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U.1 Long Civil Rights Movement:
Individual Biographies

Interview U-1035
Wyatt Tee Walker
15 March 2013

FIELD NOTES – Wyatt Tee Walker

Interviewee: Wyatt Tee Walker

Interviewer: T. Evan Faulkenbury

Interview Date: March 15, 2013

Location: The Crossings at Ironbridge Retirement Center, Chester, Virginia

Length: 44:59

The Interviewee. Dr. Wyatt Tee Walker was a civil rights activist and minister from the 1950s through the early 2000s. In Petersburg, Virginia, he pastured Gillfield Baptist Church, organized the Petersburg Improvement Association, led the local NAACP and state branch of CORE, and became the point man in Virginia for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). In 1960, he accepted an invitation from his friend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to become the executive director or SCLC. Between 1960 and 1964, Walker led SCLC, increasing their budget, personnel, and influence within the country. He promoted Dr. King heavily as the leader of SCLC. He also served as SCLC's main tactician, organizing key protests, including the Birmingham Campaign of 1963. In 1964, he left SCLC to work for the Negro Heritage Library in New York City. Three years later in 1967, he became the senior pastor as Canaan Baptist Church of Christ in Harlem, New York where he remained until 2004. He remains pastor emeritus and has since retired to Chester, Virginia.

The Interviewer. T. Evan Faulkenbury is a candidate for the PhD in United States History at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. His scholarly interests include twentieth century political, southern, and African American history. He conducted this interview as part of his project in HIST 670 – INTRODUCTION TO ORAL HISTORY in the spring of 2013 under Dr. Jacquelyn Dowd Hall.

Description of the Interview. The interview took place at Dr. Walker's retirement home in Chester, Virginia. Several years ago, Dr. Walker suffered a series of strokes leaving him weak. His mind, however, remains sharp. He also had a recent skin graft, which caused him some pain during the interview. His wife Theresa Ann and their son Bobby joined Dr. Walker during the interview. At the beginning of the interview, Dr. Walker was quiet, but began answering questions in a more detailed way once he began discussing his college experience at Virginia Union University. Dr. Walker answered each question, but due to his weak state, did not elaborate or give long answers. When discussing SCLC and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Walker answered the questions with a deep respect for his service and his relationship with Dr. King. At one point, while discussing the Birmingham demonstrations of 1963, Dr. Walker mentioned that his wife was present. Theresa Ann described how she was injured in Birmingham and arrested in Atlanta the next day. The only interruption came when Bobby accidentally tripped over a wire connecting the recording device, but the interview was not interrupted. The interview ended with Dr. Walker's leaving SCLC and did not explore his work after 1964. The interview lasted nearly forty-five minutes after informing the interviewer and his family that he was tired.

TAPE LOG – Wyatt Tee Walker

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Comments: Only text in quotation marks is verbatim; all other text is paraphrased.

TAPE INDEX

Time	Topic
[Digital Recording, Starts at Beginning]	
0:01	Introductory statements…."Today is March 15, 2013…"
0:18	Dr. Walker describes his birthplace in Massachusetts and his move to South New Jersey. He integrated the junior high and high school in New Jersey.
1:43	Education; Walker describes going to Virginia Union University in Richmond, Virginia. His parents mortgaged their life insurance so he could go; majored in chemistry and physics; the ministry pulled him away from studying to be a physician; organized the college chapter of the NAACP; he refused to ride segregated streetcars in Richmond; but, he says he got put off many streetcars because he wouldn't sit segregated; learning black history was a positive influence on him as a college student.
4:51	Walker becomes the pastor at Gillfield Baptist Church in Petersburg, Virginia; also leads state Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), local NAACP, and founds Petersburg Improvement Association (PIA); protested against library, picketing, economic boycotts.
7:03	Arrest in Petersburg once for trying to check out a biography of Robert E. Lee in the segregated public library: "I was being smart"; jail experience: "terrible, filthy, food wasn't good, and the guards were rude and nasty"; African Americans were second-class citizens in a very evident way in Petersburg.
9:23	Work with NAACP and CORE; duties were not very heavy for him "because it was just my natural bent"; membership was low… "they were like outposts."

10:17 Meeting Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.; they were seminary students at the same time at different schools; they were both school presidents; they met during a mid-Atlantic seminary meeting at Virginia Union; immediately became friends.

11:39 Formation of Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC); he joined early, aimed at "freeing the vote and fighting against injustice"; methodology was "nonviolence"; mostly made up of ministers and their churches; Walker was SCLC's man in Virginia.

13:34 Becoming executive director of SCLC in 1960; Dr. King had noticed Walker's organizational skills with PIA; SCLC was just beginning when he joined, "it was more of an idea"; he was "on the ground floor"; first budget was $57,000 and four years later, budget was over $1,000,000 and had many more workers after becoming a national organization.

15:14 Walker's early work with SCLC as executive director to expand their reach and effectiveness; wanted to invest in Dr. King's image; wanted to use Dr. King to expand the influence of SCLC; he said people were "completely cooperative" when he joined; people followed Dr. King, and since Dr. King went by what Walker said, others followed suit; he was also Dr. King's chief of staff, which was the same position as executive director.

17:17 Other SCLC duties; worked mostly in the office, but always ready to participate; later participated in a Freedom Ride as part of the Albany Movement; administration work.

18:15 On fundraising for SCLC; Walker improved the amount of money Dr. King received from speaking engagements and rallies; he sent out pamphlets to host cities and churches for how to host Dr. King; sent out mailings; improved funds ten times over; his new policies worked "absolutely"; people were receptive to his fundraising tactics; they mailed out envelops with Dr. King's picture on it and that inspired people to give more; money was spent in personnel, on local communities; encouraged voter registration at the beginning, but the more protesting they did, the more resistance they met so they spent more money on bail and medical bills; expensive…"costs money to do anything"; printed flyers; funded the Citizenship Education Program schools; received grants, such as from the Taconic Foundation.

22:42 SCLC and grant money; Taconic Foundation; SCLC made a proposal to Taconic, which became the Voter Education Project (VEP); Taconic was "very receptive"; SCLC was one of several involved with VEP; said that VEP did not provide money to SCLC; on VEP effectiveness, and the Southern Regional Council: "they were doing the best they could, it didn't matter much. VEP program didn't go forward, the Southern Regional Council was mainly talking, but they weren't changing the scenery"; had relationships with Leslie Dunbar, Wiley Branton; they were working toward same goals, but they weren't activist organizations; he

sometimes made the tough decisions in SCLC; says he only did what Dr. King wanted.

27:10 Albany Movement; Walker said that the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) realized "they were in over their heads" and they wanted Dr. King to join and help them out; the organizational rivalry caused friction between several organizations; "they picked too many targets, just against anything segregated" which kept resources thin and wore out the local community; "The importance of Albany was that we learned how to mobilize an entire community for any assault against segregation. If there had been no Albany, there would have been no Birmingham."

29:00 Tension between SCLC and SNCC; "They [SNCC people] thought you could just jump up and go to jail" but they didn't think about how some people had families, payments, etc. and they didn't plan ahead well because they were "trigger-happy"; generational gap.

30:18 SCLC learned lessons from Albany; one event led to another, eventually to the 1964 Civil Rights Act; he mentions his circular diagram he drew that shows the ripple effect of the movement.

31: 23 Walker as SCLC's strategist; organized Birmingham protests in 1963; they wanted to assault commerce and industry, which involved demonstrations, boycotts, and jailing; he went to Birmingham a year ahead of time to pick targets of protest; he counted the stools in lunch counters; he "predicted that Bull Connor would do something stupid to help us, and he did"; Connor was "ignorant, and also a racial bigot"; local community responded to SCLC slowly at first, but Fred Shuttlesworth and his organization worked with SCLC

33:52 Walker shows the chart he drew of the ripple effect of the civil rights movement appearing in one of his books; the first event was the Montgomery bus boycott; Faulkenbury reads the chart.

34:47 Walker in the middle of Birmingham protests in 1963; he was the "field general"; he decided who would go on what protests and "took care of the details"; they used children; organized the children's march, which swayed public opinion seeing them hit with water hose; Birmingham protests lasted for 39 days until the truce.

36:57 Walker mentions that his wife was also a participant in the Birmingham protests; Theresa Ann Walker describes how she was attacked; A.D. Nixon's house was bombed, and Walker went to try and quiet the crowd; while he was away, Ann and his children were at the Gaston Hotel when the National Guard came in; Ann tried to get her children, but a guardsmen hit her in the head with the butt of his rifle; she went to the hospital; she left for Atlanta the next morning, but then were arrested on Mothers' Day driving into Atlanta; fined her $84.00 and put her in a

cell when she refused to pay; charged with speeding, then with evading arrest; Atlanta police knew their car.

42:20 March on Washington; Walker and others contacted people all over the South to promote the march; he watched the buses come in from all over the country, "we knew we had to have a large gathering of people for it to be impressive, and when the busses started coming in, we were so excited."

42:00 Relationships within SCLC did not change when his tenure ended in 1964, he "left in good grace"; he couldn't make it on the salary provided him, so he took a job with the Negro Heritage Library in New York.

44:59 End of Interview.

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START OF INTERVIEW [from 18:15]

Evan Faulkenbury: For the fundraising aspect [of his work with SCLC], in what ways did you begin to raise money that was different?

Wyatt Tee Walker: Well, Dr. King would go to, say, Houston, and he'd come back with a thousand dollars. And I thought that was not a good use of his time. And I developed a pamphlet, a book of twenty-one pages of how to promote a Martin Luther King rally. And we used that, and we took in ten times more. And I developed a donors' list, direct mail approach, and we did ten times the fundraising that way after I got there than they had done before.

EF: So the new policies you put in really worked?

WTW: Oh, absolutely. [Tells interviewer he recently had a skin graft, and it is very sensitive]

EF: So within the fundraising work, did you find when you were sending out the information before Dr. King traveled, were people receptive to your new fundraising tactics?

WTW: Oh, absolutely. I designed a freedom envelope with his picture on it, and that increased the income. People put more in an envelope than they will put something in the basket.

EF: Right. So some of these were just simple changes, but they had --

WTW: A far-reaching impact. Envelopes.

EF: So, SCLC in raising all of the money, where was the money then being spent?

WTW: In personnel, and in helping local communities with their fight against injustice.

EF: Within those local communities fighting injustice, was a major part of that voter registration?

WTW: Yes, in the beginning it was. But the more we protested, the more resistance we met. So we had to deal with bail money and that kind of thing, and people getting hurt.

EF: So SCLC money was going to bail money and also to medical bills, voting registration. So was all of this expensive, in what ways?

WTW: Yes, it cost money to do anything. We had to have personnel, had to have people in the field. And you had to have things to work with, you know, flyers. We funded the citizenship schools. We made proposals to the Church of Christ and the Taconic Foundation. And we got grants and participated.

EF: You mentioned the Taconic Foundation. What was SCLC's relationship with Taconic?

WTW: We made a proposal to them for voter registration, which became the Voter Education Project headed by Wiley Branton. Steve Currier, the CEO [of Taconic] was lost somewhere in the Bermuda Triangle.

EF: Yes, in an airplane?

WTW: Yes

EF: So, did you find Taconic and Stephen Currier --

WTW: Very receptive.

EF: They were receptive? So, you also mentioned the Voter Education Project. Can you describe the beginning of SCLC's relationship with VEP?

WTW: Well we were just one of the organizations involved. It was the NAACP, CORE, and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

EF: So, how much money did VEP provide to SCLC?

WTW: None to us, as such. We just participated in the program.

EF: And what was the specific program?

WTW: To get black people registered, to try to change the government in the South.

EF: In your opinion, while you were in charge of SCLC, did you see VEP, and I guess the Southern Regional Council, as effective in what they were doing?

WTW: They were doing the best they could. It didn't matter much. VEP program didn't go forward. Southern Regional Council was mainly talking, but it wasn't changing the scenery.

EF: Did you have personal relationships with some of the people over at Southern Regional Council?

WTW: Oh, absolutely, Leslie Dunbar, and others. I can't remember their names now.

EF: You mentioned Wiley Branton as well.

WTW: Yes, Wiley Branton, I knew him very well.

EF: But in your opinion, VEP and SRC, they weren't on the frontlines. Did you see them as more of a support group?

WTW: Well, working toward the same goals, but not an activist organization.

EF: So, in your role as executive director, did you see yourself as being the one to make the tough decisions?

WTW: Sometimes.

EF: And what did that look like?

WTW: I mainly tried to do what Dr. King wanted done. If he made me an assignment, my job was to get the ball over the goal line.

EF: [Interruption] You mentioned before the Albany Movement. I wonder if we can go back there and you can describe how SCLC became involved in what was happening in Albany?

WTW: Well, the SNCC folks had gone there and did ground work and got a movement started, but they found out they were in over their heads. And they knew Dr. King would attract the national media and bring some money, so they asked him to join. And we did. And he took along some of his veteran [SCLC] staff. And then the organizational rivalry caused friction, NAACP and the local community and SCLC. And they [SNCC] had picked too many targets; they were just against anything segregated. And it kept resources very skimpy and thin. And the community was worn out by the constant protests, and going to jail. So, the importance of Albany is that we learned how to mobilize an entire community for any assault against segregation. If there had been no Albany, there wouldn't have been a Birmingham.

EF: So, where did some of that tension between SCLC and SNCC originate? What was the relationship like?

WTW: They [SNCC] thought you could just jump up and go to jail. But we had families, car payments, mortgages; we couldn't do that. We had to plan ahead. And they were trigger-happy, if we can use that phrase. And it was the old separation of the generations, with the generational gap.

EF: As young people?

WTW: Yes. [Interruption]

EF: You said that Birmingham, the kind of protests there would not have happened without Albany. Can you expand on that?

WTW: We learned how to organize the whole community, and that's what we learned in Albany and we applied it to Birmingham. And Birmingham became the watershed of the nonviolent movement in the South. It led to the 1964 public accommodations act. If there hadn't been a Birmingham, there wouldn't have been a Selma. I have an analysis of the concentric circle development of the movement. Have you seen that?

EF: I think I have, but can you describe it?

WTW: [Asks his son Bobby to get a book of his to show interviewer the chart].

EF: Thank you. So, I know you were in large part the strategist of Birmingham.

WTW: Yes, and of everything.

EF: Right. How, specifically, did you organize what was to come in Birmingham?

WTW: We decided first we would zero-in not on everything, but on the commerce and the industry of Birmingham. And that involved a boycott, and it involved demonstrations, and jailings.

EF: Before the demonstrations began, did you travel to Birmingham?

WTW: I went a year ahead of time.

EF: And what did you do?

WTW: I picked the targets of our protests. I counted the stools in the lunch counters and identified the secondary targets and the tertiary targets. And I predicted that Bull Connor would do something stupid that would help us, and he did.

EF: You mentioned Bull Connor, what was it about Bull Connor that made you know that he was going to --

WTW: First, he was ignorant. And he was also a racial bigot.

EF: What was the reaction of the local community in Birmingham to SCLC?

WTW: Slow at first, but we had Fred Shuttlesworth and his organization was our strongest affiliate. [Shows interviewer the chart of his concentric circle development of the movement]

EF: Oh that's the chart. Yes, I have seen this. So the core was the Montgomery bus protest?

WTW: Yes. It's like throwing a rock in the water, and its how a movement developed.

EF: Right. [Reading chart] After the Montgomery bus protest, according to your chart, then the sit-in movement, then the Freedom Rides, then Albany, then Birmingham, then Selma, then Chicago, and then the anti-Vietnam campaigns, and then finally the Poor People's campaign. That sums it up. Thanks for showing me again. So, with Project C in Birmingham, were you on the ground when a lot of the major protests and reactions occurred?

WTW: Absolutely. I was the field general.

EF: Field general, what does that mean?

WTW: I decided when a protest would take place and who would go and what. I took care of the details. The use of children was a part of my responsibility. James Bevel and I felt we should use children. Dr. King wasn't so sure because of the criticism that was leveled against him [interruption, speaks to his son].

EF: So how did the campaign use children?

WTW: We had the children's march. The television accounts of using the water hoses on the children, it just swayed public opinion right there in the center.

EF: How long were you in Birmingham? And how long did the campaign last?

WTW: About a month and a half. Thirty-nine days. We got the truce, and the signs came down [referring to "colored only" signs of segregation]. My wife is a veteran of Birmingham.

EF: I read that. [To Theresa Ann Walker] And wasn't there also an incident where you were hit? Do you want to describe that?

Theresa Ann Walker: Well, Dr. King and Reverend Abernathy had gone back to Atlanta because it was Mother's Day and they had to be at their respective churches. My husband did not have a church so he stayed in Birmingham.

WTW: We needed somebody to stay in Birmingham, and I was the person they decided should be there. So since I couldn't go home, Dr. King said I could bring my wife and the four children over. That's how she came.

TAW: Somebody had bombed [37:56] house and you went to go calm the crowd.

WTW: I went over to the city to try to calm them. There was a riot about to start.

TAW: We were at the Gaston Motel. The two older children had gone with the Barfield-Pendlesons, they had a son and a daughter the same age as our children. And this one [referring to her son Bobby sitting in the room] and the youngest one were with me at the Gaston Motel. And the National Guard came in, and we were sitting out in the courtyard and the children were asleep inside. And they said everybody had to go into the lobby of the motel. And I said my children are asleep in the room, I have to get my children. And he just struck me in the head with the butt of his rifle.

EF: What happened after that?

TAW: Well, I went to the hospital, and I wouldn't go until somebody got my two children, Bobby and Earl, to come with me because I couldn't leave them at the hotel because nobody was there to look after them. [Bobby, in the background: "The hotel had been bombed"] And then, I got up in the morning when I got out of the hospital, and I just wanted to get out of there. So I left.

EF: Where did you go?

TAW: Home, back to Atlanta.

WTW: And she and the four children were arrested in East Point, Georgia.

TAW: After we got to the airport, after we got back to Atlanta.

EF: Right after?

TAW: On Mother's Day. And my oldest child must have been eight or maybe nine, and we had four under that, and they arrested us. And I called Daddy King first and I couldn't get him because he had left the church. And they said, "You've had your one phone call," so I said "Well, can my daughter have her call?" And they said, "Yes." So on her call, I called [39:59] and she and his secretary came out to the jail about midnight, and they [police] told them we were not there. Meanwhile, Daddy King had come with someone he knew who owned their property outright -- you couldn't have a mortgage on your property for them to put bail up for me -- so Daddy King came and got us out. And then when I went back to trial, you and Bob Brown were coming from Birmingham and he [Dr. Walker] saw his car, and he said, "Oh my God, my wife is in jail out here." And sure enough I was, and they came and bailed me out because I wouldn't pay. They fined me eighty-four dollars, and I said, "Well, I'm not going to pay it." So then they put me in the cell, but it was a nice, clean cell. So I said, "OK, I'll get a good rest." [Laughter] But they came and got me out.

EF: What was the charge?

TAW: When the policeman pulled up beside me, he said, "What do you do when you see a police car's lights flashing?" And I said, "You pull over." He said, "You didn't pull over." So that charge was evading arrest, and he told me to follow him to the jail. And then at midnight when Daddy King came, they had added another charge. Oh, the first charge was speeding, but I

was only two blocks into East Point, where the airport is. So when Daddy King came and they released me, they added another charge, and that one said I was evading arrest.

EF: So did the Atlanta police know who you were?

TAW: They knew the car. That's why they stopped the car. Maybe they thought he [Dr. Walker] was driving at first.

EF: Thanks for sharing. [To Dr. Walker] Can you describe your role in organizing the March on Washington in 1963?

WTW: Abraham Woods from Birmingham, we just contacted communities all across the South, and we were in charge of the southeast organization.

EF: So you got the word out?

WTW: And got busloads [42:54].

EF: And at the march, can you describe what you experienced while being there in Washington?

WTW: I got up early in the morning and watched the busses come in from all over the country, from the Midwest, from New York, and from the South. We knew we had to have a large gathering of people for it to be impressive, and that was what we were hoping for. And when the busses started coming in, we were so excited. [To Ann and interviewer] I'm getting a little tired.

EF: Sure. Let me just ask, how did your relationships change with SCLC in 1963 when you were coming to the end of your tenure?

WTW: It didn't change. I left in good grace. Most people understood. They had frozen my salary at ten thousand dollars and I couldn't make it. And I took a post in New York that paid me twice that and plus some.

EF: With the Negro Heritage Library?

WTW: Yes. Educational Heritage was the formal name of the company.

EF: Well, I think you're getting tired, so I'll wrap up the interview and say thanks once again.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcriber: T. Evan Faulkenbury

Date: March 20, 2013