

Interview with John Emmerich
Greenwood Commonwealth
Greenwood, Mississippi
July 16, 1985

J. Emmerich: ... Well, what do you want to know about him {Robert Moses}?

J. Sinsheimer: Well, really whatever you can tell me about that time.

Emmerich: All right, well it was a long time ago. I bet this was in 1961 or something like that. No, let's see it must have been in '60 or '61.

Sinsheimer: Well, tell me first how did you get get back into McComb? I mean I know your father was there.

Emmerich: Well, let's see. Well was born there. I went off to college, went into the army, from the army I went to the University of Paris. From the University of Paris I came back to McComb. And that had to have been ... that was about 1954 or '55. I was a reporter for the McComb Enterprise-Journal. And then about a year later I got a job at the Minneapolis Tribune. And I went there for about three years and then I came back as managing editor of the McComb Enterprise-Journal. That didn't mean a heck of a lot. We had me and another guy was kind of a city editor. And we had a woman writing society and my father of course (J. Oliver Emmerich) was the editor and publisher. He wrote mostly of the editorials. So it was a small staff. Got a lot bigger staff now.

And it was during that period that the racial thing was cranking up. And I can't remember, then I went off later to Harvard for a Neiman Fellowship, I think that was in '61 and '62, then I came back in '63 and then I went to Baltimore. So then I was kind of out of it for the worst time. But it was, it seems to me that Moses was around in '60 or '61. I can't remember whether it was after I was a Neiman Fellow or before I was Neiman Fellow.

But it was-- maybe that was '63-- but it was the, there were a whole series-- you know I have forgotten a lot of this-- but the first wave, the first big conflict in Mississippi, as I recall, were the Freedom Riders. They integrated the buses. And they started driving across the South, blacks integrating buses. And then began to come to McComb. See we were about the first bus stop after New Orleans. So if the Freedom Riders were coming from the south, that is if they were coming from New Orleans, if they were coming into Mississippi from the south as opposed from the northern part of the state I believe McComb was probably the first place they got on or off the bus at the bus station.

And there were plenty of people who took the attitude , by God they are not coming through here. So there would be a gang, you know rumor would go out that some Freedom Riders were arriving in McComb. That was as though the Russians were coming or something. When the word went out, and usually we would hear about it at the newspaper. You know, they are coming in on the ten o'clock bus or whatever. And then there would be a big stir through the town and a bunch of bully-boy sort of guys would go down-- I guess a lot of them just to watch, to see-- but they were pretty intimidating. You know you get 25 to 30 big burly southern types, you know just to see what was going on.

And then of course that was when they were cussing newspapers too. You know all you newspaper guys want to do is to cause trouble. If you would ignore them, you know, nothing would happen. So the newspaper would go down, I guess we were taking our role from the big city newspapers. You know if it was news in the big city newspapers well then when they came to our town it was supposed to be news too, so we would go down with a camera and take a picture of the Freedom Riders or the people watching the Freedom Riders.

And there were some pretty good scenes because you would have surly, disgruntled looking guys. And I can't

remember it seems to be now that you know we did have a few instances in which some people would be jostled or heckled or something like that. I frankly can't remember now whether there were any major incidents in that regard but certainly there were, I mean there were some bad feelings and if I had been one of the Freedom Riders I sure as hell wouldn't have wanted to get off the bus in McComb at that time. But that was the first big group.

Then as I recall-- and that was a little earlier-- then the second group, when it really heated up, was the voter registration campaign. That may have been, it seems to me that was summer of '61 or '62.

Sinsheimer: Right, summer-fall of '61. (Actually the first wave of white students into McComb didn't occur until 1964 during the Mississippi Freedom Summer Project)

Emmerich: Yeah, and it was a whole bunch, as you know it was a whole bunch of idealistic college students, mainly from the East, mainly from good Ivy League Schools, some of them from the Midwest who came down to help register blacks to vote. And actually it really did do a lot of good because blacks at that time, they really could vote-- I mean there was no way to prevent blacks from voting legally but many blacks were intimidated and they didn't want to go down. You would go through a lot of hassle-- if you wanted to vote badly enough you could do it but there were a lot of dumb laws on the books that said that you had to interpret the constitution, you had to read and write and interpret the constitution.

And that meant that if you had a straight-- I think it is, I have forgotten whether it is the circuit clerk or the chancellery clerk, but whichever one if the voting registrar-- if he was straight he could give you the test properly and if you could read and write and you could explain the bill of rights or whatever, you registered to vote. But if he was not straight, I mean if he was one of the ones

that felt himself the guardian of the purity of the voter, you know the white voting rules, well he could damn near prevent anyone from registering. He could ask them to write something, explain the constitution, that you know a political science professor couldn't have done.

And then also there were a lot of blacks, they wouldn't even go in the courthouse. You know you take an elderly black person who maybe was somewhat intimidated by authority anyhow, and you would get him to the courthouse and say all you have to do is go in there and walk in that door to the right and register, and they wouldn't walk up the steps. And then there were some that would go in the-- if they would get up the steps and if they would get in the right room-- and if somebody said, "No, I am sorry we are not registering anybody today," well then they would turn around and say, "Yes, sir," and turn around and leave. You iknow there were just so many ways to intimidate blacks. And then over in Tylertown-- I could get cranked up I guess and remember a lot of this stuff-- which is the town right next to McComb.

Sinsheimer: Right.

Emmerich: I remember-- I may be forgetting these details to some degree-- but see Tylertown was tougher than McComb because it is a smaller town. You know the more rural you got usually the tougher it was. And some black screwed up his courage and decided that nobody was going to keep him from voting so he went in to register and the voting registrar as I recall picked a pistol out of his desk and slapped him upside the head. The guy went out, you know, bloody, and then the sheriff arrested him (laughter) for disrespect and disturbing the peace (laughter) or something. He not only got pistol whipped, he got put in jail.

And then the idea was that that is what happens to blacks that want to register in this county. The message was not lost. But anyway, so a lot of bright young people

with Yankee accents started coming South to encourage black people to vote and they were not greeted with universal welcome to say the least. And I think that is about when (Bob) Moses came on the scene, I am not sure. He was involved in ... as I recall it was SNCC then, maybe COFO, I think it was SNCC.

Sinsheimer: Right.

Emmerich: And he was as I recall the Mississippi coordinator or something like that. And I believe they decided, you know, they were working in different places but he decided to devote his efforts to McComb one summer. And I think he was doing some other things but McComb was his basic headquarters and he worked in and around McComb.

And as I recall he was, I first met him, I think, you know I was writing stories at that time and I went out to see what was going on and I encountered him somewhere. And he was very bright, he was a young clean fellow, obviously an idealistic sort of guy that normally would inspire confidence and would be considered a fine young man.

Sinsheimer: But when you say idealistic, I mean you were young too at the time. I mean do you think you really felt that way at the time?

Dittmer: Yeah, I think I did. I mean I didn't, now remember I did not necessarily share all of the segregationist sentiments of everybody else-- but as I recall, yeah, I thought, I can't remember how many times we met, but I think we met on a pretty much basis of mutual respect. And I think he recognized that, that I was young and a reporter and I didn't have a baseball bat, you know and that sort of thing.

As I recall when we first met and ... I was writing a story about something, you know, what was going on. And again these were stories that the whites didn't even like. You know they didn't think-- if somebody was there in town trying to register blacks to vote a lot of people didn't even think that the newspaper ought

to write about it, they ought to just annoy it, it would go away. But I think he, he probably recognized in me kind of at least, somebody who understood what he was trying to do. I mean I didn't, I never joined his campaign and encouraged him or anything like that. I mean I believe that I was too much of a white Mississippian to do that. But at any rate I was not hostile. Now you may have read, you know Hodding Carter wrote a book about the Heffners. I don't know if you read that or not.

Sinsheimer: Right, right.

Emmerich: But Red (Heffner) was a guy, I mean he was a good friend of mine but what he did wrong he was an Episcopalian. Some of these guys showed up at the Episcopal church and Red was the kind of guy that, you know, was always hospitable and he saw bright young people from somewhere else. He went up and introduced himself and got to know a few of them at the church and said look we are going to have a spaghetti supper out at our-- it was a church supper I think-- said you guys want to come. And they came and it was that, that innocent beginning that-- everybody was looking around for a scapegoat and that innocent beginning-- and I think that Red kind of bowed up in the back right at first, you know who in the devil is going to tell me who I can associate with or invite to my house.

And pretty soon at a time when the town was spoiling for a fight, looking for somebody to blame, Red became a scapegoat. And it reached a point where he felt compelled to leave. I am not sure in retrospect, I am not sure he really had to leave. But certainly he was under a lot of pressure. I think there were probably other people that were under as much pressure that never did leave, but nevertheless he felt that he had to leave. He felt that he and his family were being intimidated to the point where it was not safe for him to stay.

Sinsheimer: Do you put your father in that category?

Emmerich: Yeah, I think so, I think there were times. But there any number of times during his newspaper career when probably he was under some pressure. And I would say at that time-- Red said that people were traveling around his house at night and honking horns and really doing things trying to intimidate him. I don't think they ever did anything like that with my father.

Now this, I have really skipped because I remember I was in Baltimore at this time. And I think when my father was under the greatest pressure was during that long, hot summer of maybe '63, '64 right when they were dynamiting all of the churches. Well this is a little bit later than the Bob Moses era.

Sinsheimer: Let me interrupt you and ask the question. This is one of the main question I really wanted to ask you. You have been up here (in Greenwood) so I think you have a good perspective. That summer-- given that there was a history in McComb, that really the first voter registration activity was there-- but that summer there were projects all over the state, basically the same thing was going on all over the state. But McComb was the most violent place in the state. And the historical question is I guess why. In your mind why does one community erupt where Greenwood went through the same thing and it had problems in '63, but Greenwood certainly didn't have the amount of problems that McComb did (in '64). What would be your hypothesis at least on something like that?

Emmerich: I don't know. Why did three guys get killed and buried in damn in Philadelphia. I don't really think that if anything I think Greenwood was probably tougher than.... I don't know, there are different kinds of communities. Whether this had anything to do with it or not I don't know. Where was the worst town? I would say a lot of people, you could make a case out, say that Greenwood and the Mississippi Delta was the toughest place in Mississippi on race relations. You know this is with the Emmett Till murder was I think forty years ago. And it happened

just down the road.

Sinsheimer: Well I guess ...

Emmerich: Let me, let me, I will respond. This is what I think. There are differences. Greenwood is, at that time at any rate, was more a kind of a planter type society in which something of an economic elite, or a power structure, was kind of running things in Greenwood. And it was probably a power structure (break) I think I said that the Delta kind had a, maybe a more responsible power structure. Now that power structure didn't always run things and it was a very conservative power structure in the Delta generally because the Delta has long been dominated by, you know, the planter class kind of.

Areas like McComb didn't have a planter class. And areas like Philadelphia, see that was area of small farmers. McComb and south Mississippi, piney woods, you know, little farms. There weren't any rich people in McComb or Philadelphia. And they were the kind of redneck people, you know the small--I mean if you want to put it into the derogatory term ignorant redneck, if you want to put it in a more positive, you know, the yeoman farmer of America (laughter). What they were, they were hard working, not very well-educated white people who were stubborn as all get out, who didn't anybody to tell them how to run their race problem.

All right. Now this, if you had enough education, most better educated people were more responsible. But some of the less educated, you know the kind that go down and listen to country music and drink beer in a honky tonk, you know they were the dynamiters. And they were the people that would, they were the lynchers of an earlier era. All right. The difference in one community or another whether there was violence usually was just whether you had three or four guys who were prepared to go out and shoot somebody. You know, well here is a guy who is willing to shoot in one town, and there just happens not to be anybody in another town to shoot. So one

town doesn't have violence, and one does.

And it turned out in McComb, after all of that dynamiting-- McComb was the dynamite capital of the world for about-- as I recall there were about twenty or twenty-five incidents of Suppose that had happened in New York City or something. You would have said that a reign of terror in New York. But it turned out after it was all over it was only one little cell of Ku Kluxers who were doing it all. So it just happened that the guys were there, I think that is what it really was.

It was not that one town handled one, or look at it in Philadelphia. It was a handful of guys that one night went out and took those guys out of jail and killed them, you see. Now I will say you also had to have at least a participating sheriff. You had to have some other things. But that was not unique. I mean there were, I have a feeling that there were a lot of policeman, police officers, and sheriffs at various times that the side of right and order was on the side of the white establishment. You know, and they didn't see anything wrong in violating, in beating up some black troublemaker from outside. I mean that was what the sheriff was supposed to do I guess, at least that is what So in other words, what was the sheriff's responsibility? Well, it depended on how you saw the sheriff's role and not everybody saw exactly the same. So I think that was the reason, I guess, I don't know. What else?

Sinsheimer:

Actually, one more question. Stuff I found about Greenwood. I know you weren't here but you know the town well enough since you have been here. And it goes back to something that you said. The stereotyppe that I will admit that I came in to looking at Greenwood with was that the society was controlled by the planter class. But it wasn't. But it was Greenwood businessmen here. Now do you think that-- now everybody has been telling me that, that it was Hardy Lott and (Charlie) Sampson owned the dry cleaner's and (W.G.) Mize and the planters just really weren't part of it. Is that true you think

throughout the Delta or do you think that Greenwood is ...?

Emmerich:

When I said the planter class I really didn't mean to limit it that much. But there is a kind of a psychology. And the, I mean today really the planter class doesn't amount too much. I mean we have so few people of the actual population engaged in farming. We go through all the, even today, we act as though the Delta would collapse without farming. And if you look at the statistics to see who actually is working in farming, and it is a very small amount. A lot more people are engaged in manufacturing but you never hear anything about the, people don't say a whole lot about manufacturing.

And so part of it is historical, it is kind of what we are accustomed too. So when I said planter class I was probably limiting that to It was kind of the, what would normally be the power structure in the community. And it did, it means the lawyers; and it means some doctors, not all, some doctors; it means the businessmen; and the planter class as such, as people who are connected to the land you say are very conservative. You see. You put all of that together and you had a kind of a status quo psychology.

But I suspect, and I am not sure that this is true, but I kind of suspect in the Delta that it was little more responsible than it was in certain poorer towns where maybe the shots were being called by kind of the rednecks, you see, who were less responsible, more prone to violence. (Mr. Emmerich asked that the tape recorder be turned off momentarily)

'Cause my father wrote a book about this. You didn't happen to read his book did you?

Sinsheimer: Two Faces of Janus?

Emmerich: Yeah. I remember he recounted this and he seemed to have thought it was bad.

W. Emmerich: (Mr. Emmerich's son) He wrote a lot about

Mississippi. Didn't he write a whole chapter?

Emmerich:

I don't think so. I remember, let's see, I think it was Moses, Moses had been put in jail for something. I can not remember, I am sure it was nothing of any consequence. And I went down to interview him. And I think this, I remember this because Dad put it in his book. As I said he was more offended by this than I was. Maybe this does show the temper of the times. Well when I saw him (Moses) in jail I shook hands with him. Well the reason I shook hands with him is because I knew he was no criminal and I knew he was in jail because he was down trying to register people to vote and because we had seen each other on a number of occasions under more favorable circumstances and so it was natural that I shook hands with him.

And my father was somewhat irritated because, actually it was one of my friends as I recall who had seen this confrontation, spread the word around that I had shaken hands with that notorious wrong doer Robert Moses and tried to cast some kind of reflection on me as being kind of a traitor to the cause or something (laughter). I guess that shows, in other words just because I had shaken hands with the man that meant-- I guess you were supposed to poke him in the nose first, I am not sure (laughter).

And let's see. What else? We had quite, of course, I guess you remember this. But as I recall I think it was Moses that went over to Liberty-- and Liberty was really a tough town too-- and I think he got beat up pretty bad over there by some guys. See really Liberty and Tylertown were tougher towns than McComb even though there was a lot more activity in McComb because they were more rural. The moral rural you got, the worse it was.

But that is, I mean all I can recall of Moses was that he was very dedicated, very soft spoken and I am amazed that he didn't get killed. That is probably why he went to Africa because if he had stuck around, I mean that was a time where if somebody just

stayed with it long enough there was a good chance that he was going to get badly beaten up or maybe even killed. Now I don't mean that all you had to do was walk into town and you would get shot. I mean if you just hung around long enough and made enough people mad, you could, in those days you could get beat up or shot or whatever.

Sinsheimer: Did you do anything up at Harvard for Robert, R.L.T. Smith when he was running for Congress?

Emmerich: I can't even remember who that was. Was that the white guy?

Sinsheimer: No he was a black minister who was running who said that some people up at Harvard had helped set up fundraising clubs.

Emmerich: No, I remember that name but I have forgotten who that was. There was another white guy at that time....

Sinsheimer: Ed King?

Emmerich: There was a white guy who was a young lawyer who had been at Harvard I think

Sinsheimer: Bill Higgs.

Emmerich: Yeah, Bill Higgs. He ran for Congress and he was kind of an idealistic but ineffective fellow when I had been kind of friendly with him at one time. But I don't know whatever happened to him. But no. At Harvard I made, Harvard at that time was very much interested in the civil rights struggle and all that and I appeared on a lot of panels and that stuff but usually in the guise as the southern representative who was defending the South, which I did. I did it judiciously, I mean I couldn't defend it all. But there were, in my Neiman class there were quite a number of Southerners and we frequently would be asked to participate in

And it is really funny, see in the South I was considered kind of something of a turncoat. But then you would get up and I

couldn't justify the things that Southerners were doing. But then you would get in an environment like Harvard where you would get such absolute, in my view, insane comments, such irresponsible comments that would show no understanding of what the South was going through. But then of course I would be in a position of saying but you don't understand that is not the way it is, this is the way it is. And then I would end up defending Mississippi and the South.

But that has happened to me a lot. I am getting older now and more conservative and I am about to live down my reputation as a liberal. But in earlier days in the South I was a liberal. But outside-- you know I wrote editorials-- and outside the South I would be considered conservative. So everything depends on compared to what.

Sinsheimer: Did you do any writing about your experiences up at Harvard that might be

Emmerich: No, not that I can recall. I think I wrote some columns and stuff Actually I did a lot of interesting things during ... I should have written it all down but I didn't. I have written a lot. In fact I figured it out the other day if you averaged the number of years that I have been in the business-- take an average day of writing, for instance today I wrote two editorials-- if you take how much I normally write each day multiply it be five or six per week times fifty-two times thirty years, I figured that I have published five million words (laughter). And I don't have a record of any of it. I haven't got a single thing.

Sinsheimer: Your recent editorial up here, raised a lot of eyebrows down in Jackson. People were really pleased to see that.

Emmerich: About what?

Sinsheimer: About the city council and the Democratic unity.

Emmerich: Oh.

Sinsheimer: Did you write that? A lot of people ...

W. Emmerich: Where did it appear?

Sinsheimer: They reprinted it in the (Jackson) Clarion-Ledger. Did you know that?

Emmerich: No. See actually, I don't know if that came through. I don't think that is Democrat versus Republican, I think it is factionalism. I think some deals have been made. And what you have is some white Democrats who had made deals with some black Democrats and it has very little to do with party. What it does have to do is with factions. And the fact-- and it will be interesting to see what happens, whether that faction will hold. I don't think it is Democrats versus Republican. Right now it is a white faction cooperating with a black faction and that is a rather tenuous relationship.

Sinsheimer: But it is a positive sign, isn't it?

Emmerich: I don't think it is myself because the -- I don't know-- I think no because the purposes of the deal making were not worthy. I think that the blacks want to get certain things and the whites wanted to get certain thing and they have made a deal. And it has to do whether you have honest government or not so honest government. I mean it is really a little too early.

Sinsheimer: People may have misinterpreted that editorial. I think they did. Though there was a hint of that in the way that you wrote about Charlie Deaton. Let me ask you one more question and I will let you go. What about John Doar? Did you get a chance to talk with him during that time?

Emmerich: Yeah, at one time we had gotten to be pretty friendly. And I don't think that John Doar would remember me now but at that time we were at least talking to each other. And he was really an incredible guy. And I think-- well he has gotten a lot of credit in some quarters but he deserves a tremendous

amount. He was a very courageous guy who in my view did his damnest to understand what was going on. And he didn't just take the kind of senseless attitude that everything that whites were doing was wrong and that everything that blacks were doing was right, although he understood what he had to do.

But I think he really, I think he had a greater understanding of the agony that the South was going through than a lot of other people did. And then he showed a great deal of personal courage. There was one, I am sure that you read about the time-- I can't remember what the occasion was-- but it was a big march in Jackson.

Sinsheimer: After Medgar Evers died.

Emmerich: Yeah, it almost got out of hand. And he, no doubt with serious threat to his own physical safety he pretty well stopped that. And at that time I can't remember where all I saw Doar but I think I would be in Washington every once in a while and as I recall I met with him in Washington and then I met with him in Mississippi. And actually what he did, and also Kennedy did this and who was the Assistant Attorney General?

Sinsheimer: Burke Marshall?

Emmerich: Yeah Burke Marshall did this. All of them tried to develop some contacts throughout the South with people like me I think, I mean they considered very rational observers, who would, I mean we were not committed to the establishment. And they were trying to get some people that could give them an idea of what was happening so they could figure out what to do.

Sinsheimer: Gray Evans played that role here (in Greenwood) because he had worked with Frank Smith and he had met (Robert) Kennedy.

Emmerich: Yeah, well they were all over. It was a kind of a network, I wouldn't say, they certainly weren't informants because I never did anything particularly except they would call you up and say what is going on, what do you

think about so and so.

Sinsheimer: They would literally call you up?

Emerich: Yeah, on a number of occasions I talked to, as I recall I met with Doar and Marshall in Washington. I was up there for something and somebody knew it and they asked me to come by just to talk with them.

Sinsheimer: What do you think their politics were? I mean do you think they were in favor of what was happening? Trying to slow it down?

Emmerich: Oh no they were definitely, I mean this was the Robert Kennedy Justice Department and they were definitely trying to effect change. I don't think there is any question at all about that. But they were trying to do it in an as responsible way as possible. And I don't think the white South ever gave them credit for that. And then the question was they were moving, but then how fast do you move. You know they could determine whether they were going to move fast in this community or back off. And they were also dealing with governors and legislators and courts and everything else. And they were having to map a lot of strategy in all kinds of ways. And these were guys that really didn't know anything about-- you know what the hell did they know about Liberty, Mississippi or Greenwood or McComb or Philadelphia. They didn't know anything more about that than I know about Peoria.

And so they were trying to make intelligent moves I think and the way they did it was that they developed people that they thought were reasonable observers that they could get some good information from on which they could base their action. And I think maybe I may have been one of those. But there were a whole bunch of us. I mean you know there were a lot of people. And when I say I think I was who knows?

All I know every once in a while I would get a phone call or somebody would come by and see me and they would say so and so said to come-- there were a whole bunch

of people that would come through and for a time it seemed that I was kind of on the circuit. You know if somebody would come South with a foundation or one thing or another and they would be trying to get information and they would stop by my office or see my father. And I think the word was out among certain people that we were the kind of people that they could come and talk to and get some information. So there were a whole bunch of people. Now whether I was part of a network I don't know but I suspect that I was.

Sinsheimer: Right. Well, thanks you have been a great help.

End of Interview.