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G: It is Thursday, June 27, [2002]. This is Susan Glisson. I=am in Atlanta, Georgia, on **West Peach Tree**, just around the corner from the **Stork Hawks** with Charles Prejean. We are talking about the Southern Regional Council. Thank you very much for your time.

P: Thank you.

G: I would love to hear your story on how you arrived at the point where you were associated with the Southern Regional Council.

P: I think maybe I ought to start off with the statement that yes my name is Charles Prejean, and although it doesn=t sound like a typical southern name I am a southern, that is if any state west of the Mississippi can be classified as southern. Southern Louisiana, that=s part of the South. The question is how did I come in touch with SRC and how would I characterize my early experience with the Southern Regional Council. Working Louisiana, working in the area of social justice and social and economic empowerment issues in rural southwest Louisiana, first we started off with community literacy training thinking that if adults were exposed to more formal education, they would build on this and have opportunities for better employment. That was a difficult proposition for adults because the classes were in the evenings and folks worked all day and retired at night. They were more concerned with immediate results, short term benefits from doing the extra that was needed. So we decided to respond to that by creating employment opportunities and income generating opportunities. What seemed to be the model that was most appropriate for people with little resources was the cooperative economic models, bringing folks together, pooling the limited resources, and starting businesses that were labor intensive and could provide some immediate employment. Credit unions were also an opportunity for mobilizing capital and using that for business development. We started a group in southwest Louisiana under the leadership of Father

**Albert McKnight**, started mobilizing small communities and organizing them for this purpose and in the early 1960s we incorporated Southern Consumers Cooperative. It was a cooperative in principle, and it was established as a holding company with the idea that it would have subsidiary businesses under. We decided to start a business that could utilize local agricultural products, so we went into the fruitcake business and at the same time we created a lending institution that would be a statewide lending institution based on credit union principles. We were not allowed to establish... The bond was not common enough, we were told by the federal credit union administration, to qualify for a state charter. So we organized a small factoring company with credit union principles on people=s enterprise. During the course of organizing and mobilizing people and employing folks and whatnot, we found that we could not raise internally the necessary capital for those businesses, so we started seeking monies from external sources, especially from financial people. Coming in contact with other regional type organizations like Southern Regional Council, like the National Sharecroppers Fund, and the American Friends Service Committee who were all active nationally as far as the American Friends Service Committee, but they were also active regionally in the South. Our efforts to prevail against these benefactors and these groups not knowing really how to respond to these requests for assistance, naturally guided us to organizations that they were familiar with like the Southern Regional Council.

G: You=re talking about the national foundations?

P: Yeah, the national foundations. In a sense, Southern Regional Council, and these other well-established organization who had been doing fine work for so long had standing with the relationships with these national foundations. They were the natural groups to guide us towards. The civil rights movement was in full force at that time, but there were elements of that movement that had shifted toward economic issues. Voting rights were still very important and the public

accommodation issues were also very prominent and we were involved in those things, but we also knew that there had to be something else as part of the civil rights movement. Some of us veered more towards that issue of economic empowerment. It was new. [For] community based type organizations who were self-determinative in nature, dealing with those kinds of important bread and butter issues was somewhat new to these national organizations. Southern Regional Council at some point in time decided, I guess in response to these national foundations to convene a meeting and bring together these organizations that were requesting assistance and they were bringing to spring up throughout the South.

G: The ones that were more focused on economic empowerment.

P: Right. And doing surprisingly similar kinds of things that we were doing and using that same model of the cooperative economic model, or community based self-determinative type of organizations, non-profit groups. I think the first meeting was convened and I figured now even in 1964, in Edwards, Mississippi, Mount **Bula**, there was a place called Mount **Bula** there and we began discussing our concerns and needs and the issues that we were confronted with. I think the Southern Regional Council played a very important role in convening that part of the movement to think through and talk through some of their needs. They were able to convey to the national philanthropic sector exactly what we were talking about. I thought that was a beneficial role that they did play in support of the civil rights movement in general and those groups that were moving in the direction of employment betterment and economic empowerment activities. Southern Regional Council, it was a regional organization with some decentralization. It had a staff in resources in a number of souther states and so we did come in contact with these staff persons and organization, Southern Regional Council representation at the state level. They had a sense of what was going on in a number of states in the South and it was well respected. I should say it

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was well respected in general, but it was respected in some circles that were concerned with change and improvement and general betterment.

G: I just want to make sure that I'm accurately hearing. I have a sense that there are local grassroots organizing efforts that are beginning to shift their attention in the mid-1960s to late 1960s from public accommodation work, voting rights work to economic empowerment, and somehow SRC gets this sense that there is this shift and they respond to that by bringing people together to see if they can help. In other words, it's not SRC initiating a shift, it's SRC responding to...

P: Maybe they did encourage a shift, but I'm not aware of that. It wasn't so much a shift away from public accommodations, but it was becoming more inclusive and incorporated that very necessary issue of concern. From my vantage point, it was a reactive sort of response to that phase of activity at that particular time. In my particular instance, Southern Regional Council was very helpful in introducing us to a larger world that we needed to be associated with because as I said before, we just could not mobilize the resources we needed internally within these community groups. We needed to start establishing these kinds of relationships with folks who were sympathetic with what we were trying to do and supportive of what we were trying to do. Southern Regional Council sort of served as that bridge that introduced us to professional folks as well as organizations, **Ealy Micener** types of organizations. It played that valuable role for us and for other organizations also.

G: Those organizations wouldn't have been easily approachable without that intermediary role for SRC.

P: Intermediary sort of role? I don't quite understand. That would not have been approachable?

G: For you, for your organization, for the Southern Consumer's League to go to Ford? You wouldn't have been able to do that.

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P: Right, right. They helped. There were some instances where we did have some contacts with one or two foundations, but they were **nase** and they were just evolving and whatnot. Father **McKnight** who was part of that leadership in southern Louisiana, although he had been there for quite some time, he had some contacts up north. He was from New York and so he had established some relationships with foundations in New York. Southern Regional Council sort of complimented that or facilitated that.

G: Did you have any sense working on the ground that there were proscriptions or limitations then placed upon you either by SRC or by those national organizations once they became involved in funding you?

P: Not in the beginning. I didn't think that they... We were very young and we had a lot to learn. We took it one step at a time. We needed to forge good relationship and folks were offering some assistance to us and that assistance seemed relevant to what we were trying to do, and we didn't look behind. We didn't question their intentions initially. We were just at the talking stage and not at the involvement stage, so those things don't usually come out until you start working in close relationships with organizations. We didn't see those proscriptions as you would say initially and whatnot. We were naive and young and energetic and full of enthusiasm and we thought that effort, the good effort would produce the good results.

G: Did that happen?

P: Not as easily as we thought or as quickly as we thought. The naivety blinded us to the complexities of relationships and intentions. Other folks viewed what was happening and what was really needed and whatnot. I think we offered also the possibility of community engagement and positive and constructive activities. We were not calling for an overthrow of the government and

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we were not rioting in the streets or anything of that sort. We were focused on economic well-being, empowerment, and we wanted to use peaceful means to do that.

G: Did you feel like over time, as that relationship evolved, there were [proscriptions]?

P: I never felt that SRC directly was trying to guide us in a certain direction. The closer the relationship got there were some disagreements in terms of emphasis and things of that sort, but you must also [understand], as you probably do, there was a great deal of confusion during that period in terms of the changes that were occurring and what to do once these changes occurred. We didn't have all of the answers and I don't think SRC had all of the answers either. Some of us felt that with the coming about of the more egalitarian society with the passage of the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act and the housing act and whatnot, that that would change things automatically. But once that occurred, we realized that we still had a job to do. That didn't change attitudes or anything. Looking in hindsight now, we realize that folks were regrouping at all levels. Those who resisted change developed new strategies to deal with how best they can remain in power and control the changes that were coming about. We didn't even consider those things until we started feeling the impact of how the new leadership was organizing themselves and relating to us.

G: Do you have a sense that SRC's role or it's strategies changed as some of these passages occurred?

P: Yeah. There was a point in time with Black militancy that SRC was confronted with... confused SRC, and did not realize what all of this meant and why they were being attacked in the fashion. I think some elements within the movement, the more radical and frustrated aspect of the movement just painted all Whites generally with the broad brush of well you played a role, but now it's our time to play a different role. That transitioning sometimes was awkward and hurtful, and I don't

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know if SRC at that point had thought about how it could continue to play a role within the changing circumstances of the region.

G: When they were being attacked by Black militants, did they allow that kind of control to switch?

P: I think they resisted that. They didn't think that that would necessarily be the best thing for everybody. I think there was some resistance in their part and there was some hurt on the part of those who were in that leadership during that period. There was hurt because of the confusion and because of not knowing exactly the new role that they were going to have to play. I think for so long, SRC was in charge of guiding and encouraging the change. It was a question of how their leadership would go forth and how it would share leadership responsibilities also. I don't know exactly how that was done in terms of Black/White sharing of leadership within SRC, but I suspect that for a long time, White southerners were in the leadership positions guiding the effort. I must say when you think and read and understand the role that SRC played in those early days, those folks were very courageous in their efforts and they were subjected to all kinds of problems. They played a very courageous role, but things were changing and I don't think SRC changed as quickly as was necessary during that time. SRC really played some very basic roles in helping community groups to structure themselves and organize themselves firmly and pointed in the right direction. There was not that overwhelming desire on their part to control those organizations= day to day activities. I think they wanted to maintain some kind of relationship and they struggled to try to learn what that type of relationship would be.

G: For the most part, that kind of relationship worked fairly well until some of these other transitions began to occur, and then in your assessment SRC didn't necessarily handle those transitions as well as...

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P: Yeah. As I said, here you have an organization being in existence for what twenty, thirty years by that time, I think it started in 1940s.

G: Yeah, and it grew out of that commission so it had an even longer history than that in another organization.

P: I don't know if it resisted that, it was just in a state of confusion. From my view, how to transition when so many other circumstances had obtained by that particular time.

G: From your vantage point, you weren't necessarily aware of the internal workings? If there were personalities changing from White to Black?

P: No. I was not that close to SRC, I was only on the fringes. I was not part of the internal evolution of that leadership. When I came onboard, Dunbar had already left and **Paul Anthony** was the executive director of Southern Regional Council. Vernon Jordan was still here VEP. I remember VEP started as a department within Southern Regional Council and I remember hearing conversations and discussions about the need for it to become an independent operation. There was some conflict involved with that transition, I guess, or change, but I was not internally a part of those discussions. All I knew was that a certain point in time, Voter Education Program was an independent operation.

G: Did you have any interaction with the VEP project?

P: Oh yes. VEP was working in some of the same communities... By that time, we had started a regional organization, the Federation of Southern Cooperatives, which grew out of those initial meetings that SRC convened in the National Sharecroppers Fund and American Friends Service Committee. Out of those discussions grew the community groups needed technical support, they needed financial assistance. Some of the problems were common problems so why not create an organization that will deal with those problems in an umbrella organization to facilitate the response

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to satisfying technical and training and advocacy and mobilization of capital. That organization was created and was working in ten of the southern states in communities in those southern states, and in many instances, those were the communities SRC had projects in those communities too. So that was a working cooperative, a collaborative relationship with the Voter Education Project. We were dealing with the same people in some instances.

G: How would you assess VEP=s role in the movement?

P: I think it played a valuable role in provided resources and information to those groups, and encouragement and some legal assistance for folks who needed that kind of assistance, who were thrown in jail because of their voter activism. I thought VEP played a very valuable role in that area.

G: It had some pretty amazing personalities that were associated with it like the Vernon Jordans and the John Lewises. What strengths do you think, or how did their roles affect the project?

P: I thought Vernon=s personality, his grasp of the situation, his contacts that he had not only in philanthropy, but also in those communities, in those states and whatnot. Vernon Jordan had the good relationships with the Black leadership and the southern liberal leadership in many of those states. He was well respected and I thought that went a long way in the effectiveness of his work. He was very articulate about the need within those communities, and represented those needs well with foundations. I thought he was a very effective leader in the area of voter registration and participation. It was the thing that was needed and he provided staff and other resources to those groups.

G: What about John Lewis?

P: John Lewis= efforts, again... There were community groups that were forming at the local level and coming into their own, and was able to do more things independently of a regional body than

before. There were some tensions, I think, during John=s administration, but those were good tensions and it was very exciting to see people assume responsibilities at the local level and wanting to move pretty much in their own way, and who were beginning to forge direct relationships with national groups and whatnot.

G: Could you talk more specifically about what those tensions were and why you felt they were good?

P: It was a question of who would be the spokesman for the local group. Whether or not local groups would assume more of those responsibilities than the regional group, and I think **Lewis says**, who will speak for them? You need the regional organization to represent them, or how would you involve the local groups. I think those questions, those tensions rose out of the leadership issue and how to involve local communities in leadership responsibilities as advocates for the local group and representation of what was going on at the community level. That=s my sense of some of those tensions. There may be others, but what was important to me and exciting to me was to see people assume responsibilities for their own lives and their own betterment and whatnot. Again, there was an adjustment. Prior to that, you had the original organization serving as a spokesman for all kinds of reasons. It was safer for them to do that, and now the local leadership represented talent that was prepared to assume responsibilities and courageousness on their part, they were becoming more courageous about risks and things of that sort. In the early years after the Voting Rights Act, there was still fear on the part of your local community. I remember before I left Louisiana in 1967, there was a local election and we tried to recruit community people to offer for office, we call them parishes, at the parish level especially in this election. We couldn=t find anyone so some of us had to run just to open the door. Afterwards, folks felt encouraged by this and then subsequent elections offered at the parish level and at the city level. They just needed to

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see somebody do it and live. I think you saw that occurring in any number of communities in the South. It was that evolution that I think caused some healthy tensions between the role of the regional organization and the role of local organization.

G: What was John Lewis's particular take on all that?

P: I think John appreciated that evolution and I think towards the latter years in office, his interests began to change and he wanted to become more directly involved in electoral politics on a personal level. I think that's the reason why he decided to offer first for the fifth congressional district seat and when he was unsuccessful, he took the job with the Carter administration temporarily. But his passion was to become an active participator in electoral politics and he came and ran for city government and the city council and won a seat, and then from there ran again for the fifth congressional district and won. I think John adjusted well and he accepted those changes and he encouraged them to a certain extent. He also knew that the efficacy of the organization was transitioning as folks assume more and more responsibilities at the local level. I'm not saying that there wasn't a need anymore for the regional VEP, but there was a need to reassess its efficacy.

G: What about **Julian Noland**?

P: In terms of his relationship with voter education? I think it was similar to John. **Julian** played the supportive role and the representational role for the regional organization well, and I think **Julian** would have encouraged the participation and the more independent participation on the part of the local organizations and leadership. There were other factors. You had your local leadership trying to establish itself, its independence, looking around to see how it could evolve relationships with the broader institutional society within their local communities too. That search had to be done by the local groups to see if there were opportunities to establish good, mutually acceptable relationships at the

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local level. I don't think the regional organization could play that role better than the local groups because of the view of outsiders coming in and defining how things should be at the local level.

G: Is there a point, because you mentioned leaving in 1967, did you cease to have an interaction with SRC at that point or did you...

P: With Southern Regional Council?

G: Oh no. As a matter of fact, Southern Regional Council, National Sharecroppers Fund, and the American Friends Service Committee was still involved. It took us about two years to create the regional federation of southern cooperatives. There was that relationship. When the organization was incorporated in March of 1967, that is the Federation of Southern Cooperatives, and we looked for an executive director. I was the founding chair of the organization and the first official chairman of the board once it was incorporated. John Lewis had just returned from the North, I think he was doing some work with the Field Foundation, and he took a job that was held by **Al Olmo**, which was a community development project. I forget the official name of that project, **Al Olmo** was running that project and was leaving and John came to take over that job. Southern Regional Council through John Lewis and **Al Olmo** were very involved with the evolution of the federation and the incorporation of the federation. They put us in touch with lawyers and other contact persons that we needed. They also agreed to help us in the search for an executive director. So they traveled the region communities, **African** communities, and ended up in Lafayette, Louisiana to report that they could not find anyone they had thought would be better than me. Here I was in the midst of a local campaign and what not. To make a long story short, I decided to take the job on a temporary basis because I really wanted to work at a local level. I accepted the offer and then they persuaded the board to consider me and the board of directors chose me for its executive director in the Fall of 1967. I took it with that qualification that I would get it started and get it pointed in the right direction. Of course that never happened, I

stayed for almost about twenty years or something. Coming to Atlanta, SRC helped us to find office space and to structure the operation. The little money that we had, they served as an intermediary for us, it was very little, not even enough to pay my salary. They provided that very necessary assistance for the organization and very fragile that new organization. We retained that relationship with SRC as a fiscal intermediary until we were able to get our own 501C3 status which occurred four or five months after I was here. They were always very supportive of me when I first came here. We were in the same building with them so there were discussions and what have you.

G: You talked a little bit about the responses to the rise of Black militancy, and then next there=s sort of the backlashes of that which is the **Wallace** campaign, the more majority, that sort of Black conservative retrenchment. How do you think SRC responded to some of that?

P: SRC=s strength was in its ability to deal with that radical aspect of racism or conservatism in terms of its contacts through the media and national circles. I think it played a strong role in encouraging the changes and attitudes and likes that needed to occur to deal with the new egalitarian society because now we had voting rights and civil rights laws. I think it still played a role in that regard. I know I=m groping for the right thing to say right now or the good response to that question. I still saw it in the 1970s as successfully leading the discussion in terms of moderation with the evolution of those new politicians who were moving in that regard, the **Bumpers**, the **Winters**, folks in South Carolina, to some extent Jimmy Carter, but that new group of southern politicians who were moving already from the policies of racism into the policies of more moderation. This new generation of politicians I think the Southern Regional Council was involved with that to some certain extent. It was sort of laying the blueprint out there for consideration. I didn=t know how directly their influence was, but they helped to lay their blueprint out for folks to at least think of and serve as some guidance for their thinking. I was

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trying to think of this other organization, but I can't think of it. There was some kind of elite think tank or something.

G: Where was it based?

P: I don't know where it was based. It was named after somebody that... some kind of classical name. I'll probably think of it a little later. SRC, I'll tell you this southern liberal Black radical problem was a scary kind of thing. You had that frustration on the part of the Black groups who really expected more changes and didn't see those changes, and also understood the leadership role that your southern liberals played. There was a need to factor more Black leadership into that and some of us felt that that was being resisted and it just was an awkward time to make the best transition with the changes that were occurring. Is that the Christian way to say it?

G: Talk a little bit more about that.

P: It hurts to recall the pain that occurred and the insults, the verbal abuse we visited upon each other during that time.

G: Could you talk about, if it's not too painful, sort of how you felt about what was going on at the time versus how you maybe feel about it now? Those might be the same thing.

P: You have a person like a Pat Watters and some of the other guys who came in from, I don't know how many, became a part of SRC but had the experience at the Journal of Constitution. These were good guys who also did not know exactly what to do and what role they would be playing in this whole thing. They were just as confused as some of us were. I felt that there was a need to accept Black leadership. I thought I knew how that should occur then, but I'm not so certain in looking back that we needed just to make the transition as abruptly as some of us thought it should be occurring.

G: You thought it should've been...

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P: I thought there should=ve been more discussion, it should=ve been more gradual. We just did not know the full ramifications of what was going on and the complexities of our society, even the evolving society, and how important relationships were and how to define or delineate the roles that people could best play in dealing with these changes. In hindsight I can see that, but then it was like who=s going to be in the leadership position and who was going to be in the followship position. We were saying it was your day to lead, now it=s our day to lead kind of thing. And not knowing what we were getting ourselves into. You see things figuratively in black and white terms, maybe even literally, but figuratively. This is the problem, this is the solution, and not looking more closely to see all kinds of shades of the problem and shades of the solution. I=ve come over time, and I=m not just saying this for the record, but to appreciate the value of the role since we=re talking about southern White liberals, and they played a very important role in bringing about the change. I don=t think we can attribute the changes to one person or one group. Changes were occurring for generations and it just reached a point where all of these contributions, historical contributions, provided the force that was needed to bring about the change. Certain people were in leadership positions at that particular time. I think there is a role that groups like SRC or southern liberals could play and we ought to be more supportive of that role and not feel threatened by it. [End of Tape A, side 1] I was saying that just in hindsight, I began to understand the value that the different groups played and how important it is for groups to play the role that they can best play to bring about the desired result. I guess maybe age and understanding and experience and other training, if one is open to become wise, one can become wise and understand these things in a fair way and all of that.

G: If SRC has had this sort of stigma in some circles as being gradualist, not \_\_\_\_\_. What do you think about that?

P: Yeah. I didn't understand that at first because we wanted change, a transformation to occur immediately. Certain things cannot change as quickly as usefulness would want it to change. I'm not so certain that SRC gradualism could not have been a more rapid motion in all of that, but I think folks resisted that, as I said earlier because that was how they interpreted reality and defined reality and their response and their practice of what they believed in. I'm not so certain we all can say that we purge ourselves of all of our prejudices and racist tendencies and we are in touch with all of that too, and I'm not going to pass judgement to say that they were racist. They had not purged themselves and that's what the resistance was, I just think that's how they understood the reality and how they could best respond to it. They were in the leadership position too. I've been in their position and had to give it up and resisted having to give it up and finally giving it up and still having these second thoughts and adjustment problems with folks not deferring to me. I can place myself in their position too. I'm trying to be fair with my responses. I'm not certain that my perception of what went on is all that accurate as an outsider to some extent with SRC, and as a participant in life in the South during that period that's what it seemed to be.

G: I want to ask the overarching questions. Can you in the wisdom of time now describe how the racial climate might have evolved from this period when you began to be involved in the mid-1960s to the early 1980s through the **real act** of the civil rights movement through Black militancy through the Black backlash of White conservatives. Can you describe how the racial climate might have changed if it changed in the South?

P: It's changed somewhat, but I don't think we've had the sweeping change or expected change. Racism evolved over hundreds of years, racism in the United States. It's going to take a little more than a half century or forty years for us to try to transform ourselves. I see resistance and prejudice and racism being manifested most subtly in society. It's not the type of racism we had during the

period of the segregated society. You can just look at your neighborhoods, you look at the structure of the economic system in other institutions in society and whatnot and you must raise the question about the lack of diversity in those institutions. It=s easy... One certainly would have to study that and I would resist making the generalization at this moment to say that=s a direct result of racism, but you have to wonder about that.

G: So really you would say that there=s this underlying racism still there?

P: Oh yes.

G: It=s just become more subtle.

P: I would think so. To be fair about this interview too, I would be the first one to say that we brought some problems to the table too in terms of not doing maybe some of the things that we could=ve done. We bring some problems to the table too. By we I say... it=s not just all the problems and all of the mistakes we made in **regard to** the White folks in this society. We have to do more things and we could have done more things and things better too. We made some mistakes and those mistakes are also part of the reason why more progress hasn=t been made. We need to be fair about this stuff. I could=ve worked harder than I did, I could=ve made better decisions and better judgements about things. I could=ve been more careful about the generalizations I made too.

G: Given that the evolution has been, evolution may be too strong a word to describe racial attitudes, and then factoring in what you talked about as SRC=s strength in being to appeal to, talk to, that sort of really **retrenched** racist strategy. How would you characterize SRC=s work over that period of time.

P: I think it struggled to try to play a meaningful role in the changes that were needed and in preparing people for those changes in both societies. I still think that there is a role for a Southern Regional Council, what it stands for, its mission and goals and whatnot. More work needs to be done in terms of race relations. There are more discussions, structured discussions that need to take place in a

peaceful, respectful environment. That=s not the only thing it should be doing, but I think that kind of role that it played historically, that aspect of it=s role that it played historically is still a need role to be played. We need the view of circumstances and occurrences, matters that have to do with politics and economics and justice issues and all that. We need an articulation of those views from their perspective too. You put that on the table along with other perspectives and you may come close to reality when you put them together. I think we ought to encourage that type of understanding and representation of reality from both camps. There is a value for an organization. I think it might have to redefine the particulars of that role given the society that we currently live in, the contemporary society, but I=m sure that can be done. Some of my friends got angry at me when I talk like this and I say we need to support White southern leadership, liberal leadership. They are our allies. Certainly they cannot play the role that they played in the 1940s, but there is a role for them to play that=s compatible with our roles [that] we have to play. We should support the leadership of those organizations. This is getting a little off the subject too, but in the general sense, I think it has some relevance to what we are discussing. I thought, in hindsight now, and I saw a little of that when it was occurring, but not as full as I understand it now, with the structuring... As I said, I didn=t understand these transitions that were taking place, I referred to the new egalitarian society with the changes that are occurring, how those who had the institutional power base in this country also had to transition, and they made their transition much more rapidly than we were able to adjust to the changes that occurred. To be a forceful player in this new society. We find ourselves more reacting, not to the changes that occur, but to the way other folks had reorganized themselves and restructured themselves. I think that=s the situation, same people who had power and control in the segregated society were able to maintain that. For instance, even the civil rights movement, it=s your private sector that=s the strongest advocates, Coors Light Beer, Budweiser, the advocates of the approach that Dr. King used and his

contributions, it almost makes it seem as though they were with them in those days. That=s just a very simplistic example of what I=m talking about, how they were able to co-op that whole thing and make it part of the institution influence in our society. I don=t know how valuable that view is and whether or not it is relevant to reality.

G: Do you have sense of, at least this is a sense that I have, that some of those kinds of corporations, they=re doing some good things, they have coopted that work in some ways, but in a way that shows a certain amount of progress, but still leaves the same folks in charge? It=s not like a radical redistribution of wealth, it=s sort of the sugar \_\_\_\_\_.

P: Our ideas and understandings and insight, and I think what it does to a certain extent, it inhibits the genius of a large group of people within our society. I think we=ve misused or did not use all of the talents that we could have used to make this society a better society because certain people were not a part of a certain power click and all of that. That bothers me. I think we have the solutions to our problem, but we need to engage much more of the genius of the people than we have used. Don=t get me wrong, everybody, we=re all human and we all bring problems and bring our own inadequacies to situations. I=m not one who would say poor people know it all. There=s a lot of things, and I=m very respectful and certainly differential and would still willingly be guided by their needs and their issues, even being part of a policymaking structure that encouraged and I in a management position and in being led by that as I always because I think eventually people will grow and understand more precisely what it is they can do and will prepare themselves. We have to encourage that type of evolution, which is the type of relationship that I had with the organization that I ran. I think you have to trust that in time people will make responsible decisions and judgements, but that=s part of a larger point that I=m trying to make is that we do not use our talent as well we can use. You seem to see in

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many instances people who are in positions of influence identifying people that are like-minded only and they have abilities but they think the same way and it prevents constructive tensions.

G: I wanted to revisit this period and then maybe move forward with a few more questions. I'm fascinated with talking about the strength of the SRC to reach out to Whites essentially. Do you know how that manifested itself? What mechanisms or technologies did they use to...

P: Reach out to the White community? I'm not that familiar with it because I think Steve Suits when he was the director of Southern Regional Council I thought was making some forays in that area, especially in Appalachia, and confronting the electrical coops and the negative impact that that business was having on the communities. I'm not that familiar with that. I don't know the extent to which even the earlier SRC and the role they played in those communities. I know they were in Appalachia doing some things, but I don't think I can answer that question that well. I just have a general sense of them trying to bring the two communities together. There were some meetings that I attended that were opportunities for that type of interaction.

G: Do you have a sense that the SRC believed there was a sort of silent majority out there, that if they could just reach them?

P: Yeah, I felt that. It's almost like the early labor movement in the South too. People cross racial lines at the same problems and it's a populace sort of movement and I think there's an element of that idealism that is in SRC that drives them to want to bring people together with common issues and problems to resolve those problems. I just was not that involved in that part of SRC's operation.

G: Do you have a sense of what their interaction might have been with the administrations post-Lyndon Johnson?

P: No.

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G: What about their relationship with southern liberal politicians and southern African American politicians in the post-1960s? You mentioned the way **Winters** and...

P: As I said earlier, I think the fair understanding of the new society, they tried to create a framework of a direction that we should take and issues that are important. Employment, economic issues, and other general social issues that I think they shared with like-minded groups and politicians in the South and they took a leadership role in that area.

G: Do you know what their opinion was bussing by chance?

P: No. For some reason, I want to say that they were at best, or at worst **nebulous** about... I think there were some who... I don=t know.

G: Do you think that once this sort of highwater mark of the civil rights movement began to wane, that SRC had difficulty finding the funding that it had been able to find? Do you think the support of those national foundations went elsewhere?

P: That that was a reason for the demise, if you wish, of the civil rights movement because of SRC inability to attract resources? I think the national foundations made a conscious decision on their own to stop funding new radical organizations. Whether or not had they given this money to SRC it would have deterred the radical tendencies in those organizations, I don=t think that would=ve stopped it at all. You had a shift, now we=re going to talk about a shift of emphasis within the civil rights movement when King started about his economic...

G: The poor people=s campaign.

P: The poor people=s campaign in Washington and what not. I don=t know if the U.S. society and the institutions therein, foundations included, were ready for that. I don=t think they have gotten together because I think there is a close working relationship if you will, among the institutional society here. Ford Foundation does not support activities that hasn=t resulted from some understanding of what

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other institutions are doing in those regards. That economic issue, I just don't think the private sector in particular was ready to be confronted the way I think King probably would've confronted them in your face kind of like thing. We were still in the Cold War period and Birmingham was hurting our standing in the international society and these other places too. We needed to maintain our interest in the underdeveloped world and we couldn't do that as well under these circumstances with Russia showing the pictures to all of these folks, especially in Africa and Asia. You would have had another round of those activities, confrontations and whatnot...

G: Around economics.

P: Yes, around economic issues. And I don't think we could deal with that. When you put the question about SRC's inability to raise money, I think yes that's true, but I don't think they were ready to give up that much more money anyhow. They did give some money towards economic development, but also realized that things were changing too and some of the monies went to local groups and state groups. You did have monies going through other channels in the late 1960s and early 1970s. I'm not so certain SRC, the extent to which it wanted to move in this new direction. They continued to concern itself with justice issues and voting rights **had** for a long time considerable involvement in voter education issues and voter registration issues even while VEP was sort of descending in its importance I guess. Sometimes I thought there was some kind of competitiveness between those two organizations that I didn't quite understand.

G: Do you have a sense that SRC felt particularly embattled or marginalized in the 1970s as these shifts began to occur?

P: Yeah, I really felt that. I don't think it understood its value the way we didn't understand its value at that particular time. It was almost like a pain that they were experiencing because they didn't understand the rejection. They thought that rejection was unfounded and so they were, if you will,

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almost like in mourning because of that. Put yourself in their position, they had done these courageous things, taken the risks, they were ostracized in the broader White community, and they had done all of this for us, and now we were rejecting them. I guess the human thing to do is to mope around.

G: Do you know what efforts might have been made to increase its visibility, to expand its grassroots appeal in the 1970s and 1980s?

P: I think SRC should have played a stronger role in forging relationships with these new evolving community groups. In looking more towards peer type of relationships among equals, I think it had begun to do some of that and should have done more in those regards and allowing those other groups to ascend to the leadership role in those forums. I thought it probably spent too much time trying to understand how to maintain the traditional historical leadership influence rather than looking maybe about the possibility of more collaborative and horizontal relationships rather than the hierarchical arrangement that they had in the past.

G: How would you characterize SRC=s major achievements and contributions in the 1970s and 1980s?

P: Just to remain in existence because those were difficult times for the SRC in the late 1970s and the 1980s in trying to regroup. I feel strongly about the fact that just being able to stay alive to allow its ideology or philosophy or commitment to justice and whatnot to... The opportunity to regroup and to rebuild itself and to refocus itself is important. If you study organizations or human society, there are ups and downs and there is sometimes this hiatus that an organization will go through because of rapid changes and all of that and they have to regroup. Resisting being destroyed is important and the ability to prevent being destroyed is important and I think for that reason... So what is its major contribution? I think it was a voice. It retained a voice for the ideals of justice within society and as an advocate for the poor and as an advocate for changes in the public sector and governments. They kept folk=s feet to the fire, they kept the institution=s feet to the fire, and to elevate the contributions of

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people in literature and in the work that folks were involved in. I think their publication is a valuable publication in allowing folks to express their ideas and the ideas that are expressed in that.

G: How do you think that historians should incorporate the story of the SRC, the role of the SRC in the African American freedom struggle or in a \_\_\_\_\_?

P: I think they played a very important foundational role in preparing folks for participation in the civil rights movement and encouraging their participation in the civil rights movement. I think they prepared the way, they helped to prepare the way for leadership roles on the part of African Americans. It recruited some good people, it prepared them and positioned them for valuable roles in the civil rights [movement]. Wiley Branton played a very important role in the evolution of the Voter Education Project and registration project and in running that organization even though it was a short period. It identified some key leaders in those communities and provided them with some of the sustenance and the resources that they needed to do what they were doing in their communities. I think that's a very important historical role. Also, they were able to communicate with other influential leaders whose positions or whose understanding and ideology were close to theirs or even far away from them. At least they were able to communicate those ideas and perhaps influence the thinking of people in power. They've always had some relationship with the power structure in Atlanta. I don't know if they did it on the golf course, but at the commerce club or places like that where these big shots often meet. They had access to people that some of us were only beginning to have access to, the movers and shakers, if you will, in society. Some of us, not me necessarily, but Blacks who are in the private sector and in the church sector and in the governmental sector are rising and having discussions and relationships with people who make decisions. I don't know if I've answered your question well, but to say that it played a valuable role in helping to launch the civil rights movement is a general way of putting it, but I think that is a valuable role that they did play. I would think those people who assume

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certain kinds of, Black folks, who assume those leadership responsibilities would have been able to do it had they not been nurtured and launched.

G: Why do you think that role has been unacknowledged or even misconstrued?

P: I don't know. Maybe folks just didn't get around to writing it right, telling the story right. Certain things you need time. Time needs to occur for folks to understand fully. You need emotional disinterest to view on it. I've been saying I wanted to write about the history of the federation of souther cooperatives. I'm perhaps in a much better position now than I was let's say five, ten years ago. There was too much emotions and all that. Time is necessary for certain things to be revealed properly. Ignorance of the particular roles, the private roles that it played in discussions with the national leadership. I just learned recently how connected Flemings and Dunbar were to our national government and to the leaders in the private sector, Coca-Cola and people like that, what's his name, that big guy that died several years ago that's responsible for Coca-Cola to really take... Robert Woodruff and those kinds of people, and in government too. They have contacts with them. I think the Voter Education Project grew out of the relationship that they had with the Kennedy administration. They played a very influential role in all of that. You have children?

G: No.

P: After you have children, read you adolescents and early adulthood, like Mark Twain that said he didn't realize that his father wasn't as stupid as something. He realized how, whatever it is.

G: **It's about** how much his father knew that he didn't realize he knew.

P: Yes. It's the same thing with children, generally with children if you experience that. In a sense you can characterize the relationship between Blacks and SRC as one of that type of evolution. The growth of that relationship somewhat in the same sense. As we learn more wanting to do things more

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independently not realizing the value that that parent organization could still provide us even with our broader world view that we were gaining.

G: Julian Bond even said about Ella Baker when I interviewed him about her. He said she was paving the way for us and we never even knew it, never understood.

P: Yeah. But you know, experience and other forms of training just have their greatest benefit to you over time. You just don't have as broad of an understanding or a world view, if you will, as a twenty-four year old or a twenty-one year old as maybe a fifty or sixty year old. Of course, that doesn't always follow. Sometimes folks get dumber as they get older.

G: I just have one last question. Is there anything that I should've asked you that I didn't?

P: I don't think so. I can't think of anything right now. I probably will think of a number of things as I reflect on this. I'll let you know. I thought you asked some of the good questions. I could not answer all of the questions about SRC that you wanted to ask me because I only had a fringe relationship to the formal organization and I had personal relationships with people who worked with SRC and got to know SRC in that fashion. Playing poker or smoking a cigar or something with what's his name? Chuck, used to work for the ACLU, ran the ACLU before **McGloklin** did. I don't know. You're going to see those folks also? Like **McDonald**? **Lochlin McDonald** who runs the ACLU over here?

G: He's in Atlanta?

P: **Lochlin McDonald**. **Patty McDonald** works for refugee services here. When you talk to Connie, as her about **Lochlin**. He's a southern liberal and a good guy, just a naturally good guy. He certainly is a very competent lawyer and a committed one in the ACLU tradition.

G: I think we're done.

P: I hope this has been useful.

G: Very much.

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P: I want to thank you too. The visit was not that painful. In fact, it got a little exciting as we started talking just to reflect some of the stupid mistakes that we made and some of the good things that we did. I still think we have to find a way to allow our talent to blossom and to be utilized in dealing with the issues that we have.

G: My interest is really in learning those lessons in order to keep doing that work so I think there are valuable things to be learned. I very much appreciate your time. Susan Glisson concluding an interview with Charles Prejean.

[End of interview]