Lowndes County, I can't remember this old lady's name, but the night of the elections, when they had beaten C.J. and others, Mr. Jones, I guess down in Fort Deposit, and we had gathered back at the Freedom House, and Featherstone, Rap, Bob, and I got in the car and came back to see just what was going on. And we say, "Well, we still got people all over the county. We don't know where they are. So somebody need to stay here at this lady's house." And we got there and told her what was happening and she said, now I'll never forget it, "Y'all tell the white folk, they can shoot all over Lowndes County, but they going to have to clean it up. If they shoot at us, they might miss the powder, but they going to get the lead right back." So I'm saying all of this helped us, helped me especially, in ridding myself of any notion that we always need to be nonviolence and passive resistance. You know that ought to be a tactic like everything else in

the Movement. If you're a thousand to one, yeah, be nonviolent, but it's fifty-fifty, hey look, let's go for it. I mean, you know. And unfortunately, that's the only time that we could get respect in Lowndes County or in the United States, when folks would understand that you would do the same thing to them that they would do to you. Now that's unfortunate, but that's the way it is, so I just played by whatever rules have been established. So if you come at me, you better come right because I'm going to shoot back at you. You won't miss nothing but the powder, you'll get the lead right back. That's to this day. My daddy, the night that Sammy got killed, my mother gave me her pistol. She said, "Son, if you go down, you go down fighting." So I kept her pistol in my back pocket. In fact, I went to jail somewhere in Jackson, Mississippi with that pistol in my back pocket. They never saw it.

3.7 Lillian McGill: Put Mine on the School Bus and I Got My Gun

Lillian McGill: I had to, but if I couldn't let my child be a part of that, I couldn't ask anybody else's child. And they put the record out saying that if these N's come over here, there's gonna be blood running in the street. And I sent them word back. It might be blood running in the street, but it won't only be N blood running in the streets. It's gonna be everybody. I put mine on the school bus. Everybody else took theirs. I put mine on the school bus and I got my gun and I went in to sit. I never told nobody I was nonviolent. I don't make violence, but then you don't come at me. See, I believe if you gonna do something, I just get prepared. I'm not going to be the instigator, but I'll sure protect myself. Mmmm hmmm. And they didn't bother me! He was the only one that rode the school bus to school.