



## An Oral History with Mr. Larry Rubin

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### Biography

A Philadelphia native, Larry Rubin was born June 23, 1942. In 1961, he began working to register voters in the South for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. In late 1963 and for all of 1964, Mr. Rubin worked as a civil rights activist in Marshall County, Mississippi.

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### Topics Discussed

Background and interest in civil rights  
SNCC and an assignment to Marshall County  
The idea behind Freedom Summer  
White hostility and trumped-up arrests  
Black attitudes toward his civil rights work  
White presence hurting black activism  
Organizing freedom libraries and more arrests  
Red-baiting by Senator Eastland  
Adult education and literacy tests  
Registering black voters  
Community centers, freedom schools, and freedom houses  
Successes and failures of Freedom Summer  
Whites kicked out of SNCC

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### Transcript

*This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi. The interview is with Mr. Larry Rubin and is taking place on November 11, 1995. The interviewer is John*



Rachal.

*(A brief, initial segment of the interview covering arrangements, logistics, and addresses was deleted from this printed transcript.)*

Rachal: OK, OK. Well let me begin with a little bit of demographic data concerning you and where you live and a little bit about your parentage and everything. They sort of like this to provide a little bit of biography for each one of the interviews when they're bound and put up on the shelf so they don't just begin in the middle of a conversation somewhere. They like to provide a little bit of biography. When were you born? What is your age?

Rubin: June twenty-third, 1942.

Rachal: OK.

Rubin: I'm fifty-three.

Rachal: OK. And where were you born?

Rubin: Philadelphia.

Rachal: OK and your father's name?

Rubin: Aaron.

Rachal: Aaron. And mother's name?

Rubin: Leona.

Rachal: OK. Were you raised in Philadelphia?

Rubin: Yes.

Rachal: OK. Let me ask you this first question of some substance. Do you think that there was anything in your childhood or your family life or your upbringing which predisposed you to be interested in doing civil rights work?

Rubin: Yes. Both my parents were very active in the union movement and in various movements for social change.

Rachal: For example? Other than the union--well, you could elaborate on the union movement if you wanted to.

Rubin: Well, my father was a steward. He was in the plumbers' and welders' union.

Rachal: OK.

Rubin: A steam fitter and a pipe fitter. And he was active in the United Journeymen of Apprentices. I forget the rest of it but it was the plumbers' and welders' union.

Rachal: OK.



Rubin: And my mother and he were quite active. For example when Emmitt Till was killed in the '50s--

Rachal: In what way?

Rubin: Well, to try to get justice in that case.

Rachal: Do you recall any--of course you were fairly young then, but do you remember anything specifically they did when Till was murdered?

Rubin: Well, there was a series of demonstrations and meetings and so forth.

Rachal: OK.

Rubin: Also later on they were very active in the Woolworth boycott, which was in the later '50s.

Rachal: Right.

Rubin: When Woolworth--well, Woolworth had refused to hire blacks in the North. Of course they refused to serve blacks at the lunch counters.

Rachal: Lunch counters, yeah, I remember.

Rubin: And there was a massive boycott. And when I was in high school I picketed Woolworth's in Philadelphia.

Rachal: You picketed what?

Rubin: Picketed Woolworth's.

Rachal: Oh, Woolworth's, OK, thank you.

Rubin: They were also active in the peace movement.

Rachal: So it's fair to say that you grew up in a household of considerable activism then.

Rubin: Yes.

Rachal: And I believe you went to Antioch College you mentioned?

Rubin: That's right.

Rachal: OK. Could you tell me a little bit about the circumstances under which you were recruited in SNCC?

Rubin: Well, the head of SNCC, that is the executive director, the first executive director--I believe he was the executive director--was Chuck McDew.

Rachal: Spell that last name please.

Rubin: M-c D-E-W.



Rachal: OK.

Rubin: And, oh, let me add one thing to my upbringing.

Rachal: Please.

Rubin: Before I get into--

Rachal: Sure.

Rubin: Another very large part of my upbringing was secular Judaism. That is, I was brought up as a secular Jew.

Rachal: Um-hm.

Rubin: And the essence of that was the idea of justice. In other words, the way I was brought up was studying and celebrating, leading it, the essence of the Jewish tradition. And the essence of the Jewish tradition, the stress that we concentrated on, was justice and equality, and also that all people have a right to share the resources of the earth and all people are equal. Of course at the time that I went to--I didn't go to Hebrew school, but I went to Yiddish school--a large part of this tradition that I'm talking about was what we called Yiddish keit. That is the Eastern European Jewish culture and--

Rachal: Did you say Yiddish kie?

Rubin: Yiddish Keit.

Rachal: Is that Yiddish plus K--how's the--

Rubin: K-E-I-T.

Rachal: K-E-I-T, OK.

Rubin: (inaudible) is phonetical.

Rachal: OK, thank you.

Rubin: But that's--Yiddish keit means Yiddish culture, you know.

Rachal: OK.

Rubin: The essence of you know you might say Yiddishism, but it doesn't refer to the language, it refers to the culture.

Rachal: I understand.

Rubin: Like you might say Americanism. And you know you say Americanism has to do with, you know, believing in equality and so forth. Then I'm, you know, I was describing Yiddish keit. Well, of course at the time that I was brought up, World War II was just over. I was born in the middle of World War II. And part of what we stressed and what we studied was not only the tragedy and the, again, injustice of the holocaust and the victimization of Jews, but we also studied resistance to tyranny and resistance to the



holocaust and resistance to the Nazis. And that was another essence of Yiddishkeit, of the Jewish tradition, people getting together and fighting back. So that was my background, and of course my parents were very involved in all of that.

Rachal: Yes, I'm certainly glad you added that because that seems almost the quintessence of your activism as much as your father's union work. Of course it was all of a piece I suppose so--

Rubin: See, that's what I was trying to say, it's all of a piece, yes. But I really should have started with that with what I just said.

Rachal: OK, OK.

Rubin: Of course it's all of a piece.

Rachal: OK.

Rubin: OK, now getting back to how I was recruited.

Rachal: OK, back to your recruitment then.

Rubin: Yes. I was at Antioch and--

Rachal: And you were what year there? You must have been about a senior? Do you recall?

Rubin: Well, no, I entered Antioch in 1960.

Rachal: OK.

Rubin: A freshman in '60.

Rachal: OK.

Rubin: And in 1960 the head of SNCC visited campus a few times. That's Chuck McDew.

Rachal: You were early. I wasn't aware that SNCC was out recruiting quite that early. That's very interesting, OK.

Rubin: Yes, in fact I attended several of the founding meetings of SNCC in Atlanta and elsewhere in 1960. You know SNCC was formed through SCLC.

Rachal: Right.

Rubin: After the Greensboro--

Rachal: Lunch counter.

Rubin: --lunch counter sit-ins. And then what happened was there was an explosion basically of sit-ins across the South. SCLC felt that there needed to be some coordinating committee. But then it was decided that it should be a separate organization. And I was at those meetings where all, you know, where these various decisions were made through Chuck McDew. And one thing led to the other and I decided to quit school and to go south. Now this was in 1961.



Rachal: OK.

Rubin: And I went to southwest Georgia.

Rachal: And what did you do in southwest Georgia?

Rubin: Voter registration work.

Rachal: So you started voter registration work as early as '61, OK, OK.

Rubin: And then I was a full-time SNCC organizer in southwest Georgia. Then in late '63, early '64, I was sent to Mississippi to Holly Springs. And it was in anticipation of the expanded voter registration activity in Mississippi. At that time what was called Freedom Summer hadn't coalesced yet. But I was sent to Marshall County. I was by myself in Marshall County alone for, oh, a good six months.

Rachal: What was that like? (laughter)

Rubin: Well, it was very scary. I was living at that time on Rust College. And--

Rachal: And were you the only white person at Rust College at the time?

Rubin: Yes. And in fact--

Rachal: Were you enrolled?

Rubin: No, no.

Rachal: OK.

Rubin: I was living there. Rust College, as part of their contribution to the voter registration movement, gave me a room. And my main job was to help set up a project there for SNCC.

Rachal: There meaning Holly Springs?

Rubin: Yes, Marshall County really.

Rachal: OK.

Rubin: But it was centered in Holly Springs. Now, SNCC people had been to Marshall County doing voter registration work for a while in and out. But we didn't have what we called a freedom house, that is, a place that we rented to live and work.

Rachal: Right.

Rubin: And one of my jobs was to find that place--and in fact the place is now directly across the street from Rust College--and to get to know the people, the local people there and to get to know the leadership of the community, both official and unofficial. That is, you know, the leadership of the black community in most towns consisted of generally the owner of the funeral home and teachers and preachers and so forth, in other words, the business leaders and spiritual leaders and teachers and also the heads of what few organizations there were at the time, like the NAACP.



Rachal: Right.

Rubin: But also in every community there are unofficial leaders, people that other people simply looked to for leadership, people who through their character or their outspokenness or their courage, were seen as leaders. So my job was to get to know the (inaudible). And that's where I was when SNCC decided to do Freedom Summer and I was in place in Marshall County.

Rachal: Did you have a role in the decision to create and conduct Freedom Summer?

Rubin: Well, yes and no. The question implies, frankly, a higher degree of organization than existed in SNCC. It's hard to say, and that's true of just about anything you could say in beginning decisions. Somehow the decision was made, and we know why it was made. Because there had been several killings throughout the state of Mississippi for several years. Herbert Lee. You know, a bunch of other people. All for voter registration activities and related activities. Anti-segregation activities. The state of Mississippi had been, along with Alabama, probably, the most resistant to change. And the federal government had been most resistant to helping out and coming into the state to enforce federal laws, basically. So it was felt--and when I say it was felt, primarily the people that made the decisions were Bob Moses, Jim Foreman, Stokely Carmichael, and several other people. But there was no official meeting there. There was several meetings, you know, many, many meetings. I mean lots of people had an input into it and I was one of those.

Rachal: OK.

Rubin: But it was felt that if we brought down large numbers of northerners and particularly whites that, number one, the press would focus more attention. In essence we felt that the reason, well, the reason nothing essentially was done as far as bringing the people who had killed the local people, the blacks who had been pushing for voter registration, nothing had been done to bring them to justice was because they were black and also because in many cases the people that were involved in the killings were themselves the people that were supposed to be enforcing justice, the local justice system, sheriffs and so forth, not to mention the Klan and the State Sovereignty Commission. We knew all those people were involved. I mean, I'm talking as a mass generality because I'm talking about many, many different cases. Of course each case was a little bit different. We felt that the reason the federal government didn't intervene was because it was just, you know, blacks. If it was whites they would intervene. And also we felt that if it was whites, it would be your safety that the local white supremacist groups would be more reluctant to harm whites coming down. Now, in that we were wrong. In getting the federal government to focus on Mississippi, we were correct, but in whites being protection with the activities, we were wrong.

Rachal: Let me follow a few strands of things that you have said that are just very fertile with information. One is this very idea of bringing whites into SNCC. I--

*(The interview continues on tape one, side two.)*

Rubin: I'm back.

Rachal: OK, Larry, OK. The statements you were just making about the decision to include white workers in SNCC, was that also something of a controversial decision as if there might be a diminution of this as fundamentally a black organization? Were you privy to any of the discussions on the pros and cons, in other words, of having white college kids involved in SNCC?

Rubin: Well, yes, but that wasn't the question the diminution of it being a black organization. There had



been whites in SNCC from the very beginning.

Rachal: You being the obvious example, right?

Rubin: I was one of them.

Rachal: OK.

Rubin: There were several others, too.

Rachal: OK.

Rubin: Bob Zellner, Bill Hanson, Wendy Samstein. There were a goodly number from the very beginning. Remember from the beginning the idea of a thing being a black organization, that idea from the beginning, at the beginning I should say, wasn't there. At the very beginning in 1960 the idea was that we were fighting for equality, and SNCC and the NAACP and CORE and SCLC weren't seen as black organizations at all. I mean if you asked the average person in SCLC which is closest to home, well, that question just wouldn't have come up.

Rachal: OK.

Rubin: Because although the vast majority of the members were black, they didn't see it as a black organization. They saw themselves as fighting to bring what was supposed to be American democracy to the South. It wasn't until later really, beginning in '63, as its very, very beginning. But more after Freedom Summer than before was the question of, "Are we a black organization or not?" That became controversial then.

Rachal: Well, that's a very interesting insight and in fact it has a parallel with the NAACP, which after all had significant white leadership in the early days of its founding too. So that's an interesting observation.

Rubin: Now, on the other hand, bringing large numbers of whites into Mississippi was very controversial but not for the reason that you said. The question wasn't, "Would this lead to a diminution of black power within SNCC?" The question of black power--in fact that phrase really started around that time and what that meant was still being figured out. But it was controversial for, well, for other reasons, and the role of whites in SNCC was a issue that was faced from the very beginning. Like I said, there was always whites in SNCC, but the question [of] what was their role was always a question. And it was answered differently in different places. For example, in southwest Georgia, where I first went, the project was led by Charles Sherrod.

Rachal: How do you spell that?

Rubin: S-H-E-R-R-O-D.

Rachal: OK.

Rubin: Reverend Sherrod. He's still there. I believe he's still a member, well, no, he was a member of the city council of Albany, Georgia, for years. His term was just up recently. The people in southwest Georgia led by Sherrod--when I say the people now I'm talking about SNCC--believed that if we were truly fighting for equality that we had to model equality. We had to demonstrate it, and that meant blacks and whites working together. In the southwest Georgia project we always stressed blacks and whites working together to demonstrate to the white community, and also to the black community, that blacks and whites



could be equal in working together. And to the white community it meant showing them that what the black community wanted wasn't to get white women. I'm using that term because that was one of the things that the white community always said. But to work together as equal with whites. To the black community, was to show that whites didn't have to be in charge, that you didn't have to say "yassir boss" to whites if you were black. And you could work together with whites as equal. Now, in Mississippi and in Louisiana and Georgia, the general idea had always been, the general consensus had always been, that it was too dangerous. Because if you had blacks and whites working together, obviously you stood out like a sore thumb. And the idea had been, particularly in Mississippi over the years, that the situation was so hostile and the white racists were so well organized that you needed the ability to slip in and out of communities in an unobtrusive way, in ways that were not obvious. In other words, as an organizer you needed the ability to go into any given town, speak to the leaders, encourage voter registration, get help in that you know from various ways, organize that in ways that you didn't want the white supremacists to know about because they would kill you. And in fact that was, again, just as we were proven wrong that whites would help in safety. That they would help us in focusing national attention but they would not help in safety in Mississippi. The insight that I just said was proven right over the years when I said we proved them wrong because two whites were killed.

Rachal: Um-hm, yeah.

Rubin: So in any case. So that was always a debate, and the debate around Freedom Summer was just an extension of that. On the one hand there were people who were saying, "If you bring whites down, it will focus the spotlight of the white supremacists on this activity and it will endanger everybody, particularly the local community, put them in danger." On the other hand people said, "No, if you bring down whites it will focus the national spotlight and in that they won't present a safety factor for the local community." Now, in that I think we were right. What I was trying to say before was we thought that the racists would be reluctant to harm the whites coming in from the outside. And I think we were wrong in that it would give protection for local people. Well, of course it's difficult to say what would have happened, you never know. But probably it was correct and left local people (inaudible).

Rachal: OK.

Rubin: Although at the end of the summer, in fact, that's why I got over a break. Some eighty participants were beaten, a thousand were arrested, close to seventy churches and homes and businesses were bombed over that one summer. So this all goes to the point of the controversy around having whites there. So the answer to your question was, yes, I was privy to the discussion. Yes, it was very controversial. But, no, it was not over the question, "Would this lead to a diminution of SNCC being seen as a black organization?" [It was] around other questions.

Rachal: OK, OK. Let me follow another strand. Actually this one backs up a bit to your early arrival in Holly Springs. When you were the lone outpost there in Marshall County, did you have a sense of resistance from not only whites, who probably I presume had relatively little to do with you, but also blacks?

Rubin: Well, first when you said whites having relatively little to do with me, that's a very southern way of describing hostility, you know. That presumes the existence of southern hospitality, so that you show your hostility by having very little to do with them rather than being hostile. That was not the case. Hostility was shown to me directly and immediately.

Rachal: How so?

Rubin: I was arrested and beaten, et cetera and et cetera, from almost the first time I arrived.



Rachal: Now, what were these alleged offenses?

Rubin: Well, at that time you didn't need an offense. You could be arrested on suspicion and held for up to seventy-six hours. This is before Miranda, you know, where you had to be told what you were arrested for.

Rachal: Right.

Rubin: And this is before other sorts of laws that protected your rights. So I was arrested continually on suspicion.

Rachal: Did they say suspicion of what or just suspicion?

Rubin: No, no, suspicion--at first, if we're doing this chronologically and I'll get into my role with the freedom libraries later.

Rachal: OK.

Rubin: That was a different set of suspicions arrested for. But at first it was generally suspicion of stealing the car I was driving because I didn't have the sales slip. I was told that the only proof of ownership was the sales slip. Of course I had proof of ownership from, actually, from Georgia because my car was registered--I had lived in Atlanta for a while. The car was registered in Georgia, had Georgia tags. But that wasn't good enough. Did I have the original sales slip from where I bought the car? And I had several cars, you know, sequentially, two cars actually. The first car I bought in Pennsylvania and the second car I bought in Ohio. In any case, suspicion of stealing the car I was driving. I was arrested once on suspicion of stealing the shirt I was wearing because I didn't have the sales slip.

Rachal: (laughter) God.

Rubin: I was arrested once for, in this case was not suspicion, but for killing a cow in Marshall County. Now, however, in Marshall County the cow was wrong because the cow was at fault. Of course it was the law that livestock would not be on the road, and if you killed a cow it was automatically the fault of the cow, that is, the owner of the cow. But I was arrested for killing a cow. It was my little Studebaker Lark versus a cow and the cow although was dead, won. It totaled the cow and the Studebaker Lark. That kind of thing. I can't even remember all the little things I was arrested on, but it was always suspicion of this and suspicion of that. Sometimes it was, you know, traffic violations, speeding or whatever. Generally what I would do was I would pay whatever fine it is just to get back to work. I'll tell you, eventually--and I'm getting ahead of myself because this was not during the time that I was alone--but when the project started, I woke up one day and I realized I had become a local industry in Marshall County. I was supporting (laughing) I must have been supporting three peace officers in Marshall County. Because every time I went out, they would arrest me about one thing or the other and, you know, I would pay the fine. Because if it wasn't suspicion of it, it was like I say for traffic violations. Suspicion of, they would keep me in jail for a few days and let me go. Traffic violations, they would fine me whatever and I would pay the fine and get out. In fact at one time I told the sheriff there, you know, either keep me in or let me go. In and out, it was getting ridiculous. But what they were trying to do was to intimidate me and also stop me from doing the work for voter registration. It got so bad eventually--and again like I say I'm jumping ahead--but the day of voting for agricultural stabilization committee members--are you familiar with those elections?

Rachal: No.



Rubin: Stabilization committees, these committees, and I'm sure they still exist. I don't know whether they exist in the same forum. But all farmers throughout the South and as far as I know across the country were eligible to elect people to serve on committees that decided Mississippi cotton allowance. In other places, other lobbies, that is, decide who would fundamentally not plant and get paid for it and how much each farmer would plant. It was farm subsidies, and these committees would decide how much subsidy you would get. Well, all farmers, even sharecroppers, were allowed to vote for members of these committees. Except in Mississippi. Black farmers were never allowed to vote. And one of the things that we did, aside from the voter registration, was to encourage black farmers to take part in these elections.

Rachal: Now, what year was this, Larry?

Rubin: Sixty-four.

Rachal: OK, so is this pre-project or during project or post-project?

Rubin: During project.

Rachal: OK.

Rubin: That's why I say I'm jumping ahead. Because we are still talking about when I was still alone when you asked me about being arrested.

Rachal: OK.

Rubin: And I'm saying, you know, you said what for and I'm saying for all these silly things. They built up. I kept paying fines. And eventually came the day of the cotton allotment elections. That's what people called it, but it was elections for the agricultural stabilization committee. This was when the project was underway. It was the day of these elections, and we were going from voting place to voting place. I was driving. And I was arrested for having a faulty headlight, except it was in the middle of the afternoon, two p.m. in the afternoon and you cannot be arrested for having a faulty headlight at two p.m. in the afternoon. It doesn't matter how your headlight is. I was arrested and I was thrown in jail, once again, in Holly Springs. And I was told almost as a matter of course, you know, pay two hundred and fifty dollars or whatever the fine was (inaudible).

Rachal: Two hundred and fifty dollars?

Rubin: Most of these fines that I'm talking about were in the hundreds of dollars. I cannot remember the exact amount for this particular one, but it was two hundred here, two hundred there. As I say, I was a local industry.

Rachal: You were.

Rubin: So I'm guessing at the amount because I frankly cannot remember, but I'm saying two hundred and fifty dollars.

Rachal: Where was this money coming from that you were paying?

Rubin: Well, from SNCC, from my parents, and also from the Sholem Aleichem Club in Philadelphia.

Rachal: OK, I need a spelling on that, Larry.



Rubin: Well, it's Sholem, S-H-O-L-E-M.

Rachal: Um-hm.

Rubin: Aleichem, A-L-E-I-C-H-E-M.

Rachal: OK.

Rubin: Now I'm digressing actually from a digression.

Rachal: I know I'm not doing a very good job of keeping you on task, am I?

Rubin: I'll just go on. We started with the question of arrests but that was--

Rachal: Eventually I'm going to ask you some questions about adult education. But this is so interesting I hate to even slow you down much less stop you, so go right ahead.

Rubin: I said I was a member of the SNCC staff and I had been for several years.

Rachal: And that was a paid position as a staff position, right?

Rubin: Yeah.

Rachal: OK.

Rubin: Yeah, we were paid nine dollars and forty-five cents a week.

Rachal: OK.

Rubin: That's ten dollars a week after taxes. That was our salary. But by the time Freedom Summer started, I became part of a program encouraged by SNCC to have various organizations pay the salary of volunteers and staff. So by the time Freedom Summer came, I was being paid my nine dollars and forty-five cents by the Sholem Aleichem Club back in Philadelphia, which goes back to my original state. This was the organization through which I had my I'll say religious education--but it was secular education, cultural education--as a child, and they were still in existence.

Rachal: OK.

Rubin: And they paid a salary of myself and somebody else, Barbara Bloomfeld, to be in Mississippi. And they also helped contribute to these various fines. So the fines were paid by SNCC itself, my parents, and the Sholem Aleichem Club. Anyway, there I was arrested. Now we're back to the summer of '64 for--

Rachal: Headlights.

Rubin: --headlights. And I refused to pay the fine for once because I was getting mad to tell you the truth. See, our idea always was pay the fine and get out and work, you know, get back to the field, because the reason they were arresting you in part was to stop you from working. But by now I said no. I said, "This is ridiculous." I told the sheriff, actually, I said, "This is too ridiculous, it's just too silly. Headlight in the middle of the afternoon."



Rachal: And of course you knew him well by now, right?

Rubin: By then, yeah. Slick Ash, J.M. Ash.

Rachal: What was the name again? I'm sorry.

Rubin: Ash, A-S-H.

Rachal: OK. Sam Ash.

Rubin: No, no. You know.

Rachal: J-A-Y?

Rubin: J.M.

Rachal: OK.

Rubin: I don't know what that stands for.

Rachal: OK, J.M. Ash.

Rubin: Monroe, I'm making that up now, but everybody called him Flick. He's still there, he's still in Marshall County, still in Holly Springs. He owns a bunch of enterprises now, Flick's Restaurant, Flick's Lumberyard, Flick's Convenience Store, Flick's Laundromat, every one of those things "Flick." Anyway, I told him no. I refused to pay. And he kept me in jail a couple of nights. Finally they started to negotiate with me. The county prosecutor or the city prosecutor came over and said, "Look, we'll lower the fine." Finally they got down to five dollars. Pay five dollars and get out. I refused. "To get me out of jail this time you're just going to have to drop charges."

Rachal: Did you ever see the movie, The Fixer?

Rubin: No.

Rachal: Well, that's a diversion. Go back to your story, I'm sorry. I'm reminded of that movie. A fellow, in fact he was Jewish, and he was imprisoned by the Czar or something like that. And they wanted to let him out of jail after he refused to be let out. And he finally insisted that they would have to admit that they were wrong in arresting him in order for him to allow himself to be released. And somehow enough public attention had come to it that that ultimately did occur. Anyway I was--there was a parallel there and I wondered.

Rubin: That was precisely the case. You know I just said they had to drop charges. In other words they had to admit they were wrong, and they did just to get rid of me. This was in the middle now of Freedom Summer and there was a lot of attention, you know, nationwide on this. On this project particularly since I had gotten national publicity for being beaten up earlier.

Rachal: Would you tell me a little bit about that? Was Ash responsible for that or what were the circumstances under which you were beaten?

Rubin: Well, of course I don't know really. The police had beaten me quite a few times but there was no publicity. But--



Rachal: Do you mean they pummeled you with their fists, they hit you with nightsticks, or what?

Rubin: A little bit of both. I can't say I was overly observant on what they were smacking me around with. But generally it was either being, you know, when they would arrest me they'd beat me up in jail or as they were arresting me, you know, they would rough me up. Oh, I was also arrested on trespassing; that's the other thing. You know I was walking along to people's homes to register, help, to encourage them to register to vote, you know, to encourage them to go down to the courthouse and register to vote, organizing groups to register to vote. That was my main job. And I would be arrested on trespassing. So in order to get me off from whatever I was supposed to be trespassing on, they would drag me and beat me, you know. And anyway in fact I could probably get you the exact date, but it was early in the summer and it was before--no, I guess this was during the time of the disappearance of the three civil rights workers. I was--I can't remember now whether it was during that time or before. No, it must have been during the time of the disappearance because people were at the freedom house.

Rachal: OK.

Rubin: It happened the first as they before actually they arrived the three civil rights workers had disappeared because they had left Oxford, Ohio, early. It was during that period. The bodies hadn't been discovered yet. I was walking in the black section of Holly Springs actually to a restaurant to eat. And a white farmer jumped out of his pickup truck and beat the living hell out of me. And my project director immediately called the press. You know we were testing whether the theory behind Freedom Summer would work. That is when whites, you know, if whites get beat up would the press pay attention? And they did. And throughout the country, particularly in Philadelphia where I was from--and I think what he did, the project director called the Philadelphia press I think that's what it was. But it became a national story that I was beat. In the Memphis paper, Memphis Scimitar and also the Memphis, the other one.

Rachal: Oh, the Commercial Appeal?

Rachal: Commercial Appeal. But I remember the Scimitar and the Commercial Appeal. They ran it, "Threat told to civil rights worker in Holly Springs" rather than flat out admitting I was beaten. But the northern press they said, you know, "Civil rights worker beaten."

Rachal: Um-hm.

Rubin: In any case, after I had gotten some publicity about that, one of the things that led to them dropping charges against me, and I was never arrested again.

Rachal: Is that right? Never after that then.

Rubin: After that.

Rachal: Interesting, OK. Let me--

Rubin: So that answers the question about my reaction to all these little arrests while I was alone and then, you know, building up to my just saying enough.

Rachal: Right. Did you keep account, just for the record, do you happen to have some idea about how many times you were arrested? Did you--

Rubin: I could figure that out because I wrote daily reports; we all did. And so every time I was arrested I



wrote it down.

Rachal: OK.

Rubin: But I'm just going to guess.

Rachal: OK.

Rubin: Say ten, fifteen times.

Rachal: OK, OK. Let me return to a little pre-Freedom Summer question that you alluded to a little earlier. When you were first coming to Holly Springs, did you feel any black resistance to your presence or your goals or motives?

Rubin: Not at all. In fact that wasn't even at least in my mind; it wasn't even in my mind. That was unheard of. Now, but let me tell you two things about that. Number one, I never in my own thinking throughout my the early years of SNCC, that is let's say from 1960 to around Freedom Summer, well, to say never might be a little bit of an overstatement, but in general I never thought of myself as going south to help blacks. At first it just wasn't there at all; it's flat out not there. What I saw myself doing is going south to help bring the ideal of American democracy alive, number one. And number two, this was in the early '60s and I saw that a lot of the programs, the federal programs, the federal ideals almost, that had benefitted me and everybody that I grew up with throughout my life, I saw them as under attack. I didn't see them as under attack, they were under attack. In other words, various programs of the New Deal, various college scholarships, the whole New Deal ideal was under attack and from southerners. That is because of the seniority system in Congress and in the Senate, most of the most powerful committees in the federal government were run by southerners. And they were undermining what I felt were American ideals. The reason they became the head of these various committees was they were--

*(The interview continues on tape two, side one.)*

Rubin: --few people relatively in their home areas were allowed to vote. Many of them were from majority black districts. Even if they weren't majority black. In Mississippi there were several. Marshall County being one.

Rachal: Right.

Rubin: The large minority blacks were simply not allowed to vote. So I went south with the idea of helping myself and the things that my family believed. Also being pro-union, union rights were being undermined.

Rachal: OK.

Rubin: The Taft-Hartley Act had passed and so forth. So I went south. And most of the whites that I knew at that time--this is early on--went south with the same kind of ideals: that in order to help preserve democratic principles we needed to help gain democracy in the South. So that people would be elected that would not be undermining things that had been built for years. It was not with the idea of helping blacks. The assumption always was that it was a movement of black people who were banned from voting, were barred from voting--that was simply the assumption, but there was no discussion of that, that was just a fact--but that their fight was our fight for the reasons that I said. Now, that's the first thing that I wanted to tell you. So when I went down, as I said, there was not in my mind at all of having any kind of resistance from blacks. That wasn't even a question because I was there helping, again, preserve something that had been built for years and also helping to preserve things that I had benefitted from



growing up. However, there was talk later on--and now we're getting close to the Freedom Summer--of the black power movements, of, again, the role of whites. There had always been talk of the role of whites, and I experienced myself a contradiction in my own role. And it started in Georgia and continued in Mississippi, and it was this: there wasn't blacks resisting my role; in fact it was just the opposite. Dealing with local people I found when I encouraged people to register to vote or encouraged people to get together to exercise other rights as well, they were calling me, you know, Mr. Larry, saying "yassir boss" and doing these things, but because I was a white telling them to do it. And that was a contradiction, you know, in what we were about. And it took me a while to realize that this was the results of segregation and that this was the result of people being brought up to be afraid of whites and to be, well basically, was out of fear.

Rachal: Subservient.

Rubin: Subservient, yes, that's the word. People had spent their entire life being trained by the system to be subservient. In any case that was the problem that I faced as a white, not resistance.

Rachal: OK.

Rubin: And it was very difficult for me to deal with. It was embarrassing for one thing, but there was actually nothing I could do. You just can't say, "Stop calling me Mr. Larry." They would, you know, because "you're white and you tell me to do it and I'll stop." It was very difficult to deal with. However there was a time at Rust College, and it was around it was during the time that I was alone, one black student and I got into a discussion. And he said, "All whites are the enemy." You know, he's saying, "All whites are the enemy and you're the enemy as well," or words to that effect. I forget exactly the words he used. And I didn't really place this as a part of a growing movement, but in my mind, but I did say that, "Right. You're saying I'm the enemy. I say I just got out of jail and I was fighting a white sheriff, you know. It's easy for you to tell this to me." See, to me him saying that was like being so lack of courage because it was easy to say it to me as a white. I said, "Here you and me let's go down to the sheriff and you say that to the sheriff. He's the one that needs to hear that. I've already told him off. I've told him to go to hell and he beat me up and put me in jail for this. You know (inaudible), so you and me let's go down and you say that to him." Of course he said no. Now, having said all that, when I was in Georgia--this is now, I'm jumping back in time--around '63 I did a series of radio reports from Georgia. I called it Revolution in Georgia in '63, and the last program that I did was predicting the rise of black power. I said that really the only way that we're going to resolve this contradiction that I felt personally, that I experienced personally, was when blacks really take leadership of this movement. And although they had taken leadership, had been leaders from the beginning, but in ways, I said, it's going to be uncomfortable for whites. I didn't think of it as a personal thing or as a black power thing but this is a practical matter. We were hurting organizing. Our presence was hurting organizing because we were hurting the building of that very self esteem and self empowerment that we needed to organize. That is being white in a black situation. Telling blacks what to do basically and then doing it because we were white. A contradictory situation.

Rachal: I guess that almost touches back on my earlier question about the debates that were going on, especially among blacks in SNCC, about the invitation to bring whites in. So that does connect that a bit.

Rubin: Yes, and in fact I forgot to mention, I had lost track of my thought. But I was going to say at the time, aside from the safety factor--that is, would the presence of whites make us too obvious or not--this question was discussed quite a bit in the terms that I just said.

Rachal: In Atlanta or where?

Rubin: Throughout the South.



Rachal: OK.

Rubin: Wherever SNCC was.

Rachal: OK.

Rubin: When the role of whites was discussed. In other words, on the one hand you had Charles Sherrod who was saying, as I said, that we need to model living together. On the other hand you had people saying, "No, it's too dangerous and it hurts our organizing." Because basically they were saying, "Local people in Mississippi aren't ready yet to work with whites because the very presence of whites will trigger the way they've been trained, which is to be subservient, and we need people to gain a sense of self empowerment," although they didn't use that word. That didn't come into vogue for a while.

Rachal: Right.

Rubin: But they needed to gain a sense of self. You know, blacks organize blacks and whites organize whites and all come together. There was that kind of discussion going on.

Rachal: Larry, let me make sure I've some factual information correct. When were you here? I mean we have sort of bounced around in time a little bit in this discussion. Could you give me sort of the dates of when you were here?

Rubin: I came in late '63, early '64.

Rachal: To Marshall County.

Rubin: Yes.

Rachal: OK. And were you here basically from late '63 all the way through Freedom Summer?

Rubin: Yes and beyond.

Rachal: And beyond. OK, how much beyond?

Rubin: I think beginning in '65, I guess.

Rachal: So you were here at least one solid calendar year then.

Rubin: Yeah, pretty much.

Rachal: OK, OK. Were you ever a part of the Oxford, Ohio, training?

Rubin: Yes. I was in Marshall County and I was assigned to help Staunton Lynd do the freedom libraries.

Rachal: When was this?

Rubin: At the very beginning of Freedom Summer.

Rachal: OK, in June, OK.



Rubin: Yes. And I went to Oxford. I drove up to Oxford to pick up a load of books for the freedom libraries. And so I was there for a couple of days. I wasn't really part of the training, but I was, you know, I saw it.

Rachal: Were you there during the first week of volunteer training or later? Do you recall that? That's a pretty subtle question but--

Rubin: I have no idea.

Rachal: OK. Well, at the I believe it was--

Rubin: I could probably, if I look up my, as I say, look up my, you know--

Rachal: Your notes.

Rubin: --in Antioch I could figure that out.

Rachal: OK. I believe it was during the second week of training that Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney were murdered. And I was wondering if you by any chance were there in Oxford at that time?

Rubin: No, I was in Mississippi.

Rachal: OK.

Rubin: I got the word that they had disappeared.

Rachal: OK.

Rubin: I went back.

Rachal: OK. Let's follow through with the idea of the libraries because that does tie into some potential adult educational activities. But before I ask a specific question let me ask you if you by any chance ever bumped into Fred Winyard, a Chinese American, who is--let's see, he was in Carthage or Canton, I can't remember--but he was also very much involved in the libraries, in distributing the library books throughout the state.

Rubin: No.

Rachal: OK.

Rubin: I did not end up with that project. Initially I was assigned to it and I had several meetings with Staunton Lynd, but for reasons which escape me now, I wasn't that active in it over the course of the summer. I brought down what I imagine was the first load of books for it and helped distribute them and actually helped to sort them. I didn't actually help distribute them in the sense of delivering them.

Rachal: He did that as well. Fred Winyard did that as well. All sorts of distribution, loading them in boxes and then actual carrying them out. He had an interesting experience. Apparently there had been a law just recently passed specifically to deal with this issue of the libraries which said that all libraries in the state under any kind of public guise had to somehow be registered and approved or something like that. And I think he was arrested for violating that.

Rubin: Well, you know at the beginning of the summer, the state of Mississippi passed a whole gang--



Rachal: Right.

Rubin: --including one against advocating the overthrow of the state of Mississippi. And I was arrested under that for my freedom library work. In carrying this load of books from Oxford in a--it was in a U-Haul truck, actually U-Haul trailer, in the back of a car, I think or was it a truck? Gee, now I can't remember. But it was a U-Haul, I remember that. I can't remember whether it was a trailer or a truck. And it was a big load of books, and I carried them--I can't tell you I can't remember exactly why right now--but I went to Oxford, Mississippi, and was traveling north. Now, why I went from Oxford, Ohio [?] to the north, you know, further south than Holly Springs and north again I can't remember. Again, I can look it up. I know I have it written down.

Rachal: Um-hm.

Rubin: And if I had had my papers here I would be more prepared for this interview. But for some reason I was traveling from Oxford, Mississippi, north. I was stopped in Oxford, Mississippi, on suspicion of carrying literature advocating the overthrow of the state of Mississippi. And that literature was my library books. In fact the Oxford paper--there was several of us in the truck and I have the clipping--the Oxford paper took a picture of us in front of the truck being arrested with this little sheriff, a little short little fellow, and, you know, carrying this dangerous literature. But then in the article it said "the dangerous literature," which included copies of the Bobsey Twins (inaudible). I never could understand if they were trying to make it seem, you know--

Rachal: Theater.

Rubin: --subversive, which the headline did. Why they listed the books that were actually in it, you know. But they did and I have this clipping. It's a weird thing. Anyway I got arrested for carrying the freedom books, which had been donated by school districts mostly in the North. These were old school books from old libraries, and they were hardly subversive. From, you know, P.S. 94 in Salt Lake City or something, donated their used books, and I was hauling them. I hauled them to Rust College, to the basement of Rust College. There they sat for a while until we sorted them. But anyway, that arrest for carrying freedom library books, later, well, it changed my life actually. Because when they let us go, like I said, this was suspicion of carrying literature to overthrow the state of Mississippi, which I told the sheriff at that time that if I was going to overthrow something I wasn't going to bother with the state of Mississippi. (laughter) I was getting to be pretty much of a wiseguy. I had been down south about four years. I said, "I don't think its legal to have a law about overthrowing a state. I don't think you can overthrow a state." He said, "Yeah, it's a law." I said, "No, it couldn't be." And then he said--oh, but then I said, "Well, I don't think this is considered literature because I only have one or two copies of each thing. I think to be literature I have to have a massive amount of copies, you know, to give out." He didn't buy any of that but anyway he let me go. And then I was arrested again in Holly Springs, where I was headed and--

Rachal: Still had your books.

Rubin: Still in the same truck.

Rachal: OK.

Rubin: They let us out of jail.

Rachal: After you paid your fine?



Rubin: No, actually there was no fine.

Rachal: Oh OK, OK.

Rubin: It was a suspicion of. Actually, now that I thinking of it, at first it was something about driving a truck without a truck driver's license.

Rachal: Oh.

Rubin: It was not a question. It was the Sellers' U-Haul truck then there was suspicion of literature and (inaudible). Anyway they dropped those charges and they let us go. Actually, I guess legally and officially they didn't drop the charges because we were never charged. It was just suspicion of.

Rachal: OK.

Rubin: I guess on the books it was that they decided they weren't suspicious anymore and let us go. But we were arrested again in Holly Springs, and one of the several times I was interviewed and harassed by the State Sovereignty Commission. And down in Oxford they stole from me an address book which I was carrying with names and so on.

Rachal: Did they take it with your knowledge and just kept it or they clandestinely stole it?

Rubin: Clandestine. I had it in my briefcase in my truck in my cab.

Rachal: Right.

Rubin: No, they clandestinely stole it, and I think it was in Oxford. In fact I know it was in Oxford. But then I was arrested again in Holly Springs, and right now I can't remember the charges. But I do remember we were kept in jail for a couple of days because I had been in Holly Springs quite a bit. You know, this was my home territory.

Rachal: You were an old hand at Holly Springs. Well--

Rubin: Anyway the point of the story is around this time the three civil rights workers had disappeared. Senator Eastland was trying to show that it was a hoax. He kept saying that they were laughing it up in a New York hotel room on Moscow Gold. So that address book of mine became quite famous. Somehow Senator Eastland got ahold of it and read it into the Congressional Record as proof that I was part of a communist conspiracy running the civil rights movement in Mississippi. And this somehow was proof that the disappearance of the civil rights workers was a hoax and also the freedom libraries.

Rachal: How can that be stretched to that conclusion? Do you have any idea?

Rubin: You would have to ask Senator Eastland.

Rachal: OK.

Rubin: But the idea was really this was red-baiting. In other words, in Eastland's mind and in the mind of a good many Mississippians, if you showed left-wing connections, this was automatically proof of some kind of a conspiracy. Automatically proved you were running things, you know, and therefore automatically proof of whatever it is you were trying to prove. And he was trying to show it was a hoax and that was his logic. "It is a hoax. The communists are running the civil rights movement in Mississippi and that proves



it." Now, that is quite a stretch, isn't it? But given the tenor of the times it made sense to the people in Mississippi. The fact that he made up names that was not even in my book, he just, you know, made up names.

Rachal: Oh well, I could see maybe if you chose the right names then perhaps one could come to such a conclusion.

Rubin: He even lied about the color of the book. It was called Rubin's little black book and it was not. It was actually a reddish brown book, but the papers called it little black book. Anyway it was in the Congressional Record. It was on the front pages of all the papers throughout the South, and it was evidence of the hoax. You know, this is why he brought it up and that's also why I was beaten by that farmer. That's how he recognized me. Anyway so that's all that was my time with the freedom libraries.

Rachal: OK. So your library time ended about there. By the way, you might have known of the comment from an ACLU lawyer about that time which said, "It's a shame there weren't communists in SNCC. They would have been a moderating influence." (laughter)

Rubin: Matter of fact that's true. You know the interesting thing was, though, that--well, let me put it this way after on and off four years in the South, Georgia and Mississippi, this period of time was the most frightening for me because my picture, like I said, was in the papers as a communist. And I was scared for a couple of days to leave the freedom house for fear that they were going to kill me. And I was also afraid that this would hurt the project because it would alienate the black community, you know, this red-baiting. I was more afraid of that than anything. I volunteered to leave; I volunteered to just lay low. But the interesting thing was, the black community had been kept out of, you know, political life for so long and had been alienated, by politics--when I say alienated I don't mean it in the way we used to today, made apathetic. I mean purposely kept out of it by the white community. And red-baiting didn't mean anything to them. They weren't scared of me being called a communist. It didn't mean anything to them. It's kind of interesting.

Rachal: Then for those who did follow the implications I doubt they were too snookered by that argument anyway so--

Rubin: That's right because I had been there for a long time.

Rachal: Larry, let me move to some of the specific activities that I am calling or I am defining under the broad rubric of adult education. The voter registrational activities that you did, I presume you were basically canvassing house to house?

Rubin: That's right.

Rachal: And trying to persuade people to get registered. Tell me a few specifics about that.

Rubin: Sure. The work itself was canvassing house to house. Also organizing what we called mass meetings mostly in churches. The goal was to help people overcome fear of getting registered to vote by going down to vote in groups and also trying to get federal protection for voter registration activities. Now, at first part of this--well, let me put it this way, as far as the adult education aspect of it, really we've already touched on that. When I was talking about working with people who were, through fear and intimidation, used to treating whites through being subservient and some how was trying to deal with that, that was adult education.

Rachal: I agree.



Rubin: In fact the young people were not that way. It was mostly older people. That was one aspect of it. Another aspect of it, earlier on in Mississippi before the Voting Rights Act itself was passed, I was in Mississippi before that. In Marshall County and elsewhere we still had literacy tests, which were only used for blacks.

Rachal: Yes.

Rubin: So we were doing education in that aspect helping people pass the literacy test.

Rachal: Can you be a little more specific on that?

Rubin: Yes. If I'm remembering correctly, and again sometimes Georgia and Mississippi mush together.

Rachal: I can understand that.

Rubin: But I believe it was the same that the requirement was read, the main requirement, it was a very long test. In fact in my papers I actually have the test.

Rachal: Oh-h-h, I'd love to have a copy of that.

Rubin: I'm getting all this back next week, but you had to read and interpret any section of the Mississippi State Constitution--

Rachal: Right.

Rubin: --that the registrar chose. Had to read it. This is aside from writing your name and (inaudible).

Rachal: Um-hm.

Rubin: You had to read it and then interpret it to her satisfaction. I say her because more often than not they were women. And of course whatever you interpret it was not to their satisfaction.

Rachal: Never.

Rubin: Never. And in fact if the truth be told a lot of these registrars themselves were just semi-literate or illiterate themselves and they wouldn't know what you're talking about anyway. But whatever you did, if you were black, it wasn't to their satisfaction. So at first the work consisted of again, number one, first and foremost, helping people overcome fear. And that was through a variety of ways, organizing these meetings, just talking, and so forth and so forth. The other part was helping with the literacy test. Once the Voter Rights Act was passed, and I believe I was in Holly Springs at that time. I can't remember but I believe I was actually there when the thing passed. In any case then there was no longer the literacy test, but it was fear and intimidation. I'll give you an example.

Rachal: Let me stop you there. As soon as the Civil Rights Act was passed, which I believe was in early July when it passed the Senate--

Rubin: That's right, that's right.

Rachal: --that put an effective end to the literacy tests?



Rubin: At least in Marshall County.

Rachal: OK.

Rubin: I can't say for the rest of the state.

Rachal: OK.

Rubin: Marshall County was considered relatively liberal. We only had one killing up there from Freedom Summer. This is a fourth. There was three civil rights workers and Wayne Yancey who was killed in Marshall County. But Marshall County had always been majority black. You know, it had a black representative during Reconstruction and has a black representative today.

Rachal: Um-hm.

Rubin: And in any case, yes, it ended.

Rachal: OK, OK.

Rubin: Now let me give you some background. What would happen if you tried to go down to register to vote--and over the years blacks always did, and it was always a small number of blacks were allowed to register, you know, very small. Every time you went down to register to vote, your name was printed in the paper and I have several copies. Your name and address was printed in the paper when you registered to vote. Everybody knew who was black and who was white and so it was a public thing. Automatically you would lose your job. I mean there was not an employer in Marshall County, except maybe some, you know, the few black employers. Maybe if you worked at a black funeral home as an exception. But most blacks worked for whites.

*(The interview continues on tape two, side two.)*

Rubin: --(inaudible) had been burned, homes burned down, businesses burned down. This is over the years. I'm not--

Rachal: Right. I'm familiar with a fair amount of that, yeah.

Rubin: Exactly. So when I say fear, it was real fear. Now, this is over and above just walking into the courthouse surrounded by white deputies, you know, who hung out at the courthouse because it was also the jailhouse, and hostile whites and really nasty insulting crude registrars. So it was an absolutely courageous act for a black person to try to register to vote. And I say try because chances are you wouldn't be allowed, but people did try.

Rachal: Um-hm.

Rubin: Our job was to help overcome that.

Rachal: Well, do you remember any specific cases of going to a house and either being run off or being invited in and the discussion that ensued from that?

Rubin: Yes, yes. We were never run off. Some people were afraid to speak with us.

Rachal: That's what I meant, of course.



Rubin: They wouldn't come to the door. Now, we were run off of plantations, because we would drive onto a plantation, and whites always lived around the perimeter the outside, and blacks and sharecroppers always lived on the inside. We were run off by whites. I guess there was a foreman or maybe some sharecroppers themselves. In any case let me give you a typical discussion.

Rachal: OK.

Rubin: In fact I'll give you three different typical discussions. In general you go knock on a door, and we always went, well, not always, but we tried to go black and white together. There were times that I went by myself, and in general this was out in the country in Marshall County. Sometimes in Holly Springs itself but mostly up county. We'd introduce ourselves. We would say we were voter registration workers. Generally we would say that we're working with Rev. So-and-So, who would hopefully you know be a local--hopefully we would have recruited the local preacher to help lead the movement at first. And we would say we're working with Rev. So-and-So out of the local church and hopefully they would be familiar with that. And you know, "Have you ever tried to register to vote?" And "We're going to have a mass meeting next week. They're talking about going down to the courthouse the week after that to register." In other words, it would be like that, and the normal course of things when people would nod and wouldn't say anything, just nod. Unh-uh, um-hm, just like that. We would try to talk about the benefits of registering to vote, you know, saying that "how much did you make from your crop last year?" Mostly at this time that I'm talking about they were farmers, not 100 percent. And they would say, you know, "Well, are you satisfied with that?" Well, sometimes they would say yes and sometimes they would say no. Now, you know, we would say, "Well, you know if we had the right to vote here we could pass laws to protect you from being swindled. And what do you think of the schools here? If we had the right to vote maybe we could do something about the schools," you know, like that. That would be very, very difficult to get into. And at the end we would say, "Well, are you coming to the meeting?" And they would generally say, yes, you know, nod and say yes. So that's one type of discussion, one typical type of discussion.

Rachal: OK.

Rubin: We did all the talking. The second, and we ran into this a bit, people would say, "No, because it's useless, it's worthless. Why should they register to vote? You know these politicians never gave us anything."

Rachal: It was like putting them in harm's way for no good reason then.

Rubin: Exactly. "Even if we got the right to vote, we couldn't get anything out of it because"--in fact the quintessence of this type of discussion, and this is an absolutely true story and I will never forget it. I had to ride a mule into an area of Marshall County that didn't have any good roads and a farmer lent me a mule. I was canvassing by mule.

Rachal: A black farmer.

Rubin: A black farmer. And I go up to a house, a guy sitting on a porch. (inaudible) telling him I'm a voter registration worker and so forth. And he says, "Why should I register to vote? I'm still waiting for my forty acres and a mule." He said, "After slavery they promised us forty acres and a mule and I didn't get it." Well, this guy wasn't kidding. He wasn't born during slavery but his grandfather was. And his grandfather had been sheriff of Marshall County, the black sheriff during Reconstruction. And he remembers his grandfather saying they never did get their forty acres and a mule which they had been promised. And so that had turned him off to politics, and the only thing I could say to him is, "Well, you're right." And he wasn't really, I mean it's true he was talking about being in harm's way for nothing, you know. But in this



particular case he didn't seem too afraid of anything. He seemed more angry than anything. And he remembered when the blacks who were from his grandfather's time were then, during the time I'm talking about and are now today, the majority of Marshall County, did have the majority of voters, you know, and did elect the black people to office, and it didn't seem to do them any good. Anyway so the second was, it doesn't do us any good.

Rachal: OK.

Rubin: Now, this discussion that I just described wasn't typical of that but--

Rachal: But--

Rubin: (inaudible)

Rachal: OK.

Rubin: And the third was--and of course this is what we lived for--we would come to the door and knock and people would invite us in be very grateful almost and that was embarrassing too. We did not want gratitude; we wanted people to feel empowered. But you know they would invite us in and bring the family out and say, "We were waiting for you to come, and yes, we want to try. You know we've been talking a lot about this." You know, because by this time, by the summer of '64, this wasn't new to anybody. I don't think I ever approached anybody that hadn't heard anything about what I was talking about. I don't think I was ever the first person, you know, to even knock at a door or to discuss it, not in Mississippi. And they would say, yes, they would come to the meeting. Or another version of this third version is they would invite us in and they would seem skidderish but they would talk and say, "Well, you know, my neighbor tried it and got burned out," or "I tried it a few years ago and nothing happened (inaudible) me to register." We would talk and they would agree to come to the meeting and come, you know. And it was just a joy to see, you know. They'd end up, they would say things like, "Well, you know I'm forty-seven years old and it's time for me to do this." Or "I want my children to be proud of me." Or they would say, "Well"--and this happened quite a bit--"my youngster, my teenager has been pretty active in the movement in schools." And in Marshall County there were lots of activities to try to improve schools and "I guess it's about time that I followed my kids," you know. But even at best this third version, as a white, I still ran into the situation that I was talking about, you know, earlier but--

Rachal: OK.

Rubin: You know, we would do some real good. If we hadn't come to the door, these people would not have had the opportunity to register to vote.

Rachal: Right.

Rubin: They were waiting for somebody to come.

Rachal: Tell me a little bit about the mass meetings.

Rubin: Well, generally they were in churches. They sometimes were part of church services. Generally they would be begun by the preacher of the church. In fact getting permission to meet at a church, getting permission to use the church, was always the first and hardest part of all of this work. The first people as I--

Rachal: For fairly obvious reasons.



Rubin: Yes. When we convinced the preacher to give us the church, that was a big step in the right direction. In any case, so the preacher would, but sometimes he would talk about that. He would say, "You know so-and-so here" and point to a SNCC worker, "visited me four or five times. And at first I was very frightened, you know. But then I prayed on it and I prayed to God. And I realized that if I was really had faith, you know, I would let them use the church. God told me to use the church, God told me to let them use the church. And I prayed on this and I realized we need faith here. God will take care of us if we go ahead and do this." And then he would turn it over to a SNCC worker. And normally we would just talk about the week's activities and talk about some success stories, about so-and-so somewhere being registered to vote, and then plan a time to go down together to do it.

Rachal: Did music seem to play a role in any of this?

Rubin: It played an absolute major role from beginning to end. And that's one thing what I mean by, it was like a church service. We would always start out by singing a song. And you know we had our own version of church songs, Guide My Feet While I Run This Race.

Rachal: Say that again.

Rubin: Guide My Feet--

Rachal: Oh guide, OK.

Rubin: --While I Run This Race. And when we sang it--and this was often an opening song--we meant the voter registration, the freedom race, had a little different meaning.

Rachal: Um-hm.

Rubin: Or This Little Light of Mine.

Rachal: Um-hm.

Rubin: We would say this light of freedom, you know. And all of the old hymns and the spirituals we would sing throughout these meetings. We did more singing in the meetings than anything else. And of course when we went down as a group to register to vote we would sing.

Rachal: OK.

Rubin: And we would always end the meetings with We Shall Overcome, all of them.

Rachal: OK, good.

Rubin: And frankly if it wasn't for the music and the singing, that is, if it wasn't for the church tradition, it would have been much much more difficult for people to gain courage to do what they needed to do. The church tradition and its music was a method for finding the courage that it took to register to vote.

Rachal: Did the church become one of the community centers? As you know during Freedom Summer there were various freedom schools set up which tended to be, as I understand it, primarily oriented towards youth activities and youth education, and the community centers tended to be a little bit more oriented towards the adult. That's probably a little bit too simplistic a division there, but does that have some accuracy, and was there a community center in your area?



Rubin: Yes. Throughout Marshall County the community centers are mostly churches. As I said, the church was always the center of the communities and gaining the support of the minister was the first and most important key to the work. And generally the churches were, you know as I said, were the community centers. Now, in our case in Holly Springs, we had Rust College, which of course was Methodist church, and they allowed us to use the college for a lot of activities. And we had our freedom house right across the street, which was also a community center, the house that we used. But those were exceptions to the rules; mostly they were churches.

Rachal: OK.

Rubin: And incidentally, speaking of freedom school, the--what's he called? supervisor of Hinds County.

Rachal: That was in Jackson.

Rubin: Yes. I'm talking about today.

Rachal: Oh, OK, I'm sorry.

Rubin: Is that the (inaudible)?

Rachal: I don't--

Rubin: Someone that runs the county.

Rachal: Well, there's a board of supervisors, I believe, for every county, but I'm not actually sure. But anyway go ahead.

Rachal: Was trained in our freedom school in Marshall County.

Rachal: OK, OK.

Rubin: As we're talking, looking, I have his--Deberry, Roy Deberry.

Rachal: Is that--how's that spelled?

Rubin: I think it's D-E-B-E-R-R-Y.

Rachal: OK, Deberry.

Rubin: And he went to our freedom schools in Marshall County. Now he is the head of Hinds County. I'll say the head official.

Rachal: OK, OK.

Rubin: I don't think it's--I can't remember if it's an elected position or an appointed position. But he's the chief administrator officer of the Jackson area.

Rachal: OK.

Rubin: So a lot in fact a lot of your leaders today, your black leaders, went through the freedom schools.



Rachal: And can you tell me a little more about the community centers, which again as I'm interpreting this, has a little bit more of a focus on the adult educational aspects.

Rubin: Well, in our case, excuse me, in Holly Springs now, we had the freedom house like I said, which again was an unusual situation because normally they were churches, but in our case it was not. And we were open literally twenty-four hours a day, and people, mainly adults, because we did have the freedom schools as other activity came to these centers with just about every problem and ideas for every kind of activity you could name. They would come and they would tell us about the welfare problems or school problems with their kids or, you know, problems with getting their rightful due if they were sharecroppers or wanted to learn how to read and write better. A lot of people came for that just as individuals.

Rachal: I want to pursue that in a second but go ahead and follow out your thought.

Rubin: And we would help them on each and every problem that we could.

Rachal: Well, back to literacy, focusing a little bit on literacy, were you ever serving in a specifically a tutorial kind of role yourself?

Rubin: Quite often, yes. Now this is not part of the freedom schools although in an extended way you could say that. But, yes, I might say quite often, I mean, you know, during the course of the week. Adults would come and say they would like help learning how to read and write and we would work with them. I would work with them.

Rachal: What sort of text would you use?

Rubin: Anything at hand. We had a freedom school text, and I used that although it was written for kids. I shouldn't say a text, a freedom school sort of curriculum put together. And also from all those books that I brought there were some readers as well, you know, Dick and Jane books, kind of thing that I just kept. Because I helped in sorting through these hundreds of books, I would grab some.

Rachal: So you worked with a fair number of the folks over the time you were there literally working on how to read, then.

Rubin: Exactly, that's right and at their initiation. These are people that would come to the freedom house and ask for this kind of service.

Rachal: OK. The freedom house was rented from whom? Was it a black owner or a white owner?

Rubin: It was a black owner. I do not remember--

Rachal: Well, the name isn't that critical but--

Rubin: It might have been Rust College itself.

Rachal: OK.

Rubin: In fact when I was there for the reunion the summer before last, I visited it, and it's gone.

Rachal: Oh OK.



Rubin: It was at the corner of the main highway into Holly Springs and across the street from Rust College, right across the street from the college. I just can't remember honestly. Again, I could look it up, I could tell you, but I don't have it in hand.

Rachal: OK. Tell me if you think that I'm misguided in my distinction between the freedom schools being fundamentally oriented toward youth and the community centers being a little bit more adult. Is that fair or is it too mixed to say that?

Rubin: No, no. The answer to both is yes. They were very mixed but in theory and in general that's the way it was.

Rachal: OK.

Rubin: And remember a goodly number of the volunteers that came down were teachers. In fact we had a whole project of professional teachers coming down from the North to work in the freedom schools. These were professionals that were, you know, teachers during the year. And they were oriented more towards children as professionals.

Rachal: Right.

Rubin: We, that is, you know, people on the staff, people that had been there, before did a little bit of both. And again SNCC wasn't--and in this case actually we're talking not about SNCC; I'm talking about COFO.

Rachal: Right.

Rubin: I call it SNCC. In fact generally when I've said SNCC during the course of this conversation officially it was COFO.

Rachal: Yes.

Rubin: But generally we called it SNCC (inaudible).

Rachal: I think SNCC took the leadership role in most of the areas, but it was officially under COFO's name, yeah.

Rubin: We knew these names vaguely. The organizational identifications were not all that strong.

Rachal: OK.

Rubin: And the same thing is true of what we're talking about now. The distinctions between the, you know, saying this is a freedom school and this is a community center. And here we're going to teach kids to do this and here we're going to work with the adults to you know talk about family life, in fact, in some cases talk about starting small businesses. That (inaudible) effort. We've had the Poor People's Corporation [?].

Rachal: Interesting. Now, that was during Freedom Summer too?

Rubin: No, the talk about starting businesses was, but immediately after Freedom Summer was the Poor People's Corporation.



Rachal: OK.

Rubin: One of the offshoots of Freedom Summer.

Rachal: OK.

Rubin: In any case, all of these activities mashed together both in our minds and physically, you know.

Rachal: Yeah. There weren't such nice clean lines and boundaries between these things. And I need to be careful in my own research to make sure that I don't draw them as if they were.

Rubin: Well, they were and they weren't. I mean day to day they were not, and living through it it wouldn't look like there was.

Rachal: Um-hm, OK.

Rubin: But in retrospect and in some cases in initiation there were, you know. I'll give you an example. We had in Mississippi various committees of various professions. There was the medical committee for human rights. This was called the medical committee for civil rights. And there was the lawyers' organization. There was an organization of ministers. Each of these organizations were separate in their initiation, you know, and had very distinct histories in the way they organized people to come down. But once they were down, our ministers were teaching. And oh, we had a nurse in Holly Springs who came down with the medical committee, you know, but she was teaching and did a lot of things. So you understand what I'm saying.

Rachal: Yes.

Rubin: They're both distinct and not distinct. Most people there would say they weren't so distinct.

Rachal: OK, OK. What would you say that Freedom Summer's most successful aspect was and what was its greatest failure?

Rubin: Well, first of all, you can't overlook the numbers of people that were registered to vote and there were a lot. There were not as many as we had hoped, and if you looked at the cost both in lives and in terror, the numbers couldn't justify it. But we did get people registered to vote and that was a success, that was a victory.

Rachal: OK.

Rubin: I think, and in very concrete ways as I mentioned before, many young people did go through the freedom schools and I am convinced that because of the freedom school experience stayed active and are now leaders in the state of Mississippi. Roy Deberry is one, several others. When I was down there for the reunion, I kept running into people that were state senators today or mayors. The mayor of Holly Springs was quite active in all of this, Eddie Smith, mayor today. He was at Rust College. So that was a concrete advance, involving people in the political process who have state involvement become leaders. More important than that, we did accomplish something I think that had never been accomplished before in Mississippi. That is we had large numbers--I say large numbers, there was about a thousand volunteers all together, mostly white, not 100 percent white; I forget the percentage--working, living, playing, teaching, learning with blacks. And in the various small towns that was I think the biggest success also the biggest point of danger. But it certainly helped the Hodding Carters of the state, you know, that is the white leadership who had been moderating influences and had been integrationists over



the years. It helped them point to something. It also created challenges for them. They didn't always like us being there because, you know, then there was some danger. We also--and again I'm on the plus side--we almost got the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party recognized as the official delegation of Mississippi.

Rachal: Yes. You're my second interviewee to mention that in answer to this question, yeah.

Rubin: And remember and we didn't go into this aspect at the beginning but one of the reasons you might say the third reason for the Mississippi Freedom Summer--the first two as I said being focusing national attention on it and getting federal involvement and getting safety. So the fourth reason was because it was 1964 and it was the Democratic Party convention in Atlantic City. And we were hoping to have an integrated Democratic Party in Mississippi recognized, you know, as the official party. We almost did it. Got a compromise. You know they were sat as observers. That was a major step forward. Although I must tell you that the failure to be recognized gave major power, really sped up the thrust toward black separatism in SNCC. The failure of the Democratic Party to seat this integrated group. In other words, a lot of people said, "We went through all of this and we were sold out. And this shows you, you know, that it'll never work that is integration. We need a black movement here." So that all, you know, that's all to the plus side.

Rachal: OK.

Rubin: And the last thing that I just said was really beyond the power of Freedom Summer, one way or the other, not being sat up in Atlantic City, which by the way my parents were demonstrating in Atlantic City.

Rachal: (laughter) Oh OK.

Rubin: I was in Holly Springs. I never made it to Atlantic City but I saw them on television.

Rachal: Oh, right.

Rubin: So those are the pluses. And I'm glad somebody else mentioned it too because a lot of times we tend to be rather, I don't know what the word is, vague, get into a lot of spiritual things about the advantages, you know, what's going to happen.

Rachal: Well, actually it was Rims Barber, and as I'm re-remembering the conversation, he sort of pointed to it as a kind of mixed accomplishment, sort of as you have in a way. We almost did but ultimately we failed although that was a step, even though the failure was a step towards an eventual success, so you know--

Rubin: That's right, and see I would put that in more in the plus side although I know I'm in the minority on this. Most people involved would point to the failure because they were so disappointed but--

Rachal: Well, if you see it as a point on a continuum toward a goal which was eventually achieved, then you can see it as a necessary precursor I suppose. And so in that regard it is a success.

Rubin: That's right. And it was the first time that people, you know, in Mississippi and after all all these things were saying--I mean I'm talking from the point of view of an outsider--but all of the things we're talking about fundamentally were local people in Mississippi.

Rachal: Right.



Rubin: And--

*(The interview continues on tape three, side one.)*

Rubin: --I know that black and white Mississippians together in a leadership way did something together, that is went to Atlantic City and said, "We should be seated." You know, local people now. Now, at the time that was phenomenal.

Rachal: Yes, that's--

Rubin: And we just thought it was so phenomenal that the Democratic Party would have to seat this group. But of course they didn't.

Rachal: They didn't. What about on the failure side then?

Rubin: Failure to keep the movement, that is the movement for integration--and I'm using that term in the best sense of the word--going.

Rachal: A loss of momentum or what?

Rubin: Well, no, I don't think it was a loss of momentum. I think it was for a number of reasons, which I'll tell you in a second, the movement changed directions dramatically. It had been building up, but it was a really dramatic thing that the whites were kicked out of SNCC.

Rachal: Were they actually kicked out? I mean--

Rubin: Yes.

Rachal: How did you get that news?

Rubin: We were told, "Leave." It was about a year later. Whites are no longer welcome at SNCC. Actually what we were told is that whites should organize whites and blacks organize blacks.

Rachal: OK.

Rubin: And we can get together later on.

Rachal: OK.

Rubin: In fact I did. I went to Kentucky to organize with Southern (audible).

Rachal: I'm not familiar with that.

Rubin: I forget. I'm getting kind of tired.

Rachal: Yeah I know. I'm sure you are.

Rubin: But in any case though, I worked to conduct and organize whites. But the failures I think were from the following: number one, we lacked organizational skills, internal organizational skills. SNCC was very good when it came to organizing local people, but they really didn't grasp the need to build an



organization that would be able to weather the various vicissitudes of social and political life. So that when the Freedom Democratic Party was not recognized in '64, as you say it was later, the organization wasn't strong enough to keep people together. The various and diverse lessons that people learned from it, one of which is integration doesn't work. It wasn't able to have a forum where people could deal with these things in an organizational context and have that organization survive. So that SNCC fell apart not too long afterwards.

Rachal: OK.

Rubin: About a year later I guess. When I say fell apart, it really did. When whites were kicked out, SNCC didn't last too long afterwards.

Rachal: OK.

Rubin: It wasn't because whites left, it was because of they never did solve the organizational problems.

Rachal: OK.

Rubin: Secondly I think it was a failure in we really didn't bring the people of Mississippi in a sustained and, again, organized way together with movements elsewhere. There was actually the Black Panther movement was starting in Louisiana. I'm not talking about the Black Panther Movement that went up to you know in Berkeley.

Rachal: In Los Angeles.

Rubin: You know, I'm talking about the origin of the term. They called themselves Black Panthers down there in Louisiana. And other things happening that if people were brought together--and also the union movement--if people had been brought together they could have helped I think sustain them through rough times in Mississippi. I think that was a failure.

Rachal: OK.

Rubin: Now, there were--all of these things that I'm saying it's not all or nothing. There were, as I said, spinoffs that did last and it could be argued that what I just said could be disproven by the Poor People's Corporation, by the Freedom Democratic Party, you know, by other things that did last to some extent. What I'm saying is, it wasn't enough. It wasn't a total failure and it wasn't a total success either. But the other thing is this, one of the successes is this. Thirty-one years later we're sitting here talking about it. Thirty years later, that is last summer, the state of Mississippi welcomed us back. The state of Mississippi Chamber of Commerce welcomed us back. What I mean to say is that we've created an image, a tradition, a point of discussion, a point of Mississippi history which I suspect means a lot to the state and is a way for Mississippi to discuss the race question, the question of relationships between the races in the state. And also gives you a point of departure for discussing what is really more important in Mississippi was the economics. There's more unemployment percentage-wise in Mississippi today than there was in 1964.

Rachal: Yeah, I'm not sure that I knew that, but that does sound about right. Although our current governor has been congratulating himself for our recent economic turnaround largely due to casino gambling, which he ran against, but he's quite willing to take the accolades for having reduced unemployment. Well, let's see, Larry, I'm about at the end of my list although actually this has been a little bit more free flowing than following my specific list of questions. But you mentioned yesterday that you've had apparently a fairly substantive personal archival collection. Did you keep a journal or a diary? I know



you did your SNCC reports but did you do something on a more personal scale in terms of your personal reactions to the history that you were apart of?

Rubin: Not really. The further I got in that, I wrote I think it was a two-page piece. I called it A Walk Through Holly Springs, which is just really a personal account of walking through Holly Springs one day.

Rachal: OK.

Rubin: Deals with a lot of the things that I did.

Rachal: Yeah, OK.

Rubin: I could even fax that to you if you wish.

Rachal: Sure. In fact I am sending you some materials on the oral history program here and most importantly from my perspective the release which basically gives this interview to the university and will allow us to archive it and use it for research purposes. And ultimately you will get--I don't know what the time frame is on these things--but you will eventually get a bound copy of this interview or a transcription of it of course. And I'm going to be getting my materials off to you tomorrow. So with a little luck by Wednesday or Thursday you will get them. And if you could just return the release in the prepaid envelope, that will expedite things at this end and allow us to go ahead and begin the process of transcribing. Anyway if you do think of any other things that you think I might be interested specifically with relationship to the adult educational activities I would love Xeroxes of any of that. I hate to put you at any expense but anything--

Rubin: I don't mind it at all. Frankly, I think this is a very, very important project that you're doing.

Rachal: Well, I've published reasonably broadly at the article level. I've never written a book. But this is almost, bar none I guess, bar none the most interesting and engaging and pleasurable thing that I've ever researched. Much of my previous research has not been historical although I've done about four or five things. But this is the first historical thing that I've done relative to adult education in which participants are still alive. And so this interviewing is a new angle for me, and I'm not terribly good at it, but I am thoroughly enjoying it. And this has been most interesting and certainly helpful to me. Let me ask you one final question that really I should have picked up on in response to an earlier response that you gave. Back to the adult educational activities and you said you did some literacy work with people. Do you remember any classes, like groups of people that got together for literacy work or for how to pass the voter registration test or any of those things? Did you ever organize it or was it kind of an ad hoc individual sort of response to educational need?

Rubin: Yes, the latter. It was ad hoc, and, yes, I do remember the first, that is, classes in the voter registration. I don't remember reading classes per se.

Rachal: OK. But there were classes in voter registration. Were they typically in the church?

Rubin: Yes, or again in the case of Holly Springs in the freedom houses.

Rachal: In the freedom house itself, OK.

Rubin: But in the more rural areas, they were mostly in churches. Now, I do remember, you know, like I say, the reading was more tutorial, you know, one on one.



Rachal: Right.

Rubin: And informal, you know.

Rachal: Informal.

Rubin: Informal.

Rachal: Yes, yes, OK, OK. Well, can you think of anything else you would like to add? I know you're bushed. You've been going pretty strong for about two hours now so is there any final comment that you would like to add?

Rubin: Well, just a question. Have you been in contact with the Mississippi Community Foundation?

Rachal: No, I haven't.

Rubin: They're a group in Jackson who is dedicated to doing exactly what you're doing, that is oral histories centering around Freedom Summer but really the whole freedom movement in Mississippi. Mostly dealing with local people in Mississippi getting oral histories.

Rachal: That's interesting. Are they based at Jackson State?

Rubin: Yes.

Rachal: I think they are--I have bumped into this before and I think they've sort of got a new program of collecting oral histories. In fact I believe someone at Martin Luther King Center was telling me that possibly I might be able to make contributions of this to their collection as well. I suspect there are probably some legal impediments to that here at USM. But yeah, I believe that was the context in which I heard of them. Actually the collection here, however, is pretty strong. For example Amzie Moore and Fannie Lou Hamer are both in the collection. Obviously I'm just contributing a few interviews. They've got over seven hundred, not all dealing obviously with civil rights but a significant number of them are. So well--

Rubin: I'll be darn.

Rachal: Yeah.

*(A brief final segment of the interview relating current personal information was not included in this written transcript. This is the end of the transcribed interview.)*