

Narrator: Meg Redden
Interviewer: Greta de Jong
Transcriber: Kesei Nowell

4700.0740 Tape 1074
Session I
8 December 1996

[Begin Tape 1074, Side A. Begin Session I.]

Greta de Jong: And I'm doing a telephone interview with Meg Redden. She is in San Francisco. I am in New Orleans. The date is December 8, 1996. Okay, if you could just begin by telling us about . . . a little bit about yourself like when and where you were born and growing up and things like that.

Meg Redden: Okay. I was born in Indiana in 1944. So I was twenty years old, or almost twenty . . . I guess I was actually only nineteen years old when I went down to Louisiana that summer. And I grew up in Iowa and I grew up in a sort of middle class white family that was fairly religious. We belonged to the Baptist Church and that was a big part of my . . . it was a big part of my growing up. And when I went to college, I went to a Baptist college in Kansas and that's where I found . . . the CORE announcement was on the bulletin board in the spring of 1964 . . . that they were doing this. They were planning this summer freedom registration project. My parents never really were strong advocates of desegregation or against it. You know I never got any real opinion from them one way or the other. I had a couple of . . . there was a couple of kids in my high school who were black and one of them was a good friend of mine. So that when the information started coming from the South about what was going on down there and what it was like down there . . . what the . . . you know that it was so totally segregated that there were . . . you know separate facilities for everything . . . you know separate drinking fountains, separate schools and everything was separated. It was just an outrage to me. I was just . . . I just

couldn't believe that it was really going on and so when the . . . and so it had been building up for, you know, a few years there, and then so when that announcement came on the bulletin board at school, it was just as if I really just had to do something about it. And so that's why I sent in my application to do that summer and was selected to be in the project that CORE had been planning. And they . . . CORE planned the project in the spring of that year and it was designed to be . . . it was actually because the United States Justice Department was bringing a lawsuit against the state of Louisiana because of their voter registration procedures. And so the work that we were . . . the work of the . . . so the freedom registration summer was planned in order to sort of collect some information or some evidence against the state that they were discriminating against people and to try to prove that the test that they . . . that the test that they were requiring people to take was unconstitutional. So that's kind of a little background. Where do you want to go from there?

De Jong: [038] Were there advocates at your college that were getting . . . was there a CORE chapter there or anything?

Redden: No. There wasn't a CORE chapter there. There was a group of people, the group that I belonged to called the Baptist Student Movement, and that was . . . it was not really a political movement, but it was a group of young people, you know, thinking and discussing things. And it was just sort of a support group.

De Jong: Yes.

Redden: And so there were people that supported me in it when I went down there.

De Jong: Right. The notice that you saw advertising the CORE project . . . was that the very first awareness you had of the civil rights movement or had you been following things in the newspaper and on TV and things like that?

Redden: [047] Yes, right. As I said, there had been a lot of press coverage of what was happening down there, starting with the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955.

De Jong: Yes.

Redden: There was a lot of press on it while I was growing up, so this was just kind of a culmination of all of that. When I finally saw this announcement, there it was, an immediate reaction of I have to go do something about this. Because it was something that I had been upset about for a while.

De Jong: What seemed to you to be the most outrageous aspects of it? How did you think about racism before you went down?

Redden: The most outrageous aspect of racism?

De Jong: Sort of what seemed to you to be the problem down there and what were you going to do about it?

Redden: The things that we were aware of were the separate facilities. Like I said, they showed pictures of drinking fountains that were for colored people only.

De Jong: Yes.

Redden: And that seemed fairly outrageous to me. And the bus thing . . . the bussing thing where they told the colored people that they had to sit in the back of the bus. And because that Montgomery Bus Boycott lasted for a whole year, that was very well publicized. I think there was a lot of awareness of what was going on in this country.

De Jong: [065] Yes.

Redden: There was a lot of press coverage of the separate facilities, the separate schools.

De Jong: Yes. When you were growing up in high school and studying the United States history and things like that, what had you been taught or what impression did you have of this country?

Redden: In terms of what?

De Jong: Well, were you aware of segregation or the south at all before this?

Redden: Well, I think the things I learned in school were . . . I learned about the Civil War and slavery. And I don't know whether I was taught it or whether I just thought that it was a complete outrage that slavery . . . that slavery was a complete outrage and a complete abomination that this country had done that. I was just appalled and I remember . . . well, I do remember in high school, I was assigned a term paper. The term paper subject that I was assigned was to write a term paper. It was in a history class. I was assigned to write a term paper on the American Negro.

De Jong: Oh.

Redden: [081] And I don't know if that was just a coincidence or if they were trying to be politically aware or not. But the high school that I was in was totally integrated. I mean there just wasn't . . . I think that because maybe there were so few black people in our community that it wasn't an issue.

De Jong: Did everyone get along okay?

Redden: Yes. Everybody got along fine. In fact, one year, two kids, the two black kids were crowned king . . . high school prom king and queen of our high school, which was predominantly white.

De Jong: Right.

Redden: But then again because of the fact that there . . . the percentage of black population was so low that it wasn't a problem. It wasn't an issue.

De Jong: Yes. Okay. Let's move on to when you went down to Louisiana.

Redden: Yes.

De Jong: [091] Can you tell me . . . do you remember the exact dates that you were there? Was it just for one summer?

Redden: Yes, it was just for one summer. I went down. The project started on June 10 of 1964, and it was in . . . the training took place in Plaquemine.

De Jong: Yes.

Redden: Are you familiar with that?

De Jong: Yes.

Redden: That's in Iberville Parish.

De Jong: Yes.

Redden: And the training was only supposed to take about a week, but it ended up being about two or three weeks before I got to Point Coupee Parish which was where I did the work.

De Jong: Yes.

Redden: [100] But in the interim of that time, you ask about East and West Feliciana Parishes? I went back over some of my journal and I found that we went over to . . . on June 24, we went over to East Feliciana Parish because the voter registration books had been ordered to be opened by the justice department. The voter registration books had been closed because of the difference of opinion between the state government and the federal government.

De Jong: Right.

Redden: And so on the twenty-fourth of June, they were opened, but they were only going to be open for two days. So we all went over there and tried to do as much work as we could getting people registered to vote. And I was only in East Feliciana Parish. West Feliciana Parish was the really dangerous one and that's one . . . and the people that went over there . . . they tended to send the guys over there because I think they were afraid of the violence. But some of the guys that were sent over there, I remember one of them was hit and another one was shot at because there were not very many . . . there were only thirteen black people registered in West Feliciana Parish then. And as a result of that confrontation that happened there, the FBI came down and the Justice Department came down.

De Jong: [116] Do you know anything about what effect that had on efforts there of getting the FBI involved in things like that?

Redden: Affected what?

De Jong: How did that affect the voter registration efforts in that Parish? Do you know?

Redden: Oh you mean what happened there? No, I don't. I don't know what happened then.

De Jong: Okay. Could you go back a little bit and talk about the training you got in Plaquemine . . . what you remember about that?

Redden: Yes. Yes. The training took place in this . . . it was kind of an old, run down hotel in the black section of town. And the black section of town was . . . it had actually been gerrymandered out of the city so that it didn't have a lot of the city improvements like sewage and sewer and stuff like that. But it was a real run down hotel and we . . . the training went on for a week or so, and we learned about how to protect ourselves in nonviolent resistance, like if you were . . . how to protect yourself if you were knocked off of a . . . if you were sitting in at a lunch counter or something and somebody drug you off . . . they taught us how to just kind of roll our bodies up into a ball to protect our stomachs and protect our heads and stuff like that. And then they also taught us about the whole political climate in the . . . because this suit was being filed against or the project was just being done in the fourth and fifth congressional

districts, and so they told us about all of the twenty-four parishes that were within those two districts and what the political climate was in each one of them and how many people, black people versus white people were in each one. . . what we could expect if we went there if that was going to be our assignment . . . because people were going out to all the parishes, all twenty-four parishes.

De Jong: Right.

Redden: And so then they also talked about the canvassing methods, how we should talk to people, how we should present ourselves, what we were actually going to be doing in talking to people, and how we were going to teach them because our objective was to go out. And the canvassing was we went from door to door inviting people to . . . inviting the black people to come to the voter registration clinics. And then at the clinics, we would teach them how to fill out the forms.

De Jong: Right.

Redden: So that was another thing that they did during the training period was to teach us how to fill out the forms because they were very complicated and demanding. The registrars found anything that they could to deny them their registration. If they didn't dot their i's or cross their t's, they would deny them registration. So we had to learn all that stuff to teach them in order to get registered to vote. That's about all I can remember of the training.

De Jong: [156] Sounds like the voter registration forms were pretty tricky for you all to learn.

Redden: Yes.

De Jong: Then learn the black people.

Redden: Yes. It was totally, at first, a trick to keep people from being registered to vote.

De Jong: How did people react to you when you went canvassing?

Redden: Well, they reacted in lots of different ways. A lot of people were afraid to talk to us because they were afraid of what would happen to them later on if they were seen talking to these people because the communities that I was in were so small that everybody immediately knew who we were and what we were doing. The first week that we went out canvassing, the sheriff picked us up and took us into the jail. They didn't put us in jail. They just talked to us about what we were doing. They knew immediately who we were and what we were doing, and they just wanted us to know that they knew.

De Jong: [168] Right. What did they say to you?

Redden: They just used sort of threatening language like “why the hell are you here” and “why don’t you go home” . . . stuff like that and just talk to us like children . . . like trying to straighten us out.

De Jong: Yes, yes.

Redden: But as far as the black people that . . . so as I said some of them were afraid to talk to us, but most of them were really receptive and were really . . . when they realized what we were there for, they were . . . opened up their doors and let us come in and talk to them and were genuinely receptive. Mostly, they were receptive to us because they really understood that we were trying to help.

De Jong: Right. Did they seem . . .

Redden: And with white people in the community, they’d just look at us with hate in their eyes.

De Jong: Yes.

Redden: Which was a new experience for me. I hadn’t seen that before.

De Jong: [184] Yes. The ones that were afraid to talk to you . . . did they . . . what were they afraid of? What kinds of things did they think might happen to them? Did they say?

Redden: Well, there was a lot of really scary stuff going on then. It was really a violent period of time when black men would be lynched, hung for no reason. And so there was the fear that that kind of terrorism would happen to them. There was the Ku Klux Klan. You know all about that.

De Jong: Yes.

Redden: And there was just always the fear that that kind of violence was going to happen to them when there wasn't anybody there to protect them. And that's the reason you asked about the guns. You know that's the reason that people had guns. Even though the movement was a nonviolent movement, people like Thelma Caulfield who live in a rural area like that, totally unprotected . . . she really had to have a gun just to defend herself.

De Jong: Yes.

Redden: [198] She wasn't using the gun in an aggressive, violent way. She was just using it as a defense.

De Jong: Yes. Did you . . . was that pretty general among the African Americans that they were all armed that way?

Redden: I don't know. I don't know the answer to that. I didn't . . . I wasn't in enough homes to be able to give a general answer. My impression was that it was the people who were active in the freedom movement, who were having to defend themselves.

De Jong: Right.

Redden: And Thelma was an incredibly strong young woman. She was only seventeen years old but she was as . . . I think I talked about this to you on the phone earlier, and I went back and looked at my notes. There was actually six children in the Caulfield family and Thelma was the youngest one. She was seventeen years old. And her mother at the point that we were down there was mentally disabled, and her father and her older brothers were in New Orleans working on construction because that was where they could find the best jobs because I suppose . . . and I could tell that this family had been active in the civil rights movement for several years before we got there.

De Jong: Okay.

Redden: [218] Locally, they had been active, and that may have been why . . . I don't know this . . . but it may have been why they had to go to New Orleans to get work.

De Jong: Right, it probably was.

Redden: Yes. And I found out the spelling of the father's name. It's pronounced Sergeant but it's spelled S-E-I-G-E-N-T.

De Jong: Oh. I've seen it spelled so many different ways.

Redden: Yes. I think that's the way it was spelled.

De Jong: S-E-I-G-E-N-T. Yes. Do you know anything about the family history? How did their . . . I guess . . . I have a feeling that they began as sharecroppers but I'm not sure about that.

Redden: Yes, you mentioned that in your letter, but I don't know anything about the prior history of the family.

De Jong: Right, but yes . . . they weren't self-employed. They were working for other people in New Orleans?

Redden: [232] Yes. They did grow a lot of their own food.

De Jong: Okay. Did they have their own land?

Redden: I'm not sure whether they were renting that land. I kind of think that they were, but I don't know.

De Jong: Okay. Did you get any idea of how they perceived the struggle and what the major problems were . . . not just the Caulfield's, but just any of the local people that you interacted with . . . did they . . . what seemed to be the most important things to them?

Redden: That's a hard question to answer because the injustice was so all-pervasive. It was in everything.

De Jong: Yes.

Redden: And I don't think we ever really talked. It just seemed like the injustice and inequality was so obvious that we never really talked about it.

De Jong: Yes.

Redden: [246] But I would imagine that the things that were the most difficult for them would be economics.

De Jong: Right.

Redden: The fact that they lived in such abject poverty was the result of racism. That house that the Caulfield's lived in was just a wooden shack basically, and there was no running water and there was an old wooden stove. Thelma did most of the work. She hauled the wood in to start the stove to start to cook, and she hauled the water from a pump and did the laundry in

the backyard in a big wooden barrel. She had big strong hands from ringing out the laundry in that way. Wringing out a sheet by hand takes a lot of strength.

De Jong: Sure.

Redden: Every time you opened up the kitchen cabinet, there were roaches just all over the place. I would imagine that living in those kind of conditions would have been the thing that was the worst for them.

De Jong: Yes.

Redden: They probably learned to live with the separate facilities thing, but the fact that they were kept down like that was probably the worst. There were black people who just lived with it, who didn't object to it.

De Jong: Yes.

Redden: [269] And then there were other people like Thelma who just . . . maybe her family had been active for a long time, and she was just a product of political activism. But she was just willing to do anything she could to fight it. And there were other people in the community, in the black community, when we were in training in Plaquemine who took us in and fed us just to do something to support the movement.

De Jong: Yes. Did they ever tell you any stories about their past experiences in the parish . . . like their experiences with racism at all?

Redden: No. I can't remember anything.

De Jong: And you said you had the impression they had been active before, but you're not really sure how?

Redden: [287] Yes, I just got the impression that . . . well really, the only person in the Caulfield family that we could really talk to was Thelma.

De Jong: Oh yes.

Redden: And she was only seventeen years old, but she did talk about things that had happened. The reason that I got the impression that they had been active prior is that she would talk about things that had happened before.

De Jong: Okay.

Redden: I can't remember any specific examples right now, but I just remember her talking about the way it was there.

De Jong: You mean things like intimidation and violence?

Redden: Yes, yes. If they had tried to go against the way things were, they had gotten in trouble. They had been threatened or something. And I remember the first time we went up there and we set up a voter registration clinic in this one black man's café, and we canvassed all day long to set up this . . . to get people to come. By the end of the day, he said, "No," that he didn't want to have it there because he was afraid. And I don't know what happened in the interim whether he was threatened or just got cold feet or what, but he was afraid to have it. So then we had to go about finding another place, which we ended up having it in a church.

De Jong: [311] Were many ministers willing to let you use the churches?

Redden: Yes. It seems like the movement was supported most by the churches. That's where we had most of the clinics was in the churches.

De Jong: Right.

Redden: It provided a big enough space for us to teach several people at the same time. And it also is just a central part of their life.

De Jong: Yes.

Redden: They're used to going there for . . .

De Jong: It's one of the only places they had to meet.

Redden: Pardon?

De Jong: It was one of the only places they had to meet.

Redden: Exactly.

De Jong: In churches.

Redden: Yes.

De Jong: [323] That summer, were you mostly involved with voter registration or was CORE trying to do other things as well?

Redden: I was only a part of the voter registration project.

De Jong: Okay.

Redden: I know that . . . let's see, I talked about how they organized that. And you asked me whether they organized locally or . . . actually I think that CORE organized the whole project from their offices in New York. And I don't think . . . so I think that the impetus from this project came from CORE in New York.

De Jong: Oh I see.

Redden: They actually had two ideas in mind. One of them was to support the suit by the Justice Department that I talked about earlier.

De Jong: Yes.

Redden: [335] And the other one was to form a freedom delegation to go to the Democratic National Convention that year, which they also did. In other words, it was . . . You know what I mean by that? You know about that?

De Jong: Yes.

Redden: That freedom delegation from Louisiana that they sent to the Democratic Convention. But my part in this was just to kind of do the legwork for the voter registration project . . . to go. What we did was go from house to house talking to people to try to get them to come to the clinic where they would learn how to register and that was really the only part that I played in it.

De Jong: Okay. So there was no local organization that you were trying to work with?

Redden: No.

De Jong: Okay.

Redden: Not an official local organization. There were the people who were sympathetic. There were people, and I don't know how . . . I really don't know how they got in contact with those local leaders but there was definitely . . . by the time that I got there in June, there was definitely a network, a local network of sympathetic blacks that were willing to help us out.

De Jong: Okay.

Redden: [355] And I suppose that it was . . . the leader of this project was Ronnie Moore.

De Jong: Yes.

Redden: And I suppose it was his advance work that set up that network.

De Jong: Right. Do you . . . what kinds of local people . . . I don't know if you could discern a pattern at all . . . but in terms of their economic situation, what kinds of people were most likely to support CORE . . . or a generation or a gender or what?

Redden: What kinds of people were most likely to support us?

De Jong: Yes.

Redden: I don't think it was a particular . . . [dogs barking] Pardon my dogs.

De Jong: Okay.

Redden: [369] It wasn't a particular kind of person. There were people who afraid and would do nothing, and there were people who were just stronger. Do you know what I mean?

De Jong: Okay.

Redden: There was one woman's name who was . . . I remember Mama Jo was her name, and she was just like outrageous. She was just willing to do anything to support us. And I think that's more about her own personal courage and her own . . . just kind of person she was.

De Jong: Yes. Was that the Mama Jo . . . was she in East Feliciana Parish?

Redden: Yes.

De Jong: I thought, yes. So did you get sharecroppers involved and all kinds of people?

Redden: Yes, there were all kinds of people, and I don't know whether they were sharecroppers or not.

De Jong: I don't know if you can answer this question. But you know I'm interested in the impact of things like the Depression and World War Two on these communities, and I wondered

if you had gained any sense of social changes in Point Coupee Parish that had been occurring in the decades before you got there?

Redden: [388] I don't know. I'm sure the Depression had an effect on them. I know that was a devastating experience for people who were in poverty anyway.

De Jong: What did most people seem to do to get income, or what were they working at do you think in the sixties?

Redden: I don't know. The only person I'm aware of working was Mr. Caulfield who went to New Orleans to do construction work. And I don't really know what was going on for other people. They could have been sharecroppers. The poverty was appalling.

De Jong: Yes.

Redden: The way they were living was appalling, and I sometimes wonder if they were even working at all. But I don't know. I really don't know.

De Jong: [409] That's okay. Did that experience of living there and seeing the poverty that they lived with . . . did that changed your perceptions of what had been the problem at all? You seemed to have been really shocked by it, so how did that affect you and the way you thought about the movement?

Redden: In the way that I thought about what the problem was?

De Jong: Yes.

Redden: No, I don't think that changed my opinion of what the problem was because I thought then and I still think that the reason that they lived in such poverty was because of the racial situation. I think that because they've always been put down and disadvantaged, they never had the chance to . . . I don't think they really had the chance to work and to get an education and work in jobs where they could get out of that.

De Jong: Right.

Redden: I think that whole inequality, slavery system just never . . . the injustices were just all pervasive throughout their whole lives, throughout every aspect of life. I'm not sure exactly what I'm trying to say but do you know what I mean?

De Jong: I get it. Well, do you want to talk about the white peoples' reactions to you a little bit more?

Redden: [441] Yes. I remember as I said, the people staring at us with hatred in their eyes which was something that I had never experienced before. And I remember a time when . . . whenever we went out, we usually went out black and white together which was one of the nonviolent tactics that we used just to be in their faces. So it attracted attention wherever we

went because it was such an unusual thing. Black people or white people were not used to seeing black and white together. I remember one time when we went, we tried to go to a drive-in movie theater and there were several of us in the car that were black and white, and they wouldn't let us in. And that struck me as really strange because what difference would it make in a car in a drive-in theater. Another time when we were . . . I think we were in Baton Rouge or a larger city and we were driving in a car on a fairly busy freeway or something like that and some white guy pulled a gun out of a glove compartment and just aimed it at the car and fortunately didn't shoot us. But it was just the fact of being black and white together really upset them. It really made them angry because they weren't used to seeing that and they didn't want it to happen.

De Jong: And these were just ordinary white people of the community?

Redden: Yes.

De Jong: [477] Did you have problems with the law enforcement people after they had called you into their office and spoken to you?

Redden: Occasionally they would . . . what they would do is stop . . . they would stop us and want to see our identification and do just little harassing things like to tell us that we had to get a . . . if we were going to take up residence in Louisiana, that we had to get a Louisiana driver's license. You know that kind of thing.

De Jong: Yes.

Redden: Just little irritating things. I never got involved in any of the really scarier violent things that happened down there that summer. I just got little pieces of harassment.

De Jong: Yes, just irritating things.

Redden: Yes. Yes, just little irritating things.

De Jong: I'm almost done here but I just wanted to check back. The Thelma and her gun . . . do you think . . . oh sorry.

Redden: Pardon.

De Jong: Keeping a gun handy to defend herself . . . was that something you had the impression that had just sort of emerged recently or did the family . . . was it something that had more of a history that they had been . . . like had she grown up with guns in the house and with her father protecting himself or did you . . . was it more recent than that, just in response to . . .

Redden: [506] No, I kind of got the feeling that she was pretty used to having a gun around and that that was something that she might have grown up with.

De Jong: Okay.

Redden: And I think that any family in that situation that was going to stand up for their rights was going to have to protect themselves with a gun because they would have been beaten back down again. Do you know what I mean?

De Jong: Yes. Did CORE workers ever try to discourage that?

Redden: The use of the gun?

De Jong: Yes.

Redden: [516] Well, of course we, the CORE workers, would not use guns but we really didn't have any control over, nor would we want to have any control over how the black people protected themselves. Because they're the ones that had to live there after we left.

De Jong: Yes.

Redden: I'm a nonviolent person myself and I hate guns, and I don't like to be around them, but I certainly understand why they had them and why they needed to protect themselves. Because if the black people didn't have guns to protect themselves, the white people would come in with their guns.

De Jong: Yes.

Redden: It wouldn't have been fair. [Laughs]

De Jong: It was kind of equalizing the odds. [Laughs]

Redden: Yes.

De Jong: [538] Okay, I think that's about all I needed from you. Is there anything that you would like to add that particularly stands out in your mind?

Redden: Let's see. You asked a little bit about what happened to me afterwards.

De Jong: Oh yes.

Redden: After I came back from Louisiana I went ahead and finished college, and then I taught school for a couple of years. And then I got married and had children, and during that period, I got involved in the anti-Vietnam war demonstrations and then the equal rights movement.

De Jong: Oh.

Redden: The equal rights amendment. We got involved in marches for that too. And then there was kind of a feeling after I came home from Louisiana of being really discouraged that we hadn't really made any progress and that it was a situation that was never really going to change.

And after a few years of kind of struggling with social protest, I sort of gave up. And just thought, "Well, I've done all I can do. I don't think I'm ever really going to do anything." And so then, I went off and went into other areas. I kind of got out of the social demonstration areas and went into selling, advertising, and working in business.

De Jong: [574] And you've been doing that ever since?

Redden: What?

De Jong: Is that what you've been doing ever since?

Redden: Yes. Right.

De Jong: Okay.

[End Tape 1074, Side A. End Session I.]