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Interviewee: Samuel Dubois Cook

Interviewer: Susan Glisson

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G: This is Susan Glisson. It's Thursday, June 27, and I'm in Atlanta, Georgia, with Dr. Samuel Dubois Cook. Thank you very much for your time.

C: Thank you.

G: We're here to talk about the Southern Regional Council. I'd love it if you could tell me your story. How did you come to be associated with the Southern Regional Council?

C: When I came to Miami University to teach in 1956, I had known about the Southern Regional Council for years. It was an outgrowth of the old Interracial Council, if you will. They (a group of whites and blacks) were supposed to **try to go down and convince them** in the legislation \_\_\_\_\_ increasing the consciousness of \_\_\_\_\_. People from Atlanta like Dr. **Mindy Maize** \_\_\_\_\_ North Carolina, Dr. **Frank Graham** \_\_\_\_\_, and Dr. **Will Alexander**, who had a lot of influence and he lived in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. He had a connection with \_\_\_\_\_ university by way of [the] serving president and I had a portrait of him in my office, and I always referred to him as Uncle Will who's watching over me. There was a group of courageous individuals, black and white, working together to change the South and to eliminate the worst kind of evils. They did not at that time, of course, assault segregation, or even, confront it. They concerned themselves with more limited issues like lynching

and trying to get a handle of that situation. Out of the old Interracial Council they grew, they \_\_\_\_\_ humanizing the men of the South and improving the conditions within the framework of the course of segregation. Up to the North all of them were opposed to it. It was sort of impossible to think of getting rid of segregation, so they tried to educate people, white people, to the higher possibility of a biracial society based on an essential equality. When I got a chance to get involved in it, in the late 1950s and essentially meet **Les Dunbar**, [I did]. I knew John Wheeler, who was very highly commended, who was president. **Les Dunbar** was in his second track. So I knew of the great work of John Wheeler **and govern** \_\_\_\_\_. John Wheeler, a good friend of mine, had gone to **Moorehouse** and built up a reputation \_\_\_\_\_. There were others involved like **Wright** in North Carolina, and several [other] people. It's amazing that several people from North Carolina were there at the Southern Regional Council. So that's how I got involved in the Southern Regional Council and got involved in a variety of activities, and **Les Dunbar**, a good friend of mine, came with me.

G: You were involved in your own specific work, but then also served on the executive council?

C: Yes.

G: What was the work that you were doing at the time?

C: At that time, I was chair of the original science department at Atlanta University, **Racker School**.

G: So you're coming there, and you came in and you were on the executive council starting in 1956?

C: I didn't start on the executive council. I was elected to the executive council in the early 1960s.

G: Okay. You were sort of aware of SRC's work?

C: Oh, yes.

G: That's a pretty potent time. The Montgomery boycott has occurred [and] there's a growing sense of mass activism by blacks. How do you think the SRC responded to that growing activism?

C: I thought SRC responded in a creative way. It was not one to get in the streets but it was quite supportive. It supported it.

G: How did it support it?

C: Moral support mainly, and I suppose some financial support here and there, though it didn't \_\_\_\_\_ any money. But mainly moral support and carrying this vision of this genuine biracial society. This was always a motivating force in the life of SRC and one of the reasons I always referred to it as a noble organization. A noble legacy in heritage is to have that vision of a genuine humanistic child, a genuine democratic child.

G: Do you think that there was any unease on the part of SRC that African-Americans were seizing initiative?

C: I don't individually remember that, [although] I'm sure there was some. Those were the days of great uncertainty. You didn't know what the next step would be or what the views of the South would be, what the reaction would be, and that

must be with one of great hostility in the mid to late 1950s. The Supreme Court decision was outwardly, kind of an organizing, central point. So you had all this massive resistance, schools closing, churches closing, swimming pools closing. It's hard to imagine the kind of chaos that existed and how the political leadership in the South just advocated it, and that's what was sad and sinister. I remember **Radley Hill** saying to me, he says Samuel, I wonder how differently modern, Southern **leadership**, had Virginia (which occupied a very special place in history), had Virginia served any real leadership or created the leadership instead of leadership creating this. Virginia lead a massive resistance \_\_\_\_\_, and all the governors of the south\_\_\_\_\_.

G: I know a Mississippian who went up to Virginia to learn how to set up a separate school so that white children didn't have to go to school with black children.

C: Yeah, Virginia was the leader in it. I remember seeing on television last year the interviews on channel two in Atlanta [of] all the living ex-governors of Georgia, George Busbee [1975-1983], Carl E. Sanders [1963-1967], Ernie Vandiver, Jr. [1959-1963], and a lot of them listened to it. I couldn't swear what they were saying then or what they had said and done during the crisis. All of them, in effect, said even though it was Atlanta they believed in (they never said desegregation). [They said] they knew change had to come; they were opposed to violence. I remember hearing Vandiver \_\_\_\_\_ and all \_\_\_\_\_ on television saying we can afford to have integration \_\_\_\_\_. But to hear them, and they reenforced each other, you would think that the South never had

any real problems, well Georgia, turning to desegregation. It was a time of the brave to \_\_\_\_\_ what was going on, a great deal of violence, people trying to \_\_\_\_\_, subjecting all kind of types, telephone calls, [and] threats. At SRC, you know, I had to be moderate, and by moderate, I don't mean hedge on an issue, but equality. But in terms of strategy types it had to operate within a framework, a reasoned response, otherwise, we would've been eaten alive. It was denounced, of course, as white trash, and called all kinds of names, socialist, communist, a gash in the southern way of life. So it had to be, it had to be. It wasn't my type of \_\_\_\_\_, but it was very individual, very, very **vindictive** \_\_\_\_\_.

G: So as there was increasing black activism and mass demonstrations, how did SRC respond to those challenges?

C: I think SRC encouraged them. I remember \_\_\_\_\_, except through publications at the **New South**, which was a big voice. This is one of the great strengths of SRC in trying to educate, some of the education \_\_\_\_\_, and trying to reach people through the media.

G: Of the print.

C: Through the print, yeah.

G: Did they use any other media to try to reach people? Did they use radio for instance?

C: Not radio, but primarily the printed paper. [It was] not only the New South, but there were all kinds of special publications dealing with lynching, dealing with

voter registration, dealing with desegregation of the schools. The best thing was [that] every time you turned around they were publishing something. [We] had a lot of special projects.

G: Do you know what their attitudes were about non-violent, direct action?

C: Oh yes. They were strictly an issue of non-violence. I said Martin Luther King joined \_\_\_\_\_. He was my godfather and obviously \_\_\_\_\_, and of course, legal mediation, legal direction, \_\_\_\_\_.

G: So SRC would have encouraged non-violent tactics?

C: Oh yes, absolutely. Larry tried to encourage \_\_\_\_\_ of this country, but all \_\_\_\_\_ lawlessness on the part of the segregation forces. They were ready but \_\_\_\_\_.

G: And it did that how? It tried to curtail that how?

C: By warning against it \_\_\_\_\_, inconsistent, you know how America can be. Of course the segregation forces paid no attention and they were opening homes, schools, and all, right and left. You didn't have to worry about **lines**, and liberal, white forces in the South \_\_\_\_\_. It's bad enough just that people believed that moderate, non-violent resistance, peaceful change, and things like that, they received enough hell just with even that. There was no chance of \_\_\_\_\_ whatsoever, and that's why I go \_\_\_\_\_ later in the 1960s with the hot summer of 1964 and some of these SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] people \_\_\_\_\_. \_\_\_\_\_ shocked they're coming because no one, Montgomery had succeeded, Martin King, Jr. and all the \_\_\_\_\_ and find

a way of non-violence and a way of bringing about social change. It's hard now until you imagine the kind of atmosphere, lawlessness, threats, intimidation, and all that. Being there are people killed just for advocating social change and racial justice. It's hard to imagine. You know, in the midst of it with all that going on, white citizens townspeople, Klan mentality, the Klan, you didn't know what the \_\_\_\_\_ would bring. The SRC was a voice of decency, a voice of justice, a voice of harmony, and a voice of humanism. I knew that.

G: Did the SRC try to encourage compliance with say, the Brown decision or any of that?

C: Oh yeah.

G: Do you know what they might have done to try to encourage that?

C: They just advocated obedience to the law. The Supreme Court is open, this is a nation of laws and \_\_\_\_\_ of men, and this country believes in the rule of law and all \_\_\_\_\_ is chaos. \_\_\_\_\_, you know it \_\_\_\_\_.

G: Which is a more educational.

C: Yeah, an education. But the rule of law, that was a chief principle. Les Dunbar, as I recall, was not only a political theorist, but also taught constitutional law, so he was a great \_\_\_\_\_, advocator of obedience to the law. We had the law on our side, though sometimes it didn't mean very much. The atmosphere was so terrible. Sometimes, and one of the reasons why I have so much respect and admiration for the white liberals, Southern liberals, \_\_\_\_\_ in the South was they \_\_\_\_\_ during the late 1950s and early 1960s. The races were harder on

them than on blacks because for blacks they say, well I don't like them, well they're victims so you'd expect them to **do this** so they didn't expect any better, but the whites should know better. So they were really hard on them.

G: So they were harassed and vilified.

C: Oh yes, absolutely. I remember **Margaret Holmes** worked at SRC and was better known to our college \_\_\_\_\_, a really decent lady that worked up in my office. She had a daughter she called Sissy who went to Tulane. She was involved in a demonstration and a white Southerner at the demonstration called her all kinds of names, and she was just a high school or college kid. It was an atmosphere of incivility and meanness. When I remember people like **Meghan Roan, Pat Waters**, who worked for SRC, \_\_\_\_\_. **Margaret** came over from SRC \_\_\_\_\_.

G: I'd like to move now more toward talking about the Voter Education Project. Why do you think that the SRC was considered well-placed to administer the VEP?

C: Through various studies that SRC had conducted in terms of voter registration, in terms of black participation in the political process. I remember SRC engaged two very distinguished political scientists, **Don Matthew** and **Jim Kroker** at the University of North Carolina. They did a study concerning black participation in politics and not \_\_\_\_\_ in terms of registering for voting, but also in terms of financial contributions to political leaders. They discovered that in proportion, blacks had contributed more money to politically campaigning whites. This shocked all of us, including me, that they had contributed this money. So SRC

had a lot of knowledge of black political participation, but also we were very centrally located in Atlanta, had already \_\_\_\_\_ a black university \_\_\_\_\_, and the geographical location. I remember the first **got the grant**, the first \_\_\_\_\_ of it, it was something like \_\_\_\_\_. I suppose Les Dunbar named the political science **director** \_\_\_\_\_ and that he understood the special laws of voter registration; how the political system influences in a cold culture. So that's how we got involved in it. You had so much Negro-phobia up there with races and \_\_\_\_\_ in Mississippi, and you had towns in Georgia, \_\_\_\_\_ South Carolina. So clearly the political system was one that demanded performance.

G: Tell me some more about that. What were some of the impediments to black voter registration, and what did the VEP do to overcome those impediments?

C: They had a \_\_\_\_\_, league of defamation and the literacy test, by which it is impossible to go to the \_\_\_\_\_ and hold the \_\_\_\_\_. You had to interpret the constitution \_\_\_\_\_, say Article Three, but you had to interpret the constitution in a way to satisfy the very afraid people who were determined that you wouldn't satisfy. So it was an impossible task, this literacy test would determine. I remember when I taught at Southern University one of my colleagues Dr. \_\_\_\_\_ went in to register and the registrar told him to interpret the \_\_\_\_\_, and the fellow told them no and denied them the chance to register.

G: He denied two professors of constitutional law? Amazing.

C: So one was a literacy test. Another one, of course, [was] the poll tax, a big hindrance at the time. To a lot of people it was \_\_\_\_\_. Another one they had [was the] good character test. In fact, **VEP** said that the South had more conflicts with **congressman**, a way to disenfranchise voters, than any other system in western culture. It was a good character test, literacy test, poll tax were the three that were achieved. Of course, you know, the stubborn thing is inertia. Those things guaranteed the whole system for it to minimize voter participation, not to maximize voter participation.

G: What were some of the things that the VEP did to try to circumvent those obstacles?

C: Voter education did a lot of that. We held seminars, all kinds of workshops, \_\_\_\_\_, and interpret the constitution.

G: Were the workshops with people who were trying to register to vote?

C: Yeah, and, given time, they were designed to help them to overcome inertia. They hadn't been in school in so long, they had fears to go in the voting booth, or we'd go down to register. And you had real fears because they didn't want you to register. There were a lot of black people who lost their lives and lost their jobs, lost their \_\_\_\_\_ because of their very attempt to register to vote. I can remember when I was teaching at American University \_\_\_\_\_, this is in the early 1960s. There was a young lady in my class from Mississippi and she had a major fear. Now, this is Mississippi, [but] it could've been Georgia, it could've been South Carolina, anywhere in the South. Some of my students in Atlanta,

said, Oh, register to vote \_\_\_\_\_. I said, it is easy for you in Atlanta, whether you can vote or not, you **have taken** the vote for granted and this and that. I had sort of carried to somebody in Mississippi, You don't know the circumstances. After all the blacks did not get to vote in Georgia until 1946, all kind of barriers. I shall never forget this young lady \_\_\_\_\_. So VEP wanted to design its parts to encourage blacks to overcome this apathy, overcome this fear, and to realize the positive fruits of voter participation. So they had all kind of \_\_\_\_\_ around the house \_\_\_\_\_ .

G: What were some of the organizational challenges presented by running the VEP project? How did they run it?

C: How did the organization run it? \_\_\_\_\_. Proudly they would make grants. Two organizations would say it's rural Georgia, Mississippi, Alabama \_\_\_\_\_. So they could buy gas \_\_\_\_\_ to get people to register to vote. Of course there were big staff members, too. It was a full time job. They had the support of the job. They made grants throughout the South.

G: How did they decide which ones to fund?

C: You had to submit applications and show the feasibility of it, how that money would be used and there had to be something to convince people that the money would be given to the fund and something would be done to get people registered to vote. Some grants that I recall are \_\_\_ as far as Kentucky\_\_\_\_\_, but the eleven states of the old confederacy had a lot of \_\_\_\_\_Ford Foundation,\_\_\_\_\_.

G: Do you think there were any particular problems with the SRC having this kind of power working role? You know, they're the ones that have the money and they get to distribute it. Were there tensions with the people on the ground trying to get the money?

C: Not in a serious way. I'm sure there was a \_\_\_\_\_ role there, go there with money and were giving it out and whether they say yes or no. But that was not a big problem. The situations were so very desperate, and so important, that the people worked\_\_\_\_\_.

G: Was there a benefit to the SRC being the mediator between the foundations and the local projects?

C: Oh yeah, there were benefits. They could get in class and have them pay some salary. It gave SRC more visibility. They kept the foundation, too\_\_\_\_\_.

G: Could the local groups have gotten the money from the Ford Foundation by themselves?

C: No, we'd have had to have a lot of cops to \_\_\_\_\_, and the SRC had the reputation.

G: Right. Because it had existed for so long and done a good work?

C: Yes. SRC always had a very good reputation \_\_\_\_\_, good people. It was unique. You did not have another biracial integration in the South at the time. You had one of the Mississippi projects \_\_\_\_\_. But the only thing we had going for us in integration, and with some of the management of the SRC.

Individually we imitate that committee \_\_\_\_\_. It had a lot of clout (is the word I want to use.) It had a good reputation.

G: Credibility.

C: Credibility, that's the word.

G: How would you summarize the changes in the mood or the personnel or the philosophy of the SRC as the Civil Rights' Movement gathered momentum in the early 1960s? Did you see any change in attitudes, or did it bring in new people or get rid of old people? Were there any changes as the Civil Rights' Movement gained momentum within the SRC?

C: I don't think there was any basic change in philosophy. As it became more activists-oriented as circumstances commanded and required, sit-ins, \_\_\_\_\_, it became more activist-oriented. But in terms of the basic change in philosophy [there was none]. \_\_\_\_\_. But there was no change in direction of SRC, as I recall. Les Dunbar, was a very reflective individual, scholarly, reflective who would think before he speaks. Most of us [**think**] and hopefully, it'd come out. Les is a philosopher. All of us are different and have a different style, but no difference in philosophy.

G: What about in terms of personnel racial board by gender? Did that change as the Civil Rights' Movement gathered momentum? Were there more whites working for the organization and African-Americans were brought in, or were there more men and women were brought in? Were there any of those kinds of changes, demographic changes?

C: That was a letter that caused some concern about having more blacks in decision-making positions and SRC made progress on that. That was a challenge for the SRC, and the SRC was \_\_\_\_\_. They don't want a secretary as decision maker. This is why voter education was very important to the SRC.

G: It could involve both.

C: Voter education from VEP you had blacks that could vote.

G: Were there mostly males in charge?

C: Mostly males, yeah. Even in terms of the board, most were male. \_\_\_\_\_, bring more blacks into the decision making in the SRC.

G: But you felt like they made an adjustment?

C: They did make an adjustment. You always would have the feeling like you were working for people who were very genuine, very decent. You might differ here and there, but you knew that the **thrust** level was in the right direction.

G: This is a little more complicated question. There are some scholars who suggest that after a period of relative impotency the SRC became revitalized, but became revitalized because of this newly emerging dynamic Civil Rights' Movement. So [they're saying] that the SRC becomes more dynamic as it responds to a dynamic movement. How did you see that description of the SRC as being reactive rather than proactive? Do you think that's accurate?

C: For the factor, and that's to be expected, that an organization operates within a given social context. An organization is a **fluid** vibe, but goes home externally in

the socially, orderly, political system. When you have a movement [that's] dynamic and energetic, the organization would be foolish not to take advantage [of it], to learn from it, get involved in it. But it's a reciprocal relationship. Just as the pool men sit around outside \_\_\_\_\_, I think the SRC also influenced the movement through its publication writings, through its annual meeting, which was \_\_\_\_\_, but the annual meeting with the SRC was very, very special. \_\_\_\_\_.

You always got a feeling, and there was nothing else in Atlanta to compare with the annual meeting, to give \_\_\_\_\_, to change society to bring about more decency. You had a feeling of good will. Here again the sense of nobility. My wife and I would always look forward to \_\_\_\_\_. It provided a lot of hope, and that's one of the major contributions of SRC. As you think about it, as I think about it, it provided a chain for a hope of betterness, that change would come to pass. It kept a lot of hope in the air. \_\_\_\_\_ **moral and psychological.**

G: Which you can't underestimate.

C: That's crucial.

G: Would you argue that the SRC should be given more credit for the emergence of the Civil Rights' Movement?

C: Oh yes, there's no question about it. SRC helped capture the better ground, so I certainly would. I have to single out Les Dunbar for his contacting, writings, and invitations. I think Les Dunbar is on the side in \_\_\_\_\_. As I have said

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numerous times before, he was one of the great architects of the Civil Rights'

Movement and the New South, \_\_\_\_\_.