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Russell and Gina Sugarmon, Tennessee State Senator, 1969

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Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/10267/33891

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Russell Sugarmon- Universally but without folk you come in asking questions and they tell you what they think will get you away from their door quickest and easiest and we have this questionnaire prepared with all these lists and all these choices about who is your preference and if, which organization you identify with, NAACP , Shelby County Democratic Club, unity league, Lincoln League. If your choice did not coincide with which one of these organizations do you think is most effective in achieving gains for the negro, this sport of thing and if this organization and your personal choice differed, would you support your own choice or give your support to the organization. We came back with about 95% for Ingram. It was really scary I suppose. And then we decided that we had to try to beat him and we lost Farris.

Joan Beifuss- Was Farris that much better?

Russell Sugarmon- No, but Farris had far…

David Yellin- but you saw what he…

Russell Sugarmon- Farris could not become a machine leader because too many people did not believe in him as sort of a second Christ. Crump had control of the black vote and maybe 20% of the white vote and this is what Ingram was going through and he was going to destroy any independent negro issue.

David Yellin- And you saw this?

Russell Sugarmon- Yeah and so we figured it was better to try to stop this, than win with Ingram. We could have backed him he came and asked us to support him.

Joan Beifuss- What is this thing that has continually popped up in elections here about black ministers selling out candidates and black leaders selling..

Russell Sugarmon- It pops up, I am sure some black leaders some black politicians, some black anybody, some white anybody taken money. I think it usually has the most currency when the particular black leader you are talking about doesn't agree with your point of view on the candidate.

David Yellin- I figure that is one of the reasons he did it.

Joan Beifuss- Ok so then would you say though that it occurred in the Ingra years as mayor where the Shelby democratic club was functioning pretty well then?

Russell Sugarmon- Yeah, yeah ,yeah. But not because of Ingram I think in spite of Ingram.

David Yellin- Yeah does Grider's name come into this now?

Russell Sugarmon- I would think that you could say that the democratic club is some of the power has bee more, you could give a guy like Lobe more credit than Ingram

because lobe gave you a target, he made it easy to define the issue and Ingram never did.

Joan Beifuss- Ok now at this point are you getting new people such as Lawson came into town in the 60's are you getting new people involved in the leadership of Jesse Turner and You and Willis?

Russell Sugarmon- We have some yeah. Some new leadership. I guess maybe we have a lot, Cabbers and Sweet Willy Wine with a different point of view.

David Yellin- Now you are coming to about 67 and 68 right?

Russell Sugarmon- Yeah.

David Yellin- All through this where is Russell Sugarmon here, where are your ambitions?

Russell Sugarmon- Right now?

David Yellin- No then.

Russell Sugarmon- For then? Power. All through this time I felt it was important for the black community to have the sense to being able to affect its destiny. I don't mean me power, my power, power for me. I mean in terms of the black people in this town. I thin it is important for the white community to realize that the black community had the ability to affect its destiny.

David Yellin- well I don't know how this fits in but along bout this time, 64 is when George Grider, and you supported George Grider.

Russell Sugarmon- We supported him, we did not, we endorsed George Grider in 1960 when he ran for appointed court and we unendorsed him about 3 days before the election, it was too late to get our ballots changed.

Joan Beifuss- Why?

Russell Sugarmon- Because after our endorsement of Harsley Jones he was one of the people with who we had a pretty honest exchange and he said if you are going to have him on my ticket take me off. And so we said ok.

David Yellin- At that time he was partners with Lucius Birch?

Russell Sugarmon- Yeah.

Joan Beifuss- Oh was he?

Russell Sugarmon- Yeah. He was in Birch's office and…

David Yellin- And it was his request.

Russell Sugarmon- I think it was a threat, I won't let you support me.

David Yellin- Yeah I see.

Joan Beifuss- So you took your ballot and went home.

Russell Sugarmon- Yeah we took it off, took him off the confrontation was too late to get it off all of our ballots to really get the message out.

David Yellin- Do you feel that you are George Grider as a person or your backing of him in 64 entered into the history of your organization, the negro movement, political.

Russell Sugarmon- When you say the history in what sense do you mean in terms of…

Joan Beifuss- Was it of any value to you?

David Yellin- Any value then did he fulfill his obligations, were you instrumental in getting him nominated, I think you were instrumental in getting him elected.

Russell Sugarmon- Yeah, yeah, yeah. I am not sure. I think he was instrumental in our fight against Ingram when they were establishing the war on poverty he helped open some doors where we could present our case.

Joan Beifuss- Yeah would you talk on that just a moment what was the deal when the war on poverty started here?

Russell Sugarmon- Well the wear on poverty as Ingram visualized it was going to be a part of his apparatus where he could control patronage. The money that the mayor could ok who gets and we didn't want that.

David Yellin- I am sure that he didn't read the New York Times about the harub in, he just knew it…

Russell Sugarmon- Instinctively yeah.

David Yellin- Anything about..

Russell Sugarmon- I think he is a master politician and he is a tremendous (muffled).

Joan Beifuss- Who then when the war on poverty came in who were the negro leaders then who…

Russell Sugarmon- The group I am talking about, the NAACP, the democratic club, Everest has always been an ally of Ingram. And he was trying to rationalize it and we were trying to destroy it. The structure as it was then projected.

Carolyn Yellin- Was Everest ever a real power?

Russell Sugarmon- A negative power, we, a power in the sense of his ability to frustrate by draining off enough votes.

Joan Beifuss- What was the deal with Cornelia Crenshaw and Willis?

Russell Sugarmon- I don't know.

Carolyn Yellin- Was she an ally of Everest?

Russell Sugarmon- Yeah. She became an ally of Everest, that goes back to her frustration of being a manager of housing authority and I don't know what happened to build up her frustration but she became dissatisfied one day and started trying to help the janitors and the medial employees to organize and somehow during hat period she became convinced that Willis was not really on her team.

Joan Beifuss- Well now what did he have to do with the, what did he have to do with the housing?

Russell Sugarmon- Well NAACP, we were the lawyers, the NAACP attorneys and they asked NAACP's support. I think maybe he may not have gone to enough mass meetings for her, I don't know what it was.

David Yellin- It was a personal thing.

Russell Sugarmon- Yeah it was personal he ran and she ran, so they had a (muffled) and she resented it. He put a picture on his material, her picture on his material and she didn't consider it a flattering picture and she got hot about that one.

Joan Beifuss- How about in….

David Yellin- She wasn't a segregationist she was a woman first.

Russell Sugarmon- Yeah I think she is a woman.

Joan Beifuss- in 1966 when they…

Russell Sugarmon- With a little w.

Joan Beifuss- In 66 when the sanitation workers, is it 66, when they first tried to organize, did they come to the Shelby democratic club for help?

Russell Sugarmon- Let me see in 66, at some point during the efforts because what happened when they finally succeeded was sort of…

David Yellin- That is the Hoffman injunction.

Russell Sugarmon- The end of a trail. They had been trying for years and years and years. They went to Everest for while. The teamsters were involved initially. The retail clerks they let them use their facilities for awhile and then finally they got to the government employees. Yeah off and on they did come to the democratic club but at the point they came Everest was the kingpin on the thing.

David Yellin- Of their group?

Russell Sugarmon- Well I mean they had more faith, more repoire that the group of public workers who were trying to get the union organized at that point had more repoire.

Joan Beifuss- With Everest?

Russell Sugarmon- With Everest.

Joan Beifuss- T.O. Jones sit in ever?

Russell Sugarmon- No not T.O., Jones, he was I think Jones came along later. He emerged later.

Carolyn Yellin- He was sent in by the union?

Russell Sugarmon- No Jones was a public works employee but he emerged as a central figure in an effort to organize a little bit later. There was another guy who went to California, I can't think of his name, little short thin fellow with big pants. They fit him loosely on the ankles.

Carolyn Yellin- Charlie Chaplin?

David Yellin- It was Epps wearing T.O. Jones'.

Joan Beifuss- But this first this 66 effort to organize the sanitation workers didn't create a big stir then did it, or it doesn't seem to have.

Russell Sugarmon- It didn't get very far, I don't know how much of a stir.

David Yellin- Well they stopped it with the injunction, that is the injunction on that Sunday night.

Joan Beifuss- There is your Hoffman injunction. Ok so then when Willis ran in the mayor's race looking at it from the outside it would appear that the whole Shelby democratic club fell apart?

Carolyn Yellin- No, not when he ran, last election.

Russell Sugarmon- No I don't, I think the process, and don't think it is a part yet, over the history of the club there have been spin offs. I think there is more competition…

Carolyn Yellin- (Muffled).

Russell Sugarmon- The Kennedy democratic public was spun off.

Carolyn Yellin- (Muffled).

Russell Sugarmon- No that is Mrs. Sexton and Mrs. Morris.

Carolyn Yellin- Oh I thought that was…

Russell Sugarmon- The Unity league is O.Z. Evers. No Kilpatrick and Lockard where in the democratic club spin offs, the 9th district.

Joan Beifuss- What did they spin off too?

Russell Sugarmon- The 9th district democratic league or something like that.

Joan Beifuss- So why then at the time Everest, Lawson was running for the school board at the same time.

Russell Sugarmon- Yeah Lawson was running for ht school board.

Joan Beifuss- what other candidates did you have going?

Russell Sugarmon- Willis was running for mayor and Lawson was running for school board, those were our candidates. A.R. Wilson was running for the school board.

Carolyn Yellin- Was Billy Kyles running for…

Russell Sugarmon- And Billy Kyles.

Carolyn Yellin- Was he one of your candidates running for council?

Russell Sugarmon- Yes I think so.

Joan Beifuss- Who else do you recall?

Russell Sugarmon- At that point there were probably only 3 or 4. Not that many.

Joan Beifuss- What about Fred Davis?

Russell Sugarmon- No that was after that race wasn't it, or was it? No same race.

David Yellin- That was when 101 candidates.

Russell Sugarmon- Let's see Fred Davis….

David Yellin- Well and Patterson, and Neders…

Russell Sugarmon- Yeah Patterson and Neders.

Joan Beifuss- But Davis came out of the Shelby democratic club didn't he?

=Yeah.

Joan Beifuss- But Patterson didn't?

Russell Sugarmon- No. I think you know I guess maybe 85% of the negros in politics came out of the democratic club.

Joan Beifuss- Yeah well where did Patterson come from?

Russell Sugarmon- The Church of Christ came from his fathers (muffled).

Carolyn Yellin- Yeah and how about Neders?

Russell Sugarmon- Neders race was difficult race for us because we had a guy ran, he announced and ran who was in the club and was pretty popular. Really wanted to run because he felt he could do some thing.

Joan Beifuss- Who is that?

Russell Sugarmon- He is a member of the southern male course.

Joan Beifuss- What?

Russell Sugarmon- It is a male chorus, great soul singing and primitive Baptist singing, Dr. Watts and stuff. He is an insurance agent in North Carolina. He is maybe retired now, I can't think of his name but he ran and at this point we had a lot of pressures that this affection of old members who felt that we had been going for probably the most articulate and most dynamic and most effective candidates passing over a lot of people that had the desire. At this point this guy ran and we felt that maybe this maybe the last straw for a lot of these people who are valuable people. Effective people on a certain level.

David Yellin- Russell you have not as I can recall given the structure of the democratic club. What was your position and who was chairman?

Russell Sugarmon- Well I was chairman for 4 years.

David Yellin- From when to when do you recall?

Russell Sugarmon- Well let me give you the structure, the first chairmen under the new structure was Macy L. Walker and then Frank Kilpatrick and Alexander Gldden.

Joan Beifuss- Who is that?

Russell Sugarmon- Gladney, Alexander Gladney.

David Yellin- Yes Gladney.

Russell Sugarmon- I think I was the first one who served two full terms without getting impeached.

David Yellin- 2 year terms?

Russell Sugarmon- Yeah 4 years two, two year terms.

Russell Sugarmon- I sort of retired with my shield still at my loin.

David Yellin- When was this?

Russell Sugarmon- Let me give you the structure, the structure was the basic organization…the basic part of the organization is a precinct club and it is made up of people in the precinct who elect their own leader and they come together they held their election and they nominated people and whoever they elected is a precinct leader. And they had 5 other, 4 other people with the precinct leader they elected who are members of our central committee. The central committee elected the county wide chairmen.

Joan Beifuss- I am not with you, you had a sort of a central committee composed with precinct leaders plus 4 other people?

Russell Sugarmon- 4 other people from the precinct, elected by the precinct. They elected 5 people including the chairmen and this 5 member delegation was that precinct's representation on the central committee. And the central committee elected the county wide officers.

David Yellin- So it was organized on a county basis?

=Yeah.

David Yellin- And you were chairmen for two terms.

Russell Sugarmon- Two terms yeah. We had a thing you could be chairmen for two terms and that is it.

David Yellin- And when did you end so we will know when you began?

Russell Sugarmon- When did I end? Vasco Smith replaced me.

David Yellin- Replaced you. Were you in the state legislature when you were…

Russell Sugarmon- Chairmen? I am not really sure I think I have been out, Vasco served one term, one two year term. Walter Bailey is the chairman now. This is part of his first year. Vasco was the two years prior.

David Yellin- So you would have got out in 66 and you were elected in 62.

Russell Sugarmon- Something like that.

Joan Beifuss- Did you find in Nashville it was possible to do a lot for the negro community in Memphis?

Russell Sugarmon- In the negative sense yeah I think so.

Joan Beifuss- How so?

Russell Sugarmon- Well we were able to persuade, well the democratic club is the power has to be articulated in terms of state. Because after we got the democratic club, the momentum going we did a study of the state of the population over 21 by race and listed the percentages by county mailing out to all the Masonic leaders we

could find, all of the eastern star leaders we could find, all of the preachers we could find, all of the teachers we could get mailing lists for and asked them, this is the way the state looks. The eastern 3rd is republican the middle 3rd is democrat the western 3rd is segregationists and this is where the black votes are heavy in middle Tennessee. We have the possibility on the statewide level of influencing state wide elections because of the republican democratic, liberal democratic, conservative democratic splits. If you agree that wee are going to meet at Fisk University we would like to have you come and se somebody so we can talk about whether we can have a state wide organization. We said the Tennessee voters council and we wound up with organizations in 54 counties. Which is where all the black voters went. So when we went to Nashville we were not only dealing with the other legislators as other representatives we were dealing with them as officers of a state wide organization that had votes in their counties.

David Yellin- And were you can officer of this?

Russell Sugarmon- I was chairmen I think at that point. Or vice chairmen or something, I am not sure when I was chairmen or a vice chairmen. But the whole thing was Powell, I think early in the term of a guy, a state senator ran for mayor of Jackson he has voted against 2 or 3 things up there and the TVC affiliate in Jackson opposed him and they clobbered him for mayor, Bob Conger beat him, Conger is the present mayor. Everybody knew it, everybody knew he was running for mayor and they knew he got clobbered and knew that TVC beat him up there.

David Yellin- So you are still functioning?

Russell Sugarmon- It was a salutary thing and so we were able to not all of it because after King and after the riots in Nashville it didn't matter. Didn't care what we could do. But on a lot of issues less volatile I think that we were able to dissuade a lot of people from supporting things they might have.

David Yellin- Now you just made a statement of course which is very significant to what here you say that after the King assassination that it didn't make any difference.

Russell Sugarmon- Well it was more of an emotional reaction and not one of where I go. It was a sort of a white (muffled) representative.

David Yellin- I see you are not talking about the legislature, that your organization existed and this other thing was so powerful.

Joan Beifuss- Let me come back tot eh Willis election. Did Willis himself think that he could win that election?

Russell Sugarmon- I am not sure I think he has a lot of political sophistication and I think if you are a candidate the one thing you have to do is convince the people who are backing you that you believe in your chances.

David Yellin- And then you start to believe in your own beliefs.

Joan Beifuss- Did you think he could at least get into the runoff?

Russell Sugarmon- Yeah I think I always thought he had a chance of getting into the run off. Enough of a chance to take it.

Joan Beifuss- Was he bitter when he did not get it.

Russell Sugarmon- I don't think so.

Carolyn Yellin- No I think he was bitter though that he didn't carry more.

Russell Sugarmon- I think he was bitter more about the lack of support he got from black voters. But I don't think he was bitter about not making….

David Yellin- You know he got 8 votes in our area.

Joan Beifuss- Well now in the post mortems of the Willis election and I am sure there must have been post mortems….

Russell Sugarmon- We always have post mortems.

Joan Beifuss- Yeah to what basically did you attribute it.

Russell Sugarmon- Well I think one thing as I said he is a guy who does not the common touch.

Joan Beifuss- Was there, because I heard and I can't remember it was somewhere I heard that there was a great deal of resentment and Willis and the black community because of and right now I can't (muffled).

Russell Sugarmon- You get, I think any negro who yeah the affluence.

David Yellin- Well this is what I want to get at and if you don't mind I was saving this question I am not interrupting you to be very personal. You know, how did you and I think you two in that regard are certainly related.

Russell Sugarmon- Well I don't know. I certainly have never been in his category.

David Yellin- Well, aside whether you think you have or not there are images we have. You have a different part of it. I guess if people spell out they say Willis is probably richer than you are. But that doesn't make it(muffled).

Russell Sugarmon- I can answer that, I think I can answer that.

David Yellin- But how did you early on, because I think A.W. always has been affluent which shaped him and I wasn't which shaped me.

David Yellin- So you had something else that he doesn't have.

Russell Sugarmon- My father had a decent living, he was able to take care of his family but I don't think he was ever an affluent man.

David Yellin- Well now there is something else that I think even is…..I don't know you ask Carolyn I am not going to be part of anything, if you don't have your own (Muffled).

Carolyn Yellin- I don't think people trusted him, I don't thin the black community trusted him at all.

Russell Sugarmon- Well he had the assurance of money that he didn't need the word about whether they trusted him.

Joan Beifuss- What about the deal that supposedly made between Willis and…

Russell Sugarmon- Lobe? Nothing, nothing.

Joan Beifuss- Where did that come from?

Russell Sugarmon- People who wanted to rationalize why they didn't want to go along with it.

Carolyn Yellin- Negro?

Joan Beifuss- Are we talking about O.Z. Evers?

Russell Sugarmon- O.Z. Evers any middle class negros, they wanted to have an excuse because of their hang up about whether or not we need a black mayor.

Joan Beifuss- Isn't that funny because.,.

Russell Sugarmon- Because this challenges what they have been doing with their lives. For men to make a significant contribution.

David Yellin- Well Joan because suppose you do because I don't know if we have any where what the rumor was?

Russell Sugarmon- That Lobe gave him $35,000 as a bribe.

David Yellin- That Lobe gave..

Russell Sugarmon- Willis, yeah.

David Yellin- On the face of it with Willis probably being as wealthy as Lobe.

Russell Sugarmon- He could have afforded, at that point he could have afforded to give Lobe $35,000.

David Yellin- I mean that seems hardly the bait to have attracted this.

(muffled)

Russell Sugarmon- He wants to be, I won't say that he wants to be a millionaire but he wants to make a million dollars on his own.

Joan Beifuss- Who?

Russell Sugarmon- Willis.

Joan Beifuss- Oh he does?

Russell Sugarmon- His family is worth a few million.

Joan Beifuss- But that rumor was widely circulated wasn't it?

Russell Sugarmon- But the thing that motivates Willis' power is not, I know him we grew up together, he could care less about money he cares more about power. And he is an astute enough politician to know that $35,000 was not going to help him get any power.

Carolyn Yellin- Of course no power.

(Muffled)

David Yellin- Russell see I think you are a faced and I always thought this, in fact the first time I heard you was I thought that was, even though what I thought you gave was a brilliant…I think you have more of a political deficiency.

Russell Sugarmon- Maybe.

David Yellin- And I am not accusing you I am asking you, and that is that you are an intellectual you are articulate how does this, how have you found this I regard to particularly to your people?

Russell Sugarmon- I don't know I think other people have had more problems with it than I have. Turner, Maxine, they are always telling me to keep it simple when I am talking to people. They weren't invited but I have always had the feeling that somehow the people I was talking to understood what I was talking about. Maybe they didn't.

David Yellin- No it is not that they don't understand it, I don't know, I am asking this in a sense that…

Russell Sugarmon- At the risk of sounding snobbish I honestly don't believe I have eve come through as a snob with people.

David Yellin- That is kind of interesting. Well I don't know, snob means something else to someone else.

Russell Sugarmon- Social, intellectual, economic.

David Yellin- I mean I don't know then how do you then account for yourself sir, why did you lose this last election?

Russell Sugarmon- Well I lost that for a number of reasons and one of them was my involvement in my divorce.

David Yellin- You think that did have a big affect?

Russell Sugarmon- One of them was my reputed liaison with Margaret Piazza.

David Yellin- I did hear that once.

Joan Beifuss- I didn't even hear that.

(muffled)

Russell Sugarmon- I have no idea.

Carolyn Yellin- At the American opinion bookstore.

Russell Sugarmon- I have no idea, to my recollection I have met her once when the Kennedy memorial when Jack Kennedy was assassinated she sang the star spangled banner, that is the only time I have ever seen her in my life.

Carolyn Yellin- They had me convinced, you know after a while.

David Yellin- Yeah I heard that one time…

Russell Sugarmon- I got a letter from a lady who worked at the American Snuff, on the production line and she told me that the lady that worked next to her, she didn't identify herself, but she told me that the lady worked next to her was going all over the plant saying that Mrs. Condon was having an affair with me. You better check this thing with Mrs. Condon before you….

David Yellin- But that was while Mr. Condon was alive?

Russell Sugarmon- No he was dead by then.

Joan Beifuss- What kind of a….

Russell Sugarmon- She thought it was terrible and this particular lady that was spreading all these rumors was having an affair with somebody and she had mentioned his name and they were meeting out at the Holiday Inn in Frayser. His license plate and everything.

David Yellin- oh really.

Carolyn Yellin- (Muffled)

Joan Beifuss- Let me ask you, did you even want to run in that election you lost?

Russell Sugarmon- No. I did not want to run.

David Yellin- You really didn't have your heart in it.

Russell Sugarmon- Actually Walter Bailey was going to run, that district and then we checked him and he was in the wrong district and about 3 days before the qualifying deadline they had no choice…I think I would have enjoyed being up there again but I did not have the, I had other things that prevented me from getting focused as a candidate.

Joan Beifuss- What about Willis though was he still?

Russell Sugarmon- I think he still wanted it.

Carolyn Yellin- He was very bitter.

Joan Beifuss- Russell go back again to this Willis election…

Russell Sugarmon- I couldn't generate enough intellectual energy or whatever it takes to go out and make all those speeches. I made 3. One at Fred Davis' house, one at district attorney's house and one somebody else's house, one of our precinct leaders for whom I have a hell of a lot of respect. It was for them and not for me.

David Yellin- Well now if we can when the strike…

Joan Beifuss- Wait just let me ask this one second before we get to the strike. Did Willis, I know that Laurie tried to drum up support for Willis. Was there in fact much white support for Willis at all?

I think that probably initially there was some among the white people here who were fascinat4ed by the concept. There was probably some among the white liberals. On one or two occasions I think that he dissipated it when they actually had a chance to get exposed and on one or two occasions I think he confirmed it.

Carolyn Yellin- He just wasn't a well enough speaker to really…even people that he wanted to, wanted to leaning toward that….

Russell Sugarmon- He has a very fertile mind, very creative mind politically. But somehow you have to work at listening and extract these.

Joan Beifuss- Oh he is a terrible speaker.

Carolyn Yellin- (muffled)

David Yellin- Let's talk about Russell Sugarmon we will talk to A.W. Willis.

Russell Sugarmon- You are supposed to be objective.

David Yellin- Yeah let's talk about you know I think we can get tot eh when the strike happened, February 12th 1968. What was your reaction if you recall both as a, I mean not both what was your reaction as a person…

Russell Sugarmon- February 12th was that when it happened? It was the same day as the new administration taking off.

David Yellin- Well it was close to it the new administration came in January 1st.

Russell Sugarmon- They came in with that problem to live in didn't they?

David Yellin- Pardon?

Russell Sugarmon- Didn't they come in with that problem?

Joan Beifuss- No.

David Yellin- It happened later in the administration.

Carolyn Yellin- They had been in since January, and this happened in February.

David Yellin- Lobe had a midnight mass or something.

Russell Sugarmon- Well something happened prior to it taking off I don't recall what it was.

Carolyn Yellin- Now he just sent letters out at midnight to different people firing them. You know Ingram called some last minute meeting, or last minute appointees.

David Yellin- Then the strike happened in February, do you recall now your own personal involvement in this because what I am getting at I think is why are you as a here to fore leader in the negro community, did not in this instance take an active part at least as we know it officially or from the point of view of the papers. Again this is not any kind of an accusation just a need for an explanation why you weren't there in this, what was…

Carolyn Yellin- I think that is very obvious.

David Yellin- Well I think it has to be said.

Russell Sugarmon- I don't know. I think a part of it was because Jones never really trusted the democratic club leadership. He didn't come to us, the strike was a surprise to us we didn't know anything about it.

David Yellin- Then you have to go back to the before…

Russell Sugarmon- I think that Jones trusted me but he thought I was probably too much influenced by people in the leadership he did not trust. I don't think he liked Turner and I don't think he trusted Willis. I don't think he liked the Smiths.

David Yellin- He didn't feel comfortable with them?

Russell Sugarmon- Yes, it is a matter of not feeling comfortable I guess.

Joan Beifuss- Was he the maverick in this whole deal?

Russell Sugarmon- Who?

Joan Beifuss- Jones?

Russell Sugarmon- In relation to which point?

Joan Beifuss- In that for instance it has been printed that the strike took the international union leadership by surprise, he took everybody by surprise.

Russell Sugarmon- Oh yeah, I think he was NAACP and every other group.

David Yellin- He didn't consult anybody.

Joan Beifuss- He was the little man (muffled).

Russell Sugarmon- I don't think really he comprehended what he was initiating.

Carolyn Yellin- The whole thing was sort of a…..

Russell Sugarmon- I think he got into the situation where he was confronted with some arrogance and he reacted viscerally.

Carolyn Yellin- On the part of other people in the department there.

Russell Sugarmon- In the department yeah.

Carolyn Yellin- People he had to deal with?

Russell Sugarmon- Yeah people he had to deal with.

David Yellin- Then did they ever come to you, when did the thing accelerate?

Russell Sugarmon- I think over the ensuing two or three weeks they had been enlisting other groups to come in and support.

David Yellin- Because now Mr. Willis was down at city hall that Friday for the macing. You weren't?

Russell Sugarmon- No.

David Yellin- Where were you then do you recall?

Russell Sugarmon- What was the date?

David Yellin- The 23rd.

Russell Sugarmon- Not that will help me recall.

Joan Beifuss- Where were you on the night of…

David Yellin- Yeah where were you on the afternoon of the 23rd.

Russell Sugarmon- I was probably trying to make up my mind about what I was going to do about my own personal problems.

David Yellin- So that, we don't mean to get personal here, so that what you are saying here in essence…

Russell Sugarmon- Well at that point.

David Yellin- You had your personal problems?

Russell Sugarmon- Back in August during the mayoral race my wife and I were going through the process of deciding if it was better to try to provide an emotional stable emotional, whether we could provide a stable emotional environment for our kids without estrangement or whether it would be better getting a divorce. I mean all this was going when I ran. And it was still going on during this period.

Joan Beifuss- Well looking back though..

Russell Sugarmon- I was out of it because of personal reasons.

Joan Beifuss- Looking back on it though from a period of calm following did you when T.O. Jones took the men out, shortly O.Z. Evers supported him almost immediately the NAACOP came in quickly, did you have a power struggle there in the negro community or is that really as altruistic….

Russell Sugarmon- No I don't think there ever was a debate about whether they should or not. I think the question was how and what would be the approach.

David Yellin- But in essence you weren't too involved in this then?

Russell Sugarmon- Well I was only involved in say theoretical discussions with people like Turner and Vasco. Hooks was, about if we get into it what is going to be the frame work, what was going to be the approach.

David Yellin- What was your concern with these people, what was the concern.

Russell Sugarmon- Of the public works people?

David Yellin- Of Hooks and Turner and Vasco and you and Willis. What did you talk about fellows?

Russell Sugarmon- Well how could you best translate your potential into impact in resolving the strike, in getting what the workers wanted.

David Yellin- I mean there was no doubt there was sympathy.

Russell Sugarmon- Oh no there was, the only issues were…

David Yellin- How to do it?

Russell Sugarmon- Which way would be the best way to come in.

David Yellin- Which way you could function from your power point and all of these other people.

Russell Sugarmon- Yeah.

David Yellin- Did you feel that the leadership of the strike itself was in other hands? Was it in Lawson's hands as far as you knew?

Russell Sugarmon- Well Lawson is in his orbit of the democratic club. He is a member.

David Yellin- So you never felt out of it as such.

Russell Sugarmon- Oh no.

David Yellin- Do you feel that any of the others, the people that we mentioned..

Russell Sugarmon- I think T.O. Jones always felt out of it as far as the democratic club structure is concerned.

David Yellin- And then when Lawson came into it?

Russell Sugarmon- I think he regarded the democratic club as an ally and not his thing.

David Yellin- I guess what we are saying is we are trying to find out whether as part of the dynamics that happened here in those 66 or 65 days, that…

Joan Beifuss- This is another what if question.

David Yellin- Yeah well whether the personal relationship amongst people involved had anything to do with this.

Russell Sugarmon- Well I think out of the democratic club hierarchy Jones probably had a better repoire with me than anyone.

David Yellin- But you weren't functioning.

Russell Sugarmon- I was not functioning.

David Yellin- What if you had been functioning?

Russell Sugarmon- I think it probably would have happened the same way because I think when he pulled out the workers it was visceral, I don't think he had a chance to check with anybody.

Carolyn Yellin- He would have no more checked with you than he would have no more…

Russell Sugarmon- Then he did yeah.

Joan Beifuss- Russell when the black white polarization got really bad in March did that surprise you?

Russell Sugarmon- No, not really.

Joan Beifuss- Was it comparable to what had really happened in the early 60's? Or was it worse? Had the white and black communities ever been so completely irate against each other?

Russell Sugarmon- No I think in the 60's it was worse.

Joan Beifuss- At the time the sit-ins were going on?

Russell Sugarmon- Yeah.

David Yellin- Really?

Russell Sugarmon- I think if somebody had bee killed in the 60's you would have had a worse reaction.

Joan Beifuss- Did you keep up, when you were in Nashville, did you keep up with all what was happening in Memphis?

Russell Sugarmon- Oh yeah.

Joan Beifuss- Day by day.

Russell Sugarmon- We were back every weekend.

Joan Beifuss- So when King was coming in did you regard that as a good tactical move?

Russell Sugarmon- Oh yeah, he came in 59 and spoke during our campaign. I think he had a special feeling for Memphis because he really got some of his real great audiences, his great repoire.

David Yellin- He made a statement on the way from the airport when they were joking with him and somebody said what kind of crowd. And they said oh kind of small and then they made a joke because then it was a big crowd and he said just like the old days.

Carolyn Yellin- Your law firm represented him.

Russell Sugarmon- Yeah the old days were 59 he came in to speak it was right after Montgomery or when he was on his way to his promise later achieved he came and spoke at Mason Temple and there was 5,000 people. I will never forget that because you could feel the assembly acquire a personality of its own. And it was like a brain relating to the limbs. He had a refrain, he had the speech technique of making a

statement elaborating it and repeating that statement. Like I have a dream this sort of thing and at that point the statement he was making was we just want to be free. And he was saying, we aren't trying to create a society in which the black man dominates the white man we just want to be free. And he got, I guess maybe a third of the way through his elaboration of the statement with his repetition of the theme and every time he got tot eh repetition of his theme there was 5,000 people going we just want to be free. It was like a Greek chorus and it was a fabulous thing.

Joan Beifuss- Was that in the election year?

Russell Sugarmon- This was in 59 yes the election year. Daisy Bates spoke for us and Martin king spoke for us.

Carolyn Yellin- Daisy Bates from…

Russell Sugarmon- Little rock.

Carolyn Yellin- Fresh from the riots….

Russell Sugarmon- Fresh from the riots in Little Rock.

Joan Beifuss- Did you have, you met King then in 59.

Russell Sugarmon- I knew him before then.

Joan Beifuss- Did you have any….

Russell Sugarmon- After he got in the Montgomery, you know the prominence he had achieved in Montgomery and somebody told me. There were a lot of things going on all over the south, NAACP meetings before the southern Christian leadership conference was formed, I think that at one point he would have come into the NAACP but the NAACP didn't give him the right signals so he set up the southern Christian leadership conference.

Joan Beifuss- did you have an occasion to se him over the years.

Russell Sugarmon- Oh yeah we were going to different places and south Carolina was one of the first times that Jim Lawson was at a conference in Colombia South Carolina. I think he had just gotten out of jail somewhere.

Joan Beifuss- When SNICK was formed?

Russell Sugarmon- No this was a the germination period of the Southern Christian leadership conference. He was talking about nonviolence in some meeting over there. SNICK was a little bit later.

David Yellin- Yeah before SNICK.

Russell Sugarmon- John Lewis and the group out of Atlanta. They were almost contemporary but SCLC was slightly before.

Joan Beifuss- Well you knew Lawson before he came in here then?

Russell Sugarmon- Oh yeah that is where we met in Columbia south Carolina. I think that Willis and Hooks and I were both over there and he was talking about nonviolence because he was the theoretician in the SCLC, on the technique. King was the articulator.

Joan Beifuss- Well I wanted to say, what was the impotence for bringing Martin Luther King on when Martin Luther King did come to Memphis the last time.

Russell Sugarmon- This last time?

Joan Beifuss- This last time well not the last time when he came in the midst of the strike…

David Yellin- The 28th?

Joan Beifuss- Was that the first….

David Yellin- Well he came in the snow storm..

Joan Beifuss- He came in the 18th and spoke and then cam back in.

Carolyn Yellin- But when he came the 18th the first time he spoke, after Roy Wilkins and after Barrett Ruston after the others, how did that come about?

Russell Sugarmon- Well this is conjecture but Jim Lawson is on the SCLC National board an I think Martin had a lot of respect for Jim Lawson. And Jim Lawson had a lot of respect for Martin and he felt that Martin could help catalyze the issues.

Carolyn Yellin- I remember driving along in the….we were on a trip or something, and we heard on the Memphis radio station they said that it had been reported that Martin Luther King had been invited and someone said we called down there today and his secretary said no he is out of the country and he had no plans but indeed he did come.

David Yellin- But even during that period which then became tenser as far as relationships go, again I am trying to get you back if at all you did come back to any of the activity, did you during the time?

Russell Sugarmon- Only on the weekends when I was back from Nashville.

David Yellin- Well but you didn't really participate actively again because you were involved…

Russell Sugarmon- Well there were two or three levels of my reaction. One of them was that I felt comfortable with Turner's involvement, with Maxine's involvement, Smith, Vasco's involvement, Jim Lawson's involvement. I didn't really feel that they needed me and I didn't really feel that they were going to omit me. If they did leave me out I thought they would let me know.

David Yellin- I see. Well, that answers that question.

Russell Sugarmon- I felt I was free to worry about my personal problems.

David Yellin- Yeah. I mean the thing had gotten impotence in a sense without it.

Russell Sugarmon- Yeah. And I also felt they understood what my detachment was about. I mean not specifically but I think they had some kind of insight we have all been close enough.

David Yellin- Well…

Joan Beifuss- What did we get to March 28th?

David Yellin- This again and this is because we never know what people will come up with, where were you on the day Martin Luther King was killed?

Russell Sugarmon- I was on the highway coming back to Memphis and it came on the radio.

David Yellin- You were oh from Nashville.

Carolyn Yellin- Driving?

Russell Sugarmon- Yeah, we got to Memphis before curfew.

Joan Beifuss- Were you by yourself?

Russell Sugarmon- Yeah.

David Yellin- We withdraw that question.

Joan Beifuss- I mean you weren't with Willis?

Russell Sugarmon- I wasn't with Willis I can answer that. I think he had flown back a little bit earlier.

David Yellin- Now you had no inkling of any difficulty and so on?

Russell Sugarmon- No inkling of anything like that. The only thing I thought was that it was going to be a increasing momentum on the confrontation, more.

Joan Beifuss- Can you even say what your first reaction was when you heard he had been shot?

Russell Sugarmon- Yeah when I heard he had been shot it was the same way I felt when I heard Kennedy had been shot. I somehow felt that it was going to be a superficial thing.

Carolyn Yellin- It can't be true.

Russell Sugarmon- Yeah it can't be true.

David Yellin- Yeah. Of course your office was the representative here.

Russell Sugarmon- Well I was in the car and listening on the radio so there was no way to communicate until I got here to really find out. I guess it was probably 15 minutes between the time he was shot and they announced he was dead it just came on almost…

Carolyn Yellin- At what point on the highway were you?

Russell Sugarmon- I was maybe 60 miles just past Jackson.

Carolyn Yellin- So you were between Jackson and….

David Yellin- and as you said you came right into the curfew.

Joan Beifuss- Can you articulate what you felt like when you found out he was dead?

Russell Sugarmon- I didn't feel like anything when I found out he was dead. It was probably the next day when they started having the eulogies and the programs on TV by his wife and all I was really numb. You have a faculty for tuning out if things get too tough and I think it was probably the evening of the next day when I was watching a recap of his life, that I really began to feel something.

David Yellin- We should ask you this question or something, if you are an early morning riser when you are more alert but maybe because you are tired and all of your defenses are down.

Russell Sugarmon- I don't know I have always, I guess that is the way I live my defenses are always down.

David Yellin- Yeah ok ok. Now you have disarmed me. No this is a speculative question I think I would be interested and curious about your reply. What do you think future in Memphis in particularly in relation to the race situation.

Russell Sugarmon- Well I don't know, I don't, when you are focusing on Memphis I don't think it is important on Memphis. I think the future of Memphis depends on what is going to happen nationally. I think pretty much it is up to white leadership. I think the black leadership is pretty much depends on how you look at it is either committed or trapped in a certain direction.

David Yellin- Fine. I think however it…

Russell Sugarmon- It depends upon how the white leadership interprets the direction or the thrust.

David Yellin- Now I am not changing the subject but who is the black leadership?

Russell Sugarmon- A lot of people I thin that Eldridge Cleaver and Leroy Jones, people like that. Willy Wine on a local level.

Carolyn Yellin- These are people that were farther along the road than you were.

Russell Sugarmon- Farther along the road of alienation.

Carolyn Yellin- Of alienation.

Joan Beifuss- Can you add people like Hatcher and Carl Stokes?

Russell Sugarmon- No I don't think you can write them off I think that what they can do is limited, it depends what help they can get in interpreting the context.

Carolyn Yellin- (muffled)

Russell Sugarmon- I think you can write them off if you don't believe that there are some non blacks who have insight and the courage to interpret this and react to it. I don't think the black leadership can shift too much, but I don't think that the white leadership is that barren. I think there are some people.

David Yellin- Of course you are also saying your kid of implying to me what Ben Hooks has said us here but I have heard him say that the problem…

Russell Sugarmon- After Martin King's death I think it is going to be up to the white leadership.

Carolyn Yellin- This was the turning point?

Russell Sugarmon- Yeah.

Carolyn Yellin- From then on it was out of the hands of black people.

Russell Sugarmon- Yeah I think so because I think he was the only national black leader who could articulate another course tot eh white masses.

David Yellin- Oh yeah he could articulate not only for the negros but for the white.

Russell Sugarmon- Yeah both ways but the black masses now what I am saying is that if he had lived it might have been possible for focus on another tool of change. His tool. And I think he was acquiring other tools in addition to nonviolence. I think he was beginning to focus on political approaches.

David Yellin- Or economic.

Russell Sugarmon- Or economic approaches breadbasket and that sort of thing. Once he was removed I think that a lot of black leaders who feel like there are other legitimate approaches but they don't have the stature with black people.

Joan Beifuss- Are you saying that black leadership is fragmented?

Russell Sugarmon- No I think they are helpless, I don't think they are fragmented, impotent I will put it that way impotent.

David Yellin- Helpless and so that the Cleavers and those people who don't have the patience that Martin Luther King had but…

Russell Sugarmon- The strength maybe.

David Yellin- He always inspired.

Carolyn Yellin- Jesse Jackson is (muffled).

David Yellin- Also..

Joan Beifuss- Well he is kind of local at this point he is kind of confined to Chicago.

Russell Sugarmon- He didn't have the prestige of stature of King.

Joan Beifuss- What about then here in Memphis?

Russell Sugarmon- I am not that really concerned about Memphis. I think Memphis is one facet of…

Carolyn Yellin- But Russell here is what I am saying…

Russell Sugarmon- I think that Memphis cannot work out unless the nation works out.

Joan Beifuss- You don't think all thee things working out in the nation will make a nation policy?

Russell Sugarmon- Yeah but I am saying that if it works out in Memphis and it doesn't work out in the nation then it doesn't work out in Memphis.

Carolyn Yellin- Yeah what I want to say is you came back from Harvard to Memphis because you were being specific about local community.

Russell Sugarmon- No I was being really specific about a local community I came back to Memphis I did not like Memphis but I have always regarded Memphis as a good microcosm of problems. This was as good a place as any this is where my roots are.

Carolyn Yellin- Do you think is even more so now, since it has had the attention, this is what I wanted to direct your…

Russell Sugarmon- No I don't because I think the problem has been focused in New York and I think has come home…

David Yellin- It may be a microcosm but it is not the instigator.

Russell Sugarmon- Yeah I think it has become nationalized.

David Yellin- Yah of course it seems to me when you mention Cleaver and Leroy Jones and then on the other hand, Hatcher and Stokes is that and this is what Ben

Hooks said. Once you start to talk to the white folk, you lose your influence with the black folk.

Carolyn Yellin- That is true.

David Yellin- Stokes is talking to the white folk and so on. So it is one of the those things you are damned if you do and damned if you don't.

Russell Sugarmon- It is a conundrum.

David Yellin- yeah right. And that is a real basic problem.

Carolyn Yellin- If white people listen to you then black people distrust you. They say you are a tool of the white man.

David Yellin- So if I can go back the A.W., Willis rumor is a reflection on that same thing.

Russell Sugarmon- This is an example of what happened.

David Yellin- It is a perfect what we call rhetoric of that feeling.

Carolyn Yellin- Until you saw that within the black community until you….

Russell Sugarmon- I don't think it can be solved in the black community. I think it can be solved with enough insight by white leadership to realize this process, to understand the dilemmas of the black leadership.

David Yellin- Well so what does a white person do, not talk to the black leader.

Carolyn Yellin- No I think..

Russell Sugarmon- In a sense that is sure… you have to have a subliminal communication but not an over identification.

David Yellin- Yes right very good and that takes a great amount of sophistication and trust.

Russell Sugarmon- Yeah.

David Yellin- And belief or whatever and that is true.

Russell Sugarmon- You have to read what they are doing over there.

David Yellin- Yes and not necessarily talk about it…

Russell Sugarmon- Face to face. Well I am an existentialist.

David Yellin- You see the black people are used to this. Russell the black people are used to this they live their whole lives that way talking double talk but to a black person.

Russell Sugarmon- We are used to it…

David Yellin- A white person doesn't know how to engage in that.

Russell Sugarmon- Has never had that need.

Carolyn Yellin- Are all black people existentialists really?

Russell Sugarmon- Yeah.

David Yellin- Yeah.

Russell Sugarmon- It is a lot easier for us to come and hear what is wrong and what needs to be done.

David Yellin- Right so it is exceedingly difficult on that hopeless note we are coming to the end of the tape.

Carolyn Yellin- Oh I had this lovely thought under developed. Is it still possible that the dream that an A.W. Willis could be mayor of Memphis? And by assuming…

David Yellin- The right A.W. Willis.

Carolyn Yellin- Or that Carl Stokes is mayor of Cleveland that in this process becoming related to the entire community may exist hope. I didn't phrase that well.

Russell Sugarmon- Well I don't know how to answer that because as I said I am an existentialist.

David Yellin- Yup.

Russell Sugarmon- I don't know.

David Yellin- I don't think the hope is in electing someone as mayor.

Russell Sugarmon- I hope there is hope.

David Yellin- I think it could be electing the right Lobe as mayor if you are talking about the white power structure and so on because the white power structure is still in power.

(Muffled)

Carolyn Yellin- It is almost impossible to get that somebody up there who both sides trust. Or you would say the majority of both sides trust.

(muffled)

Joan Beifuss- This may still happen or to trust a Sugarmon or to trust a Carl Stokes.

Russell Sugarmon- Well I think it is possible because of the white masses don't really need the type of truth, that the black masses need. The black masses need truth.,

David Yellin- Masses and the cold (muffled).

Russell Sugarmon- White masses jut need articulation.

Carolyn Yellin- Your dealing with two forces the old negro and the new, and you know.

David Yellin- We haven't even talked about the schism in the negro community.

Russell Sugarmon- This also not unique to blacks.

David Yellin- Oh of course it isn't.

Carolyn Yellin- The generation gaps.

David Yellin- The blood fights are the worst kind of all. (Tape End)