

Charles Cobb, Jr. – “Emmett Till”

If you ask most of the SNCC people or any, or the CORE people, they will say that part of how we see ourselves is as the Emmett Till generation. You know, and it's a different kind of feeling, I think, than the feelings of our parents about that murder. What made the difference for us, as I say, young people who would later form SNCC and CORE, and especially the guys, is A) Emmett Till was killed when he was 14 years old, and so he was our age; and secondly, his mother wanted people to see what they had done to her son, so she had the photographers from Jet Magazine, or as we called it "The Jet", take photographs of his bloated and mutilated body. We stood around with the Jet Magazine in our hands, opening it up, talking about Emmett Till.

Charles Cobb, Jr. – “Law Ain’t Got Here Yet”

Ruleville is a little town; it's 11-hundred people. So it doesn't take a day for the entire town to know, as they would put it, that the Freedom Riders have come. And we're walking down this dirt road and a car comes to a stop in front of us, a roaring stop. Clouds of dust, because the roads are all dirt in the black community. And out jumps a white guy, and he's got a pistol. And he says, "I know ya'll ain't from here and you're here to cause trouble, and I'm here to tell you to get out of town."

And this guy turned out to be the mayor, right? So now he's waving this pistol at us, still shouting at us, and he orders us in the car. And McLaurin asks him, he says, "Well why do we have to get in the car?" And the mayor says, because you remember all the words exactly, the mayor says, "Because this pistol says so" [laughs]. And it was kind of a common understanding. So we got in the car, and he drove us to City Hall. City Hall shared space with the city/town jail, and he takes us into City Hall where we find out he's also the Justice of the Peace [laughs]. Because this is a feudal society, right? And he's ranting and raving. Now he's saying we need to get out of town and go back to New York. Well why New York? He says, "You're New York City Communists." [stop here]

So he's now ranting about this, and McLaurin, who enters, engages the mayor-- and I'm fascinated by this because remember, I've come to Mississippi with all of this baggage from never having lived in Mississippi, so I'm watching. And Mac's a year older than me. And he's going back and forth with the mayor, which is fascinating to me; Mac first says that, "Well we're all native Mississippians." And I was happy about that because that included me, even though I was from Washington, D.C. And then he tells the mayor that, "We're in Sunflower County to register people, get, encourage people to register to vote, and the United States Constitution gives us the right to do this." To which the mayor responds, unforgettably, "That law ain't got here yet."

He kicks us out of the office finally and then I think he's ordered by somebody to let us go. And in letting us go, I learned something else from McLaurin. Because then Mac, when the mayor tells us to leave, go back, get out, McLaurin then says, "Well you have to bring us back to where you picked us up." And I couldn't figure this out. Because as far as I was concerned, I mean Ruleville had 11-hundred people. You're 10 minutes from any part of Ruleville on foot, and I was perfectly happy to walk back to what was then called the Sanctified Quarters, which is where the mayor had picked us up. And Mac is insisting on this. And the mayor brings us back to the spot where he picked us up. And I asked Mac later, why did you make this an issue? And Mac pointed to people, there were people now coming out of the houses when the mayor deposited us. And

The National Center for Civil and Human Rights – Atlanta, Georgia

Mac said, "All of these people saw the mayor pick us up here. And they thought we were dead." And one person did say that, they said, "We didn't think we'd ever see you alive again." There's always these situations. There's no town you can go into where at some point you're going to have this kind of confrontation with somebody in authority-- it might be the mayor, it might be the sheriff, it might be the police chief. But there's no, you're always going to have this. And how you responded at that moment had a big impact on how people saw you in the community. It was the first point in which they really began to realize you're serious.

Charles Cobb, Jr. – “Man Retrieving Gun”

The mayor, he has now confiscated the shotgun of Mr. McDonald, who I'm staying with right, as evidence. So I get back to the house and Mr. Joe, as we called Joe McDonald, is now worrying about not having his shotgun, less because of self defense then that's how he put food on the table. He's a 76-year-old man, poor, and he had three young guys now living with him and his wife. And we tell him, McLaurin and I got back in forth in terms of who exactly told him this. I say Mac did, Mac says I did. So I say we told him that the United States Constitution gave him the right to bear arms. And he asked us if we were certain about this, and we said yes. And because we were working on voter registration, we had this history book. And the history book had a copy of the U.S. Constitution in it. So we go get the history book, open it up to the U.S. Constitution, and read the Second Amendment out loud to him. And we say see, this is the Second Amendment Mr. Joe, and this is where it says you have the right to bear arms. And he took the book from us and folded the page over and kept the book. And we forgot about it. About half an hour later I noticed that he's not around. And I asked his wife Rebecca, Ms. Mac as we called her, I said "Well where's Mr. Joe?" And she says, "He went to get his gun. You said it was all right." Well now see, we're worried now because you know the worse thing that can happen to you of course is you encourage people to do something, they do something, they get killed or hurt very badly, and that was our fear, that he, Ms. Mac said he's gone to get his gun because we said it was all right [laughs]. And we're worried now that he's going to get gunned down. We're getting ready to run out the door after him when he pulls back up to the house. He's got this raggedy truck, and he steps out of the truck, and he's got the gun and he's raising it over his head like this with this big smile on his face. And I asked Mr. Joe, I said, "Well what happened?" He said, "Well I went to the mayor's office, and I told him I come to get my gun. And the mayor didn't believe me, and I repeated it" he said. "I come to get my gun. And then the mayor said you don't have a right to your gun." And Mr. Joe had brought the book he had taken with him, and he held it up, he said, to the mayor, and he said, "This book says I do" [laughs]. The thing about Mr. Joe is he couldn't read or write. He was 76 years old. He couldn't read or write, so he believed us. And it was true, we had folded it to the Second Amendment, but he, if the mayor had asked him to read it he couldn't have read it. But the mayor gave him the gun.

Charles Cobb, Jr. – “Staying in Mississippi”

I was 19 years old. And as perhaps only a 19-year-old can do, I decided I would see the entire south. And I bought a bus ticket on into Houston, Texas. Well I got off the bus in Jackson, Mississippi, because the students in Jackson were sitting in. The reason I got off the bus in Mississippi, in Jackson, was because of Emmett Till. So I couldn't imagine black students sitting in in Mississippi. It's one thing for me to be sitting in Virginia or Maryland, was the way my mind went. It's an entirely different proposition to be a student sitting in Mississippi. So I wanted to see what they look like [laughs]. So I wanted to see if there was some special something with these students, and I made my way to them. And I introduced myself to them, telling them pretty much what I'm telling you-- well I'm just passing through on the way to Texas. And one of them, Lawrence Guyot-- they were all sort of challenging, but one of them, Lawrence Guyot who was a Tugaloo student, historically black college, and who would later become chairman of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, he listens to me and then he gets up, and Guyot is a big guy-- you should talk to Guyot, you should interview Guyot-- great, big guy, and he kind of hovers over me, and he starts to speak with complete and total disdain. And he says, and you remember the words in these kinds of situations, he says "So you're going to Houston, Texas for a workshop on civil rights. What's the point of that when you're standing right here in Mississippi?" And I got the message, you know [laughs]. You won't understand the southern movement unless you understand the challenges that black people made to each other within the black community. And I've got lots of examples of this, personal and otherwise. And this is one of them. Here's this guy, and yeah, and what he's telling me is yeah, you can go chatter about civil rights in some workshop in Texas but that's useless, that's really what he's telling me. If you're serious, then what you'll do is stay with us. And then of course I had never thought about that. I never did get to Houston. But I wound up going up to the delta with two other students, and Ruleville in Sunflower County, and I wind up staying in Mississippi for almost five years.