

DAVID GORDON INTERVIEW
October 5, 1965

G. We know two days before that there was going to be a demonstration, by that time John was already gone we didn't have contact with him. We saw him more regularly when he was living in Selma which is where we were. We had definitely planned to go down there. We got there about (9:00, we weren't sure when it was going to start. We spent some time talking to the two negro leaders of the local Lowndes County Movement and they didn't know what time it was going to start. They said the local kids were all sort of talking about the demonstration. Then Jon's rented car came up with Stokely in it and 3 or 4 other Snic people. John and Fr. More and Stokely came over and talked to us. John and Stokely and Ed and I, that's the other guy I worked with, got into talking about the real problem at that time which was whether the local Ft. Deposit teenagers were going to remain non-violent if they were struck, beaten during the arrests that they assumed would take place. Snic was wavering between trying to have them call off the demonstration if the kids refused to be non-violent or just trying to convince them to be non-violent and letting them go ahead. Stokely helped the position which is a typical Snic position and Jon concurred that it was not Snic's role to issue orders, but only to advise. They would try their best to convince them to remain non-violent, but they wouldn't issue any orders. Jimmy Rogers because he was living in Ft. Deposit was more or less in charge and Jon kind of vaguely mentioned then and we found out later from a girl in Lowndes County, named Geraldine Logan that when he came down there he had not been planning on participating in the demonstration. He was mainly going to observe and take pictures. But when he got there he saw that a few of the Snic leaders weren't going to take part because they wanted to stay out of jail and continue working in the county and also that there weren't that many people in it so he felt more or less called upon to participate and prop up the courage of the people and the local kids for whom this was their first demonstration. They spent a good deal of the morning at this church talking out the whole question of non-violence. Eventually the Snic kids convinced them to be non-violent and of the damage that would be done in long range terms of fighting back. At almost exactly 11:30 they started out from the church to walk the two blocks down town. They were planning to picket three stores in which they claimed they had been intimidated and harrassed- negro customers. These were all in the one downtown block. They set out in three different groups, approaching the downtown block from three different directions.

Jon was in one group that went sort of straight from the church downtown along a side street and we saw the group as they passed where we were waiting and Jon was talking to the younger kids it seemed he was trying again to prop them up. And as he

David Gordon Interview
Continued -

always was in situations like this he was joking and smiling and looked very calm. He had been in a very joking mood before when were talking with them with Stokely. At that time I was also impressed at the difference between Jon and Fr. Morsreau. Fr. Morsreau was much more reserved. In part I think because he was such a recent arrival and hadn't gotten used to the situation. Jon was almost a veteran by then.

Joh's group which consisted of 10 people managed to get as far as the downtown block and walked along the sidewalk in front of the stores, they all had signs, was immediately arrested. I think they were the group that was stopped and fairly sure arrested by the one negro policeman in town. They were very, very quietly escorted in the direction of the city jail. They were arrested at 11:44 a few other groups were arrested at 11:46 according to F.B.I. statistics. It was at this point that Jimmy Rogers later reported Jon said it was within our constitutional rights to picket and I said we didn't have any rights . . .

The jail was across the railroad tracks and about a block and a half away from the closest downtown store. Geographically one side of the block they were going to picket on was one on which a lot of negroes were clustered and being a Saturday morning in a rural town, everybody was out and everybody knew there was going to be a demonstration. The negroes looked very scared, very concerned. The whites on the street of the block perpendicular wanted ^{the} to side faces of the block ~~where~~ ^{were} very edgy and belligerent. We'd been going back and forth on that block all morning, we had already been identified as freedom riders because we had been seen talking to negroes. All along that block guys had been threatening us and telling us to get out of town. This was the side of the block along which they had to walk when they were arrested to the jail. By the time they were arrested and everyone knew that the demonstration was starting, the cluster of whites was really large and what looked like citizens, or what may have been temporarily appointed as deputies were marching along with the police and county officials as they escorted the demonstrators to jail. A lot of them had clubs and a number of them had rifles, shotguns mainly. We didn't hear any of the comments that were undoubtedly made to the demonstrators by the white people there because we were staying our distance. They marched them across the tracks, and by this time they had arrested the other groups and were all put into an incredibly small dollhouse structure probably no more than 10 x 15 ft. They stayed there for a while and immediately started singing. We drove by there before the police started getting ready to take their names and load them onto the

David Gordon Interview
Continued -

truck for Haneville. We didn't know at that time that they were going to be transferred, they just looked miserable, we couldn't imagine them having to stay there.

In about 20 minutes the police went down to process them, search them, load them one by one onto this garbage truck which eventually took them to Haneville. By this time the crowd of whites which was mainly around the police station but some of which were down sort of supervising the loading procedure was quite large then. By this time also directly across the railroad tracks was a huge crowd of negroes and it was very clear that the negroes were to stay put there and the whites had total freedom to mill around in front of the police station. The negroes just looked incredibly frightened and very much at a loss as to what to think and do. It was a totally new experience for everyone.

It was a symbol of how new Ft. Deposit was to a civil rights movement that we were called Freedom Riders, because it was a four year old concept. As they were being loaded on to the garbage truck many of the whites' attention was distracted by our arrival on the scene with our broken car window. At the time when they were almost finished with the loading and the truck was getting ready to drive off, all the whites around there were surrounding us. At first wondering what happened to us and then getting increasingly angry a couple of people got pretty hysterical--- one guy broke into an hysterical speech in which one line went like, if I were you'all I would shave my head, paint myself black from head to toe, buy myself a nigger wig and quit calling myself white and adulterating the pure white race. He went on for quite a while and what had once been sort of a curious crowd, seeing us drive up with broken window, blood pouring down Sandy's arm was beginning to turn into a very hostile crowd. We were doing all we could. We were waiting for the police to report what had happened to us, but we were beginning to decide to just leave and forget about it. They were becoming incredibly hostile about that time. We were trying to redirect their attention. We were bad in every respect, not only were we nigger lovers, but we were reporters. Right about at that point when this guy got hysterical the garbage truck was finally loaded and it drove off along the street to the side of us and immediately the group started singing as they drove away, and pointedly waved to all the negroes standing across the railroad tracks, trying to say everything's O.K., don't worry about us. Both Jon and Stokely were very calm in the truck, some people were rather worried. I looked directly at Stokely and he had the most serene expression on his face I've ever seen. Then as you know they drove off up to Haneville. We had to stay

David Gordon Interview
Continued-

There for another 20 minutes. The mob wouldn't quiet down, just milled around. We drove back through that night to try to retrieve our car and there was still at 10:30 at night a group of about 12 people standing outside the Polser Motor Co. which all morning had been the headquarters of the law enforcement officials. The police chiefs and the state patrolmen were switching weaponry of sorts and making preparations for whatever might happen, talking with Carl Golson who was the drunken registrar who broke our window. I understood, although I never really had it confirmed that they left about six kids, six minors, in the jail overnight. Nothing happened around the Ft. Deposit jail that night.

Stokely told a story from there on, I know just a lot of stories about what went on in jail, many of which you probably know too. Stokely told us a kind of interesting story which I don't fit imchronologically because he was in the truck which drove to Hanesville. He told us the story of being driven to Hanesville by Chet Coleson, the county coroner, who is a very tempermental guy. Stokely was very calm and joking with him on the way up there. They knew each other before and they had a joking ribaldic relationship on the way up and he got up to the jail. I think this may have taken place on Sunday. The people inside were singing just as loud as can be and Coleson suddenly just lost his temper, just leaped out of the car and pulled his pistol and fired two shots into the jail directly at the window. Then he turned around to Stokely and said, "Nigger, you better get your ass out of here and get on in there." Stokely being the kind he is pulled his legs out very slowly showing he wasn't going to run for any white man and Coleson didn't do anything.

Then there were some of the stories that Rigby told, the little anecdote I mentioned in my story about sending around a note saying we are going to hold a prayer and song session at 11:00 would you care to join us, sending it around to the prisoners.

S.q When the time came was he prepared to bail everybody out?

G. No, just Jon and Fr. Morsreau.

S. Do you know why it didn't include the rest?

G. Didn't have the money. They weren't accepting property bond and total bail came to somewhere around \$6,000. Stokely and Chris had already been bailed out, they had a \$1,000 bond, All the other people had \$100 a piece. They had trouble getting a bondsman, so it was a question of getting cash for it.

David Gordon Interview

Continued-

G. I might repeat on tape the story about Sunday night and the lawyer. We got back and we ran into Rev. Middlebrook the project director in Dallas County with Fr. Stein and several S.C.L. people and they wanted to know everything we knew seeing we just came back from Ft. Deposit. After we were chased out of Ft. Deposit we were in Hanesville and we were talking to John Huhler, the president of the Lowdnes County movement. Really find fellow and he was with a good number of other negroes. This was a very interesting fact, they met Sunday afternoon the negro movement in Lowdnes County met up in Trickam which is in the north of the county where they hold most of their mass meetings, it's sort of the safe part of the county, hardly any whites up there at all and drove down to the tune of about 50 people in trucks and cars and everything and about 4000 Sunday afternoon gathered around Hanesville square, they were preparing to hold a mass meeting in a church near the jail. Huhler tried to ask to be able to see some of the prisoners to talk about legal arrangements. We went back and ran into Middlebrook and one thing we told him was there was no lawyer. Fr. Stein was very concerned that there was no lawyer and he wanted to do everything he could to get them one. Middlebrook immediately interjected with this optional working agreement that he had with Snic that he'd never offered his services at all Snic had had to come to him and ask. Snic either used the S.C.L.C. lawyer or Jack G , NAACP legal counsel. So there were 3 days or so that there was no lawyer at all. Already being denied the use of property bonds so there was no prospect of getting bail for them at that time

As far as what happened on Friday afternoon I don't think I really know that much, I wouldn't know anything you don't know already.

S. Did you talk with Jon in Hanesville? Did you see him?

G. No. There wouldn't have been a prayer in the world that he could have gone in to talk with him. But you were there talking with the people who were with him when he was shot, right afterwards is that right?

G. I spent all of Saturday, the day after Jon was shot, with the people who were with, specifically, Ruby Sayles, Gloria Larry, Willie Vaughn and Jimmie Rogers. George Bailey had gone back to Ft. Deposit because she didn't want to be involved in any of the investigation, she preferred to hide out in Ft. Deposit. Gloria Larry was sort of independent, but the other three Ruby and Jimmie and Willie were Snic and they were being hidden out and taken care of by Snic and Selma. Most of Saturday was getting

David Gordon Interview
Continued -

affidavits from them.

S. Do you remember them making any specific allusions to Jon while he was in jail, that is what he did, how he responded, things he was concerned about, things he discussed?

G. I really don't. They were all very much in a state of shock. Their almost total concern at that time was getting the facts straight about what had happened. And as they did on that tape that Mr. Tillson had, they reaffirmed certain things, Willie kept making it clear they weren't demonstrating.

S. Did they tell you that they anticipated in any way this event?

G. Well, first of all they were totally surprised by being let out, they hadn't expected it in the world. Once out, Gloria Larry said specifically we felt a terrible atmosphere of tension in the air. Everything they did was very concerned about the whole question, being out in an integrated group, everyone there knew who they were. Everything they did was sort of calculated to stay out of danger. One of the problems, of course is that there are no phones in the northern part of Lowndes County and they couldn't phone any of their friends.

S. That's an important point - there were no telephones.

G. The area in which both the Snic Freedom House of Lowndes County and many of the local leaders houses are located, that whole area has no phones. Hanesville is one of the farthest North and one of the farthest West points in the county that has telephones. There is a whole western and northern wave of the county that just doesn't have any phones at all.

S. There was no problem phoning from Hanesville.

G. No, they could phone from Hanesville to Selma, it was just that there weren't many points in between that they could get people to pick them up. I forget which of the four mentioned specifically that most of the group sort of counceled against the four going over to the store to get soft drinks. They said it was Jon who said it's O.K., go ahead. It happened to be a store which always had been very friendly to them. I remember vaguely a little about them talking about how calm Jon had been in jail and how much he had participated in the singing. Nothing specific, like what he talked about. Remembering Jimmy's description on the Cape I don't think any of those four were in Jon's cell. Stokely didn't talk much about what Jon had been like in jail, I can add some things which I picked through Ed, my roommate, who was there while I was spending Saturday with the kids in Selma. Ed went out into the northern part of Lowndes County talking to people who knew Jon, doing sort of that side of the story.

David Gordon Interview
Continued -

Several very interesting things came out of that. One anecdote I mentioned in my story about them counseling them not to drive down to Ft. Deposit alone. Geraldine Logan the daughter of a negro school teacher in Lowndes County who had just recently been fired by the school system was very close to Jon. She talked a lot about his reactions to white people in Lowndes County. He had said at one point that white people out here seem sort of ugly. Every time you look at them they seem to have an ugly expression on their faces. He apparently got very disconcerted about finding such total hatred among white people in Lowndes County. Something that was manifestly not true, you know there were some incidents and a lot of people were nasty, there were some very reasonable people. At the same time he found a kind of open armed warmth on the part of the negro community in Lowndes County which wasn't quite as warm in Selma - the difference really between a totally rural setting and a rural half city setting. It's very true that Negroes in Lowndes County tend to open up to you much more intimately than many of the negroes in Selma who feel a little bit more the impersonal forces in life. Everything in Lowndes County is on personal terms. If you want to find out something you go to so and so's house who is past so and so's house, it's not - you go down Route 17.

She described, I know, to Ed this one long walk they had which - it's funny to sort of reveal this but - she kind of had an inkling that maybe Jon liked herein a little bit more than the friendship sense, (not ever having talked to Jon about it I don't know). She liked him very much and the Logan family thought very highly of him. Mrs. Logan said they had felt like they had lost one of the children. Geraldine remembered just incredibly vividly a long evening walk they had had.

S. Is this the school teacher?

G. Geraldine is the daughter who is about 18 I think. Geraldine didn't talk very specifically about this long walk and talk she had with Jon. She remembered it as Jon taking an opportunity to open up with a human being and not someone who is a civil rights worker. I think she said they talked for about 2 hours, came back and sat on their porch and Mrs. Logan came out and talked with them for a while.

John had been in Lowndes County about three weeks he had spent most of his time there helping with voter registrations for a small part of the time. A good deal of the time he spent working with Smith on the A.S.C.S. elections. He also spent some time in helping negroes in getting over to Dan River Mills, a new plant opening there to get them to apply for jobs. Again, something they didn't know they really could do.