

***Civil Rights History Project
Interview completed by the Southern Oral History Program
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Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African American History & Culture
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Interviewee: Robert McClary
Interview Date: March 9, 2013
Location: Campus of Albany State University, Albany, Georgia
Interviewer: Dr. Hasan Kwame Jeffries
Videographer: Petna Katondolo Ndaliko
Length: 00:28:17

[Throughout the interview, sounds of conversation and laughter from a crowd are heard in the background, with occasional loud cheering and clapping.]

Petna Katondolo Ndaliko: Three, two, one, and rolling.

Hasan Kwame Jeffries: Today is Saturday, March 9th, 2013. My name is Dr. Hasan Kwame Jeffries of the Ohio State University and the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I'm with videographer Petna Ndaliko in Albany, Georgia, on the campus of Albany State University to conduct an interview for the Civil Rights History Project, which is a joint undertaking of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture and the Library of Congress. We are here this afternoon with Mr. Robert McClary.

Mr. McClary, thank you so much for taking the time to talk to us today. I just want to ask you a couple of questions about life growing up.

Robert McClary: Okay.

HJ: Where—when were you born?

RM: I was born October 19th, 1938, here at Phoebe Putney Hospital.

HJ: At Putnam Hospital?

RM: Phoebe Putney Hospital, the segregated hospital here in Albany at that time. I was born with cerebral palsy. And my mother died of diabetes before I became the age of two. I guess I was about two years old, and I don't remember anything about my mother. But my father had a job on the railroad, and he took the family that was left in the house, and we moved to Warwick.

HJ: To Warwick?

RM: Yeah, one of the little railroad shacks you see along the tracks.

HJ: Um-hmm.

RM: For the section hands.

HJ: Wow.

RM: They called them section hands because they maintained a section of the railroad.

HJ: A section of the railroad?

RM: Yeah.

HJ: So, you lived right—literally, in one of those shacks right off of the railroad?

RM: That's right, on railroad property.

HJ: On railroad property.

RM: Yes.

HJ: What was the railroad? Do you remember the name of the company?

RM: Georgia Northern!

HJ: Georgia Northern?

RM: Yeah, the Georgia Northern Railroad, from here to Cordele, I think.

HJ: Um-hmm.

RM: About fifty miles of local light rail. It was not very well maintained, of course.

HJ: Right.

RM: But that's where I lived and that's where I grew up until my father retired. But, yeah, I grew up with cerebral palsy. I remember one day my sister wanted to go—my sister, myself, my brother, and my father. My sister said before my mother died, she gave me to my sister and said, "Take care of my baby." And that's why she stayed there with my father. She was about nineteen, I guess, at that time. But that's where I grew up at.

And one day, when I had learned to walk, at about seven or eight years old, they were discussing what they were going to do with me, because my older brother, was older than me, was going to school. And he said, "I believe Robert can stay here by himself, and he don't have to go to school." My father agreed. He said, "Ain't no need of him going to school."

I had a fit! [Laughing] I had a fit. So, they were surprised by that. "But he *wants* to go to school!" Yeah! I wanted to be treated like anybody else, always trying to do what—you know.

HJ: Right, right.

RM: That gets me in trouble.

HJ: Right. But you didn't want to have any part to do with staying home! You wanted to go to school. Your brother was going to school.

RM: Right!

HJ: You wanted to go.

RM: Yeah! I wanted to do anything he and anybody else could do. But, you know, being handicapped—but I always tried. One day, my father—one *night*, a Friday night, my father came home. One Friday night, and Friday night was payday night. [05:00] The railroad people get paid every two weeks. Payday night, my father came home with a big [05:11]. And he grabbed his shotgun and started back up the railroad tracks, going to town. The neighbor stops him, “Hey, don’t [05:22]” this white man. And my father went to the store to pay the bill. You know, they’d pay the bill when they’d get paid off every two weeks.

HJ: Right.

RM: He went to the store to pay his bill, and this white guy, the store owner, he wanted—he was ready to go home. He said, “Shorty, come on in here and pay your bill!” My father said, “I’ll be in there directly,” and kept playing with the little girl. When he got into the store, the man grabbed him by the collar and said, “I *told* you to come in and pay your bill! You can’t talk to me like that! I’m a white man!” My father said, “No. You’re a son of a bitch.” [Laughs]

HJ: [Laughing] “You’re a son of a bitch!” That’s what your father said?

RM: [Laughing] Yeah! My father was [06:20] from South Carolina, a Geechee.

HJ: Oh, from South Carolina? From South Carolina.

RM: Yeah. You never bother them too bad. [Laughter] But he—I don’t think they bothered him because he had a confrontation with a white man in a small town and lived to talk about it. [Laughs]

HJ: Wow.

RM: So, anyway, I went to school. It was a good school. Warwick had a nice two-story school behind the store [07:00] for white folks. I had to go across the field, or around the field when the crops were growing, to where they had a church school, from the first to the eighth

grades. I think I skipped some grades because I was so old when I started and I wasn't too dumb, you know. I mean, I skipped some grades to eighth grade. Then, we went to Sylvester for high school. They had just built a school in Sylvester.

HJ: Okay. Sylvester?

RM: For Worth County, for black folks. It was, you know, one of those separate but equal schools.

HJ: Um-hmm, separate but equal.

RM: They were trying to avoid integration and they were building these schools. And as soon as I graduated, they thought they had to integrate anyway. So, they selected these different families to start the integration process. One of those little girls was the Young family, Dorothy Young.

HJ: Dorothy Young.

RM: And she had a confrontation with a white guy on the bus, white child on the bus that took her home. But they took her to [08:42]. They took her to the Child Development Center and didn't tell her mother where she was for two or three days. And that started the Movement in Warwick.

But, before that time, I had already gotten involved in the Movement. Shortly after '64 when the Voting Rights Act was signed, I was sitting on the porch and I saw these two people coming down the street, a black girl, a young black girl, and a young white boy. And they were talking and walking and laughing. And they had a clipboard and pencil. And I'm looking, "What is this?" [Laughs] You know? And so, they were some of Sherrod's people. They were canvassing the county to get people interested to vote.

HJ: Canvassing? They were canvassing the county? [10:00]

RM: Yeah. So, they took down my address. At that time, they had a—a—they had [pause] I lost my train of thought there.

HJ: There was a young white guy and a black girl—

RM: Oh, yeah!

HJ: And they were canvassing the county.

RM: Okay. They had a newspaper. Sherrod—the Southwest Georgia Project had a newspaper called the Albany—called “The Other Side.”

HJ: “The Other Side.”

RM: “The Other Side.” And when they were canvassing and got my address, they sent me a newspaper. They sent me a bunch of newspapers to, you know, distribute. So, I wrote an article for the newspaper and sent it back to Albany. And that’s why Sherrod, I guess, saw it and invited me to join the Movement.

HJ: Wow. So, you wrote for the paper, sent it in?

RM: Yeah.

HJ: And then, Sherrod was like, “Come on, join the Movement!”

RM: Yeah. That’s pretty much how it happened. I had already been to several mass meetings with my brother-in-law. We used to meet at night. He would pick me up, and we’d

[11:30].

HJ: Now, would these be mass meetings in Worth or would they be down in Albany?

RM: In Worth County.

HJ: In Worth.

RM: It turned out that Sherrod was trying to organize in about nine counties in Southwest Georgia. And we were going to take over one of the counties, elect the coroner, and arrest the sheriff. [Laughs] That was—

HJ: That was the plan?

RM: Yeah, Sherrod was an idealist. Anyway, I went to a meeting at Dorothy Young's house with Sherrod when they first started having mass meetings on Monday in this county. And that's when I joined the project. And Sherrod gave *me* the checkbook and said, "You take care of the money." And we had an office on Jefferson Street here in Albany.

HJ: On Jefferson Street?

RM: 615 South Jefferson.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

PN: One, two, three, and action.

HJ: Mr. McClary, I apologize for the fifteen or so minute delay there. We had to change some stuff out technically. When we stopped, you were talking about you were working with Sherrod.

RM: Yeah.

HJ: You had joined the Movement.

RM: Yeah.

HJ: What were some of the activities that you did in the Movement?

RM: Well, we did—we canvased, getting people interested to vote, trying to get people interested to vote. We did some welfare-like activities. People could not get welfare, and they wouldn't give them any welfare. And we had to protest that. And every time they'd turn them down, we'd just appeal it. And the white people wasn't used to black people coming in and

appealing. And that was during the time when most of the people there had guns in the back of their trucks and stuff like that.

HJ: Most of the white folk?

RM: Yeah. All of the white folk had guns. And [14:34] and stuff like that. Dorothy Young's mother would come get me on a daily basis when I was staying at home, and we'd go out and talk to people about registering to vote, about their welfare problems, and about school integration problems, and things like that. [15:00] Also, when we got the office, when I moved into the office, my activities mostly were keeping the office, doing little—writing the checks. I still write the checks.

HJ: You still write the checks?

RM: I still have the checkbook. [Laughs] And that kind of activity while I was working in the office. But then, later on, I left it and got a job at Job Corps. I worked there for ten years. Then I couldn't work anymore because I got unable to walk. That was from '79 to '89, I was working at the local Job Corps Center.

HJ: And just to go back a little bit to—you also engaged in some attempts to desegregate some places.

RM: [Laughs] There was a café down in my hometown called The Casino.

HJ: What was it called?

RM: The Casino.

HJ: The Casino.

RM: And you could go into the backdoor, to the back window, and Willie Mae and them would give you a big, juicy hamburger. [Laughs] But now, you know, when white activists came down to work with us from New York or somewhere, Sherrod would appoint them to come to

our house. So, I forget the name of the white guy that—but he was assigned that night to spend the night with me. So, I was going to show him around and everything. He had a car, and I was going to show him around. We went down to The Casino, and like I said, you could go to the backdoor and get a juicy sandwich. But I had this white boy with me. I said, “Let’s go in the front door.” [Laughs]

HJ: [Laughs] You said you’re going in the front door?

RM: [Laughing] Yeah! I went in the front door [17:27]. The guy said, [17:32]. They [17:34]. You know, this is a small town. Everybody knew everybody. They’re talking about going to get the sheriff. So, it was [17:47]. We had [17:50]. But he didn’t let the guy attack us or nothing. He said, “We’re closed.” I said, “But it’s only eight o’clock!” [Laughs] He closed the place and never opened it again!

HJ: Wow.

RM: I felt bad because I didn’t mean to stop the man’s business, but [18:19] just making a point.

HJ: Right, making a point, making a point. And you said Sherrod didn’t know about this?

RM: No. I recently told him about it.

HJ: That’s amazing.

RM: But that little thing happened, and the time I got attacked. I was asleep. I was sleeping in the office on Monroe Street, 307 South Monroe Street. And I had a room there and was using the other room as an office, and then there was a big sitting room we used as a meeting place.

And I was there. I heard a knock, a banging, on the door. I got up and peeped into the living room, and I saw three white folks there with guns in their hands. I had a little Shanghai

Special, too. But I looked, I said, “No, I can’t. I don’t think I can. There’s three of them, and they have automatic weapons.”

HJ: Wow. So, you thought about it? You thought about pulling the Shanghai Special?

RM: Yeah.

HJ: Umm.

RM: You know, I knew I couldn’t shoot fast enough.

HJ: Right.

RM: Or accurate enough. So, I put my gun down. They never even found it. And I walked out in the middle of the living room. [20:00] “What y’all want?” And they [20:04]. Said, “I don’t know who he is.” So, the guy—oh, the guy hit me up beside the head with the pistol, and everything went black.

HJ: Umm.

RM: The next thing I knew I was on the floor on the other side of the room. They were kicking me in the head and in the stomach. I finally convinced them that I didn’t know where this guy was and that I was over there for someplace to—living there while I was going to school at Albany State. And one of the other staff members came up, and I guess that distracted them. They left behind him, and he took off in a station wagon. And the police got them that same night. I sued them and was awarded six hundred dollars.

HJ: Wow.

RM: Which I never received. [Laughs]

HJ: No! [Laughs]

RM: [Laughs] And that’s about it.

HJ: Wow.

RM: But the hamburger place, all I can say, if they ever open up that place in Warwick again, they owe me a hamburger!

HJ: [Laughs] They owe you a hamburger!

RM: [Laughs] Yeah.

HJ: That's alright. I want to get for the record—you said that you graduated from Albany State?

RM: Yeah.

HJ: With a degree in business.

RM: Business administration.

HJ: And you came to Albany State, in part, because Sherrod—

RM: Yeah.

HJ: Said, "Come on down." He encouraged you to go?

RM: Yeah. Really, I was turned down by Albany State the first time I tried to matriculate. After high school, like I said, Rehabilitation was trying to get me into several schools, and they turned me down. I was devastated, and I came up here [22:17]. And the guy said that, "Well, you can't talk, you can't walk, you can't write. We don't have anything to teach you right here." Told me to go to some other school. Instead of that, I got a scholarship. Rehab sent me to Cordele Gillespie-Selden Institute, where I learned to type and library science.

HJ: Library science?

RM: Which I quickly forgot. [Laughs] I came back here. Somebody taught me how to do the general ledger, and do the log book, and stuff like that. And that's what I did, office work, answered the telephone, did the 990 forms at the end of the year, and stuff like that.

HJ: For Southwest Georgia, for the project?

RM: Yeah.

HJ: Yeah. Mr. McClary, is there anything else that you would like to add for us to get on tape?

RM: Well, not that I can think of off the top of my head, except the fact that, like I said before, when you joined the Movement, you can't retire because it's become a part of your bones.

Oh! The little town that I was registering people to vote in, dragging old ladies into the voting booth, while the white people they raised were looking at them, and they were afraid. "Miss So-and-so, are you going in there?" I said, "Come on! Go on!" And I forced them into the voting booth and *made* them vote!

HJ: Wow. And what town was this?

RM: Huh?

HJ: What town was this?

RM: This was right after '64. We were voting for Kennedy, I think.

HJ: And was this in Warwick?

RM: Yes.

HJ: This was in Warwick.

RM: This was in the small town of Warwick, yeah. Yes. I don't know, I guess I didn't realize how much danger there was. They had probably put the word out: "We're going to kill that little crippled nigger." [Laughs]

HJ: Wow. For doing that?

RM: Yeah. But it never happened. [25:00] Anyway, just to try to make me stop. But so much went on during that long period of time I know I missed something but that's the gist of it.

We used to have staff meetings with people from different counties on Monday morning. And then, we'd go out to the various counties and do what we had to do, to get people interested to vote. But in that little town, like I said, we got the first black mayor of Warwick, which was elected during the last administration, because he died. But we did get a black mayor in Warwick. I wasn't there, but I hope that some of my work led to the result of that.

HJ: Definitely.

RM: Yeah, yeah.

HJ: Definitely. One last question: Were you—were you ever afraid?

RM: Uh, I suppose I was. [Laughs] I was more hopeful than afraid—well, excited. I thought I was Daniel Boone! [Laughs]

HJ: You thought you were Daniel Boone—more hopeful and excited than afraid!

RM: [Laughs] Yeah!

HJ: Wow.

RM: I never was afraid. My father taught me that. He'd always complain about other people being so timid.

HJ: Being so timid.

RM: And he was not timid. I don't know where he get his bravado from, but like I said, he was the only man that I know had a physical confrontation with a white guy and lived to talk about it. After the incident, he just went back uptown. [Laughs]

HJ: Amazing. That's amazing.

RM: Like I said, that's the attitude that those Geechees had! [Laughs]

HJ: [Laughs] They weren't backing down!

RM: [Laughs] Yeah.

HJ: They weren't backing down.

RM: They say if you point a brand-new shiny pistol at a Geechee, he won't back up. But if you point a rusty one at him, he'll be scared! [Laughter] He'd be scared of a new gun.

HJ: Wow, wow. Well, Mr. McClary, thank you so much for sharing your thoughts and experiences. This has been a real honor to talk to you.

RM: Well, you know, I [27:59] and I don't have any notes or anything. I could have missed something.

HJ: That's alright, that's alright. Anything we missed, we'll get it again.

RM: Okay.

HJ: Alright, thank you.

RM: Thank you.

PN: Wonderful.

HJ: Alright.

[Recording ends at 28:17]

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Sally C. Council