

[Moses]

Bob Parris - June 20, 1963

My name is Robert Moses, I'm a field secretary for the Student Non-Violent Co-ordinating Committee; I first came south in July of 1960, on a field trip for SNCC. ()Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana, gathering people to go to the October conference. That was the first time that I met Amazie Moore, and at that time we sat down and planned a voter registration drive for Mississippi. I returned in the summer of 1961 to start that drive. We were to start in Cleveland, Mississippi, on the Delta, however we couldn't. We didn't have any equipment, we didn't even have a place at that time to meet. So we went down to McComb at the invitation of C.C. Bryant, who was local head of the NAACP there. And we began setting up a voter registration drive in McComb, Mississippi. What did we do?

Well, for two weeks, I did nothing but drive around the town, talking to the business leaders, the ministers, the people in the town, asking them if they would support ten students who would come in to work on a voter registration drive. We got a commitment from them, to support students for the month of August, and to pay for their room and board and some of their transportation while they were there. The project began August first, and lasted, as it turned out, till December; not just through the month of August.

We began in McComb, canvassing for about a two week period. This means that we went around house-to-house, door-to-door, in the hot sun, every day. Because the most important thing at the beginning was to convince the local townspeople that we meant business. That is, that we were serious, that we were not only young, but we were people who were responsible. What do you tell somebody when you go to their door? Well, first of all you tell them who you are, what you're trying to do, that you're working on voter registration. And the form that you try and get them to fill out. Now, the technique that we found best useable, I think was to simply present the form to them and say, "Have you ever tried to fill out this form, would you like to sit down now and try and fill it out?" And psychologically, as they're in the process of filling out a voter registration form, one of the questions asks them to do something right at the registrar's office, so that psychologically they have to complete a gap, to go and imagine themselves as being at the registrar's office. As you know in Mississippi, currently, you have to fill out a form which has about 21 questions on it, and aside from routine questions, there is on it a place where you write and then interpret some

section of the Constitution of Mississippi, and finally a section where you write and describe the duties and obligations of a citizen in Mississippi.

Now we did this for about two weeks, and finally began to get results. That is, people began to go down to Magnolia, Mississippi, which is the County Seat of Pike County, and attempt to register. In the meantime, quite naturally, people from Amite and Walthall County, which are the two adjacent counties to Pike County, came over asking us if we wouldn't accompany them and conduct schools in their counties, so that they could go down and try and register also. This point should be made quite clear, because many people have been very critical of going into such tough counties so early in the game. The position is simply this, that when they came over, and were very anxious to try and register, and we couldn't very well turn them down. Just from the human point of view, they had greater needs in those counties than in Pike County where we were working, and secondly from the psychological point of view, the whole problem of Mississippi is pervaded with fear, the problem is - you can't be in the position of turning down the tough areas, because the people there might think that - simply lose confidence in you. So we accepted this, we worked out a plan first whereby some of the students, John Hardy and two other students who had just come off the freedom rides, went into Walthall County to begin work. That was about the middle of August. At about the same time, I accompanied three people down to Liberty, in Amite County, beginning our first registration attempt there. One was a very old man, and then two ladies, middle aged; we left early morning of August 15, it was a Tuesday, we arrived at the courthouse about 10 o'clock. The registrar came out; I waited, by the side, waiting for either the farmer or one of the two ladies to say something to the registrar. He asked them, what did they want, what were they here for, in a very rough tone of voice. They didn't say anything, they were literally paralyzed with fear. So after a while I spoke up and said they would like to come to register - to try and register to vote. So he asked, well, who are you, what do you have to do with them, are you here to register? I told him who I was, and that we were conducting a school in McComb, and that these people had attended the school and they wanted an opportunity to register.

Well, he said they'll have to wait, because there was somebody there filling out the form. Well, there was a young white lady there with her husband, and she was sitting down, completing her registration form. When she finished, then our people started to register, one at a time. In the meantime a procession of people began moving in and out of the registration office. The

sheriff, a couple of his deputies, people from the office next door, people from the tax office, people who do the driver's license, looking in, staring, moving back out, muttering.

A Highway Patrolman finally came in and sat down in the office. And we stayed that way, in sort of uneasy tension, all morning. The first person who filled out the form took a long time to do it, and it was noontime before he was finished. When we came back, I was not permitted to stay in the office, but had to leave and sit on the front porch, which I did. We finally finished the whole process about 4:30, all of the three people had had a chance to register. Which was at least to fill out the form, which was a victory. Because they had been down several times before, and had not had a chance even to fill out the forms. On the way home we were (followed) by the highway patrolman who had spent the day in the registrar's office, Officer Carlisle. He tailed us for 10 miles, very close, about 20-25 feet behind us, all the way back towards McComb. At one point we pulled off the road, and he passed us, and circled round and came back, and we pulled up as he was passing us in the opposite direction, and he turned around and followed us again. So finally he blew us down, and I got out of the car, and asked him what the trouble was, because the people in the car by that time were very, very frightened. He asked me who I was, and what my business was, and told me that I was interfering in what he was doing. I said I simply wanted to find out what the problem was, and what we were being stopped for. He told me to get back in the car. As I did so, I jotted his name down. He then opened the car door and pushed me, and said, "Get in the car, nigger," and slammed the door after me. He then told us to follow him in the car, and he took us over to McComb, where I was told that I was placed under arrest. They called up the town prosecuting attorney, he came down, and he and the highway patrolman then sat down and opened up the law books and looked through to find out a charge. And the first charge, we were interfering with an officer in the process of arresting somebody. Then found out that the only person arrested was myself, () charged with interfering with an officer in the discharge of his duties. The county attorney asked me if I was ready for the trial, I said could I make a phone call. He said yes. I picked up the phone and called Washington, D.C., the Justice Department. Cause I'd been in communication with some members of the Justice Department, particularly John (), and had received letters delineating those sections of the Civil Rights acts of 1957 and 1960 which guaranteed protection to people who are trying to register and to anyone who is aiding other people in trying to register. And they'd also indicated that if we had any trouble, we were to call Washington or the nearest office of the FBI. So I called them, collect. The people in the office were rather astonished

at the fact that the call went through, and then they began to get fidgety. So I () the call, and I explained to Mr. D. exactly what had happened, in their presence, and told him that I thought we were being intimidated simply because the people were trying to go down and register.

Well, we had the trial right after that, I was found guilty of this charge of interfering with an officer, and the judge and county prosecuting attorney went out, consulted and came back, and I was given a suspended sentence - 90 day suspended sentence, and fined five dollars for costs of court. So I refused to pay the five dollar cost of court, and argued that I shouldn't have been given anything at all, but should have been set free, since I was obviously not guilty.

I was taken to jail then, this was my first introduction to Mississippi jails. I spent a couple of days in jail, and was finally bailed out when the bond money came through via the NAACP. We decided at that time to appeal the case, though later the appeal was dropped.

Well, that was our first introduction to Amite County. Immediately after that, we rode out to Steptoe's house, who was the local president of the NAACP, in the southern part of the county, and made plans to set up a school at his farm. Which we did, and for the last two weeks of August, we proceeded to teach people - farmers - down in the southern area of Amite County, at the little church there, coming two, three, sometimes five or ten at a time. We were severely handicapped because we didn't have transportation, and the farms there were so far apart. So we had to wait on the people at the church. While we were out there, the next week, another team went down to Liberty, to register. And they didn't have any difficulty at all. This was August 22, in fact the boys that went down with them were able to stay in the registrar's office, and the people were able to complete their registration without difficulty. They sent word of this out to us at Steptoe's, and we were somewhat encouraged by this. After that, we planned to make another registration attempt on the 29th of August, which was, again, a Tuesday. We didn't figure we would have much trouble, although there'd been rumors floating around down at Steptoe's that there might be trouble, and people - make another registration attempt down at Liberty.

This was the day, then, that Curtis Dawson and Preacher Marx and I were to go down and try and register. The day Curtis Dawson came, drove down by Steptoe's, picked me up, and we went into Liberty, we were to meet Marx at the courthouse lawn,

and instead, we had to walk through the town, and on our way back we were accosted by Billy Jack () and some other boys. I was rather severely beaten. I remember very sharply that I didn't want to go immediately back into town, because my shirt was very bloody, and I figured that if we went back in, we'd probably be fighting everybody. So instead we went back out to Steptoe's, where we washed down before we came back into McComb. So that very same day, they'd had the first sit-in in McComb. So that when we got back, everybody was excited, and a mass meeting was planned that very night. And (Howells) and Curtis had sat in at the Woolworth's lunch counter in McComb, and the town was in a big uproar.

We had a mass meeting that night, and made plans for two things - one, the kids made plans to continue their sit-in activities, and two, we made plans to go back down to Liberty and try and register some more. We thought that was extremely important, that we go back to Liberty immediately, so that people in that county would not feel that we had been frightened off by the beating, and before they could get a chance there to rally their forces. Accordingly, on Thursday, August 31, there was more activity both in Liberty and in McComb. In McComb there were more sit-ins, in Liberty another registration attempt, coupled with an attempt by us to find the person who had done the beating and have his trial. It turned out that we did find him, that we did have his trial, they had a six-man justice of the peace jury, that the courthouse in a twinkling was packed, that is, the trial was scheduled that day, and within two hours started, and within two hours farmers, all white, came from all parts of the county, wearing their guns, sitting in the courthouse. We were advised not to sit in the courthouse except while we testified, otherwise we were in a back room; after the testimony was over the sheriff came back and told us that he didn't think it was safe for us to remain there while the jury gave its decision, and accordingly escorted us to the county line. We read in the papers the next day that Billy Jack () had been acquitted; meantime, in McComb, more sit-ins had taken place.

Brenda Travis had sat in this time; she was a young girl, just sixteen years old, and had been very active with us in the voter registration in McComb. And I mean that she, with all of us, had walked the streets every day, from two to five, or from twelve to five, as it were, in the hot sun, ()

the local Negroes there in McComb, and the feeling of apathy, or the fear, and the inability to move, the absolute immobility in the face of going down and facing the registrar in Magnolia. Her response was to take some kind of action on her own, so she

joined the sit-in group. This infuriated the community, both the white and the Negro community; the Negroes were infuriated that she was so young, and should be down there in that jail, and the white community was infuriated that we would send a young girl down like that. Actually, we hadn't known her age; I wasn't in town at the time, and though I did know her age, she told the other people who were conducting the sit-ins, (Marion Barry) and some of the other SNCC workers, that she was over eighteen.

At this point, then, the town was in an uproar, we were having meetings, the white people were having meetings in their section of the town, the Negroes were having meetings in their section of the town. To top it all off, the next week John Hardy, was arrested and put in jail in Walthall County. He had been working there for two weeks, and they'd been taking people down, and finally one day he was taking some people down to a registrar's office, had walked in, had been refused the right to register, and he had asked the registrar why. The registrar recognized him, took his gun out of his desk drawer, and snapped down upon his head with the butt of his pistol. John staggered out into the street, and was walking on the street when he was accosted by the sheriff, and arrested, and charged with disturbing the peace. John wound up in the Magnolia jail, in Pike County, because it was too hot for him in Walthall County, and they had to transfer him immediately. He was in the cell the rest of the sit-in period, and that was the first time that I had gone down and had a chance to see them all in jail down there. It was pretty hot down there, and they told me that they were not being allowed to take baths, that the food was pretty bad, and their spirits, however, were good, except that they were obviously losing weight, and one of them was very anxious to come out.

The Justice Department entered immediately on John Hardy's case. It took place, I think, on September 7, two days later they had filed a suit in the District Federal Court in Jackson, asking that a temporary injunction be placed stopping the trial, which was to take place the next day in Walthall County. Judge Cox, who was the first appointee of President Eisenhower and a long friend of Senator Eastlund, and an obvious patronage, or an obvious result of the Senatorial privilege, in appointing judicial appointments to the Federal Courts, refused to give them a favorable hearing. I suppose it was a victory that he heard it at all that evening, and that they were able then to fly him to Montgomery that night, I think it was a Thursday night, and wake up Judge Reeves in Montgomery, Alabama, at twelve o'clock at night, and ask him to give a temporary injunction and overrule Judge Cox.

In the meantime, we had to go back to Walthall County, John Hardy and myself, to face his trial the next morning. We didn't know

whether the Justice Department would be able to get a stay or not. I remember, that morning we were both rather tired, and a little shook at the thought of going back into Walthall County to face this trial. We got there early in the morning, and there were people gathering, and gathered as soon as we appeared. They sent us up into the buzzard's roost, the little set of sloping, ()-like extensions, at the back of the courtroom in (Tylertown), which is the County Seat of Walthall County. And then all the old farmers, and the young ones, () and all the men - in a chorus - gathered downstairs to see if the trial was going to take place. While we were sitting there, the county prosecuting attorney came in and announced that the Justice Department had obtained a stay from Judge Reeves in Alabama, and that the trial would be () from () Court to () Court and that until that time John Hardy was free and not bound to stay in jail.

So we left - or at least we tried to leave. The people were rather thick in the corridor as we were leaving, and grabbing John by the shirtsleeve as we were leaving, and making nasty remarks at him as we left. We finally got through and to the car, and there, of all things, the car door was stuck, and we couldn't get it open. So finally the policeman came up and told us we'd better get out of there, because he couldn't hold those people back for so long. We (*drove*) out into the mob, and then got on out of town, being very careful to stay under the speed limit.

We finally got back into McComb. So, that was about it. A couple of days before John Hardy was arrested, we had gone back into Amite County, to Liberty; this time I was not beaten but () was, I think that was on the fifth of September, and I stood by and watched Travis get pummeled by an old man, tall, reedy and thin, very, very, very mean, with a lot of hatred in him. However, he wasn't very, very strong, and luckily, he didn't do too much damage to Travis, who suffered from an eye bruise and some head-knockin'.

On that particular occasion, Travis and I had been sitting out front on the courthouse, and then decided that we would go in back because the people were beginning to gather out front. And then, finally everybody - about fifteen people gathered around back, and began questioning Travis and myself. Now our reaction in all of those instances, to the questioning, is to simply shut up, be silent, and get very, very depressed. So people were talking to Travis, and he was answering them some. They were asking him where was he from, and how come a Negro from New York City could think that he could come down here and teach people down here how to register to vote, when they had all those problems up there in New York City, the problems of white girls going with nigger boys, and all such like that. Finally they began to beat on Travis, and I started going

toward the sheriff's office, and was cut off, and finally went back to try to get Travis away from this fellow who was beating on him. We did this, and we walked over to a (truck) which was nearby, and got in it, and went on back to McComb.

Well, the Travis (*Britt*) incident, followed by the John Hardy incident, in Walthall County, just about cleaned us out. The farmers in both those counties were no longer willing to go down, people in Pike County and in McComb were in an uproar, with the sit-in demonstrations and the fact that Brenda Travis, a sixteen year-old girl was in jail, and so the rest of the month of September, we just had a tough time. Wasn't much we could do, the kids were in jail, people who were in jail on the sit-in charges had five thousand dollar bail over their heads, and the problem was to raise that money and get them out of jail, and then to sit down and see if we couldn't collect the pieces together.

Well, we got through September, aided in great measure by the presence of some of the lawyers from the Justice Department who finally came in to begin investigating the voting complaints. We stayed in for about a two-week period, and while they were there they gave a lot of support and confidence to the Negroes, in the community, and allowed us to go back into Walthall and Amite Counties and interview people who had been involved in voter registration campaigns, and raised some hope that perhaps something would be done.

And then finally the boom lowered, and September 31, Herbert Lee was killed in Amite County. He had spent the previous week in Amite County with lawyers from the Justice Department investigating, and taking affidavits from all the people who had been down to register. The Sunday before he was killed I was down at Steptoe's with John ~~Deak~~ from the Justice Department, and we asked Steptoe was there any danger in that area, who was causing the trouble, and who were the people in danger. Steptoe told us that E.H. Hurst, who lived across from them, had been threatening people, and that specifically, people said that he, Steptoe, and Herbert Lee, and George Reeves, were in danger of losing their lives.

We went out, but didn't see Lee that afternoon. That night John ~~Deak~~ and the other lawyers from the Justice Department left; the following morning, about 12:00 noon, () Anderson came by the voter registration office, said a man had been shot in Amite County, they'd brought him over to McComb, and he was lying on a table in a funeral hall in McComb. And he asked me if I might have done it. I went down to take a look at the body, and it was Herbert Lee. There was a bullet hole in the left side of his head, just above the ear, he had on his farm clothes, and I was told that he had been shot that morning.

Well, there wasn't much to do. We waited until nightfall, and then we went into Amite County. And then for the next four or five nights we drove the roads every night, from the time it got dark until about three or four in the morning, till it was light again. Our first object was to try and track down those people, Negroes, who had been at the shooting, and try and get their stories. And there were three such people who had been at the shooting, had seen the whole incident, and essentially, they told the same story.

Essentially, their story was this. They were standing at the cotton gin early in the morning, and they saw Herbert Lee drive up in his truck with a load of cotton, and E.H. Hurst, following directly behind him in an empty truck. Hurst got out of his truck and came to the cab on the driver's side of Lee's, and began arguing with Lee. He began gesticulating towards Lee, and pulled out a gun, which he had under his shirt, and began threatening Lee with it. One of the people who was close by said that Hurst was telling Lee, "No fooling around this time, I really mean business." And that Lee told him, "Put the gun down." I won't talk to you unless you put the gun down." Hurst put the gun back under his coat, and then Lee slid out on the other side, on the off side of the cab. As he got out Hurst ran around the front of the cab, took his gun out again, pointed at Lee and shot him. This is the story that three Negro witnesses told us on three separate nights, as we went out in Amite County, tracking them down, knocking on their doors, waking them up in the middle of the night.

They also told us another story. Two of them admitted that they had been pressured by the local authorities - sheriffs and the deputy sheriff and some of the white people in town - to tell that there hadn't been a fight, that Lee had had a tire tool, that he had tried to hit Hurst with a tire tool, and that Hurst had shot Lee in self-defense. They said that these stories were not true, but that they had been forced to tell them for fear of their own lives. (Lee in any case) was a small man, about 5'4, maybe about 150 pounds, Hurst was a large man, about 6'2, upwards of 200 pounds, I understand. Inconceivable that he could have been so threatened by Lee, with a tire tool, that he would have had to shoot him. The fact was, I believe, as one of the witnesses who was standing directly behind Lee stated, was that Lee never raised a hand to hit him, and that Hurst simply ran around the front of his car and shot him. Dr. Anderson who received the body later in McComb said that there were no power burns, on Lee's head, and it was not possible, as Hurst claimed, that the gun went off accidentally when he hit Lee on the side of his head. Lee's body lay on the ground that morning for two hours, uncovered, until they finally got a funeral home in McComb to take it in. No one in Liberty would touch it.

They had a coroner's jury that very same afternoon, Hurst was acquitted, he never spent a moment in jail; in fact, the sheriff had whisked him away very shortly after the crime was committed. I remember reading very bitterly in the papers the next morning, a little short article on the front page of the McComb Enterprise-Journal. It said that a Negro had been shot, in self-defense, as he was trying to attack E.H. Hurst. And that was it. They might have said he'd been (a bum). There was no mention that he was a farmer, with a family, nine kids - beautiful kids - and that he had farmed all of his life in the county, and that he had been a very substantial citizen. It was as if he'd been a drunk or something, and had gotten into a fight and gotten shot.

Well, that wasn't the end of the case. We tried to track down () that we could prove, or attach it to the voter registration drive. Now we knew in our hearts and minds that Hurst was attacking Lee because of the voter registration drive, and at the polls we all felt guilty, and felt responsible. Cause it's one thing to get beat up, and it's another thing to be responsible and participate in some way in a killing. We found out only that Hurst had been waiting for Lee on the road, in the state Senator's house the morning of the killing, that when Lee came by Hurst said, "There goes Lee, I have something to see him about." And had got into a truck and drove off. He wasn't even driving his own truck, he was driving Billy Jack (Casten's) truck. Yet the shooting was done with his own gun, which probably means that he was carrying it on his person, which we also found out is contrary to his accustomed use. People saw him passing on the highway, Hurst close behind Lee, and then the people saw the actual killing.

() the Citizen's Council's meetings had taken place in Liberty, where people had come from counties 200 miles away, to discuss the voter registration drive, the plans that had been made at those meetings, and the plans to stop the drive were not available. And try as we might, we couldn't get even people who lived in town to breathe a word about any other things which any other white people invariably tell Negroes when things are about to happen.

[That wasn't the end; about a month later one of the witnesses came back over to McComb. He told us that they were going to have the grand jury hearing, that he had told a lie at the coroner's jury, that he wanted to know if he told the truth at the grand jury hearing, would it be possible to provide him with protection. We called the Justice Department, we talked to responsible officials in that department, they told us that there was no way possible to provide protection for a witness at such a hearing, and that probably in any case it didn't matter what he testified, and that Hurst would be found innocent. So this man went back and told the story he'd told to the coroner's jury, to the grand jury. And they did, obviously, fail to indict Hurst.]

For this man, that wasn't the end of his troubles; and about six or eight months later, his jaw was broken by the deputy sheriff, who knew that he had told the FBI that he had been forced to tell a lie to the grand jury and to the coroner's jury. Because the deputy sheriff told him exactly what he had told the FBI. For reasons like these that we believe that the local FBI was sometimes in collusion with the local sheriffs and chiefs of police, and that Negro witnesses aren't safe in telling inside information to local agents of the FBI.

SIDE TWO

(Opening sentences lost for lack of volume)

... () was not allowed to go back in the school, and early in October, () 150 students marched out and marched downtown. There's no doubt in my mind that probably the reason for the move, and part of the reason for () that so many students could go, was the whole series of beatings, culminating in the killing, that had taken place in that area. () the white community was completely on edge by that time, and by the time 150 students stopped in front of the city hall to begin ~~praying~~ one by one, Brenda first, and then Curtis, and then (), () [all of us herded up the steps and into the city courthouse, () packed on the steps as we went up, and then the mob outside, waiting, (), threatening. And inside, (), the white people, the so-called good citizens of the town, one by one, to take a look at this Moses guy. And they would come down, and stand at the front of the jail, and say where was Moses. And then the kids would point me out, and I was, again, very, very quiet, and (). And the people would stand up, (), and that went on the rest of that day. We were finally taken up, one by one, into a kind of kangaroo court which they held upstairs, which was crowded with citizens from the town, the sheriff, the local county attorney, the local judges. The purpose of the court was to gain information about the timing of the demonstrations, so that they could prepare their case. We of course didn't have to answer any of their questions; nevertheless, we did, and one by one we went up and told our story. I remember when I went in, the room was very tense, there were people sort of sitting around on the edges, on the benches in the dark, and the sheriffs were

PROCESSOR'S NOTE:

THE ORIGINAL TRANSCRIPT OF THIS INTERVIEW
IS INCOMPLETE - NO PAGES BEYOND P. 11 OF THE
BOB PARRIS MOSES INTERVIEW WERE PART OF THE
COLLECTION