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Interviewee: Jean Fairfax

Interviewer: Brian Ward

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W: [For the] Oral History Program, [this is] an interview with Jean Fairfax in Richmond, Virginia, on February 26, 2003, for the Southern Regional Council [SRC] project. Jean, thank you ever so much for sparing some time to talk with me. What I would really like to start by asking you is to just fill us in with a little bit of background about how you got involved, first of all with civil rights work, with the AFSC [American Friends Service Committee], and then we'll move towards when you first became aware of the Southern Regional Council.

F: I first worked with the American Friends Service Committee after World War II. I was part of the foreign-service team in Austria from 1946 until 1948, and then I was the college secretary, as they were called then, the representative of AFSC, to the New England colleges and universities from 1949 until 1955. I decided at that point to go to Africa to find out what was going on in this very exciting pre-independence era. So I organized a trip that took about eleven months, and I traveled through seventeen countries, traveling on my own and meeting a lot of people who were involved in the independence movements. When I came back, I did some speaking for AFSC. Then, in the fall of 1957, I was appointed the director of a new southern civil rights program that AFSC was launching in this community relations division. I began work in September 1957 and my first assignment was to go to Atlanta to the Southern Regional Council for a meeting of a group that SRC had taken the initiative to pull together called the Southern Interagency Conference. This was one of their first meetings. I think they had maybe a couple of meetings before then. So, my first acquaintance with the Southern Regional Council was in November of 1957 at a meeting of the Southern Interagency Conference .

W: Prior to that, when you had been working in the early days with the AFSC, where you dimly aware or very aware of what the Southern Regional Council was trying to do in the South?

F: No. I had worked in the South from 1942 until 1946, when I went overseas with the Quakers, but to my knowledge I did not know about the Southern Regional Council.

W: What had you been doing in the South in the...

F: I had been a dean at a couple of colleges.

W: What was your own background? Where had you been born and raised?

F: I was born in Cleveland, Ohio, and I went to the University of Michigan and then to Union Theological Seminary, and [I] had planned more or less to become a professor of religion. In fact, I took a master's degree in, what probably would be called now World Religions, [but] it was called Comparative Religion at that time. I got a job at Kentucky State College in the fall of 1942 and I was there for two years, and then I was at Tuskegee as a dean for two years. Then, I went overseas with the Friends.

W: Just on a personal level, what was your first impression of spending proper time in the South?

F: Well, it was my first experience with segregation, and first experience in an all-black institution, so it was a lot of culture-shock. What was good for me was [that] I immediately got involved with the white persons who were concerned about civil rights and human relations, particularly the Southern YWCA work with the students, and a group called the Fellowship of Southern Churchmen. I think Reinhold Niebuhr had been one of the active persons to launch that some time back. It was a group of southern churchmen who were concerned about social-justice issues. So, I was very much involved in integration work as soon as I hit the South in 1942, but, as I said, I don't remember the Southern Regional Council.

W: I guess the Southern Regional Council proper is founded in 1944, so it wouldn't have been extant when you first arrived, but they would have been the Commission on Interracial Corporations, some of the precursors to that. The war years are very interesting for the founding of the Southern Regional Council, and from the Durham Statement, which is the African American statement against segregation..

F: Well, I knew Benjamin Mays very well and people who were involved, but as I said, I do not recall during my years in the South, hardly anything about the Southern Regional Council as such.

W: You mentioned that you worked with whites in this context, that this was a period where there was a growing constituency of whites who were concerned about problems of segregation and disenfranchisement. Was this of the war era? Was that a time when you felt more optimistic?

F: **No**, and the southern white women were very much involved, as I said, particularly the women who were advisors to the student YWCAs on various campuses. You may have come across the name [of Nelle Morton]. She was the head of the Fellowship of Southern Churchmen for a while and then she went on to Drew University in New Jersey to [serve on the faculty of its theological school]..

W: Then, the first time you actually worked for the AFSC was when you went to do refugee work, essentially, in Germany.

F: Well, when I had been at a work camp the summer I finished college, and the AFSC had done a terrific job with college students in providing opportunities for them to get involved in various social-service projects, I knew AFSC and I knew Quakers from the Quaker meeting in Ann Arbor, Michigan, but my official connection with AFSC was only when I went overseas.

W: That was quite a controversial trip in many ways, from what I can gather, in terms of there were problems with the British sector not allowing you in there?

F: Yes.

W: I've looked at that from the British end and it's a dreadful sort of story.

F: Do the British have a record of that?

W: Yes.

F: Oh, I would love to see that.

W: I could probably photocopy you my hand-written notes; they wouldn't let me copy the originals.

F: They decided that I would not be good for the Empire or something like that.

W: I think you might have single-handedly brought it down. [laughing] So, when you returned from overseas, do you think the experience of having been out of the country, do you think that steeled your resolve to get involved in civil rights activities?

F: No, I was really interested in higher education, so that when I came back from the overseas assignment, I worked in New England with students. Of course, we were dealing with all kinds of issues. That was supposed to be the silent generation, but, as often happens in the midst of silent generations, there are very vocal people. There were wonderful people on the campuses of the New England colleges at that time. That was a very good place to be. Then, I got tired of students, and talking to people who were always talking about what they might do when they grew up. I really wanted to get involved with people who were doing something because they had grown up.

W: Let's move on to 1957 when you moved down to deal with the SRC. How exactly did that come about with the Interagency work?

- F: Well, the leaders of the SRC at that time, you probably have seen their files, Harold Fleming and Leslie Dunbar, they were the key people. You know, SRC could not have had better people in those positions at that time. They saw the importance of having close relations with the media, for example. So, they knew key people in the media who needed to have information about what was actually going on then in the South. They also were deeply committed to bringing all the stakeholders together so that the Interagency Conference was thoroughly integrated. Many of the people working [in the South] on human relations and civil rights at that time were from the various denominations. Even though they were not necessarily based in the South, they spent a lot of time in the South. It was the right mix of people who were a part of the Southern Interagency Conference. The decision was made from the very beginning that no minutes would be taken of the meetings and no outsiders would be permitted. So, the only official records you would find would be reports. For example, when I attended a meeting of the SIC, I would write up [my notes] and put [them] in the AFSC files. To my knowledge, you're not going to find any minutes of the Southern Interagency Conference.
- W: Right, now which agencies came together: the members of the AFSC [or] the SRC?
- F: Well, it would be the AFSC, the various denominations, I mean, the Presbyterians always had very active [participants]; Methodist[s], labor unions were represented, the NAACP, the Urban League. NAACP would usually be [represented by] the southern regional [director], Ruby Hurley, or Vernon Jordan at one point. Occasionally, someone from government would be invited to talk about something that a governmental agency was doing. The Defense Department or Labor or Civil Rights Commission, but [participants] were largely non-governmental.
- W: By 1957, Martin Luther King, Jr. has become head of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Would they have been at the table for these meetings?
- F: Yes, but I don't remember King actually attending the meetings, or who would have been there from the SCLC. I was at the [conference] when SNCC was organized, in 1960, the spring. I think it was Palm Sunday weekend in Raleigh when SNCC was organized. There was [some tension] between SNCC and the SCLC. Everybody who was involved in civil rights and human relations would have been part of the Southern Interagency Conference, SRC acted as [the] secretariat, [and sent] notices out about the meetings. We wouldn't necessarily have a prepared agenda. The different individuals would report on what they were doing. As the whole school-closing issue became a very live issue, that was a top priority, issue on the agenda.

W: Was there a sense that these meetings needed to be kept kind of covert, away from the glare of publicity, in order to have [secrecy,] for whatever reason?

F: Well, the people could be very frank. Also, we did not want the word to get out about what we were doing. I mean, if someone came to a meeting, as the first representative or as a new representative of an organization, the discussion would suddenly turn very neutral until we check[ed] this person out to see who he or she was. [We] always worried about infiltrators.

W: In retrospect, do you think that there were problems with [infiltration] within the agencies?

F: No, I don't think there was any problem with SRC, but, see, [we were] in Atlanta and [we] knew about all of the government surveillance mechanisms and organizations that were very active, [we] just had to be very careful, because lives were at stake.

W: How often were these meetings held? Were they several times a year, just annually?

F: [They were held] several times a year, and people were subject to call. [For example, one time] there was an emergency somewhere and we had to get together. There was a lot of exchanging of information, because different agencies would have [different sources of] information about particular [places] or maybe something had emerged in a particular community and [we needed to find a way to get accurate] information about [developments].

W: Would the SRC have been very important in disseminating that information? When I think about what the SRC was good at doing, it was that sort of research and reporting aspect of looking into the mechanics of segregation and disenfranchisement, and in effect spreading that information.

F: Well, I'm trying to remember about monographs that were published. In fact, [we have] in our files once a monograph [with] an SRC cover sheet on the [new] private schools [that were developing] across the South. So, the SRC may have had, if not regular, than occasional position papers on things. That's the kind of stuff that you are undoubtedly finding, some of the things that [SRC] published.

W: When did these series of meetings come to an end?

F: Well, I don't know. I left AFSC to join the NAACP Legal Defense Fund in the fall of 1965, and I would assume that the Interagency meetings continued, but I really don't know how long they went on. There was another member of the staff

there, Paul Anthony, much younger than Leslie [Dunbar] and the others, but [he] was a very deeply committed person. I really don't know what happened to the Southern Interagency Conference after I left in the fall of 1965, [the Dunbar and Flemming eras].

W: I wonder if I can ask you to put some human flesh on the bones of some of these people. I've met Les Dunbar, but some of the other figures, I really don't have any sense of them as human beings. I see them moving through the pages of the manuscripts. Tell me a little bit about [Harold] Fleming, in your experience of him?

F: He had a wonderful gift of language. In fact, one of the things that you have undoubtedly found being in the South [is] that there are some southerners who know how to use words [and] to tell stories. He was great. In fact, I don't know where his papers are.

W: They're in Chapel Hill, I think.

F: Are you going to interview his wife, Virginia Fleming?

W: I hadn't thought of it, maybe I should.

F: Well, if you really want more information about him, he went on then to an office in Washington [where he did], at the Washington-level, some of the things he had been able to do in Atlanta, that is, convening people [and] being *the* person that you had to touch base with if you were in the media and needed to know what was going on. Just as a source of accurate information and information about people. Dunbar is a very different person. He had an academic background. Are you going to interview him or have you already?

W: He's already been interviewed.

F: He tends to be kind of bitter about a lot of things. I don't know whether you found that [to be true] or not. He then went on to [be] head of the Field Foundation in New York. I have seen him off and on. We were on a board together of a foundation. [During] the years that you are talking about, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s, it [was] so important to convene people who had different points of view and who had accurate information about specific crisis situations, but [who] also [understood] the internal dynamics of different organizations. [Such as] the NAACP, [that] was going through a very difficult period. [It] had been thrown out of the state of Alabama and a number of groups had emerged and sort of taken over after the NAACP was thrown out. There [was] a sense of rivalry between groups and the NAACP [that] felt that some of these groups had sort of taken over the NAACP['s] historical [role]. It was just

so important to be able to have people together who were in the middle of some of those internal battles.

W: And is that what the AFSC saw the SRC's major role as being? Is that why the AFSC was keen to encourage this Southern Regional Council?

F: Well, what we got out of the Southern Interagency Conference was colleagues. That's what we found, people who could give us information about developments South-wide. Also, [the conference] provided a place where we could think some things through. What we [AFSC] should do in Prince Edward County [Virginia, which closed their public schools rather than integrate], grew out of the discussions we had at the Southern Interagency Conference about the school closings as a South-wide concern. When, the Prince Edward situation developed, I remember people turning to us and saying, what are you all going to do about it? That was a group that helped us to think through what we should do. In the fall of 19[59], we convened a seminar, more than that, it was a discussion at the Quaker House in Washington [about goals, policies, and strategies]. Many of the people that we invited to discuss this school-closing [crisis] and what should be done in Prince Edward County were people that I had come to know through the Southern Interagency Conference. Fleming and Dunbar were very important to us. I don't know whether SRC is still doing that. As I have said, I really have not kept up with them after I retired from the Legal Defense Fund in 1985.

W: Just going back into the late 1950s and early 1960s, when there's a rising tide of black protests, much of it nonviolent direct action protests, which the AFSC has been pioneering and encouraging for many years even prior to that, did you get any sense where the Southern Regional Council stood on direct-action campaigns of that nature, as opposed to legalistic campaigns [and] publicity campaigns?

F: No, I really don't know, and I don't know whether their board made a policy statement. You see, I didn't have any direct contact with the board of the SRC. I was largely dealing with the staff members through these meetings. Of course there are publications.

W: You are recalling the publications *Southern Changes*, and *New South* before that?

F: Yes.

W: I mean, in a way, they're a marvelous guide through the SRC's thinking over the years. One of the things I've found in looking at the archives is how much *practical* help the AFSC gave to the Southern Regional Council in early years and things like grant applications and tutoring them in the ways of dealing with

bureaucracy. Is some of that still going on, any of that sort of mentoring?

F: What do you mean?

W: This is sort of from the mid-1940s onwards, as the SRC is trying to establish its base and looking for Ford Foundation grants, Field Foundation grants, [and] Taconic Foundation grants. It seems as though there's quite a lot of dialog coming out of Marian Wright and Harold Fleming writing to the AFSC for help and guidance in putting in funding applications. I'm just wondering if in your time you were aware of any of that?

F: No, and they may have been talking to Barbara **Moffet**, who was the head of [AFSC's] Community [Relations Division] at that time. All of us were dealing with foundations and government people at the same time, and often at different levels. As you undoubtedly have discovered, the national foundations were very late in arriving at the decision to support civil rights. People think about the Ford Foundation and Rockefeller and others and what they did, but they were very late coming to the table. In those early years, most of the money that supported civil rights just came from either a few select individuals, like the Taconic people, or you know, the black community, churches and others who just sort of made money available. There wasn't any major grant making from the national foundations until, oh goodness, I would say...I'm not even able to put a date on it, because it was just so late in the movement.

W: I guess one of the things that some of these, the Taconic and the Field Foundation, do fund in the early 1960s, around 1962, one of the things, is the Voter Education Project when they get, essentially, tax-breaks for doing so. Of course, the Southern Regional Council is again the administrating body for that. What was your involvement or understanding of the VEP? Were you involved in any way in the events in Mississippi

we think of, but also in Georgia and Alabama, with the voter-rights stuff?

F: Well, I knew Vernon [Jordan] when he was just coming along with the NAACP in the South. I was in Mississippi in that big summer of 1964, and of course the VEP was very active in providing small grants to groups that [we]re doing voter education. I was involved in the first desegregation of the public schools in Mississippi, so I don't have direct information about how much money went to which groups [who were] involved in voter education, because I was involved in the school desegregation. [I] was with AFSC at the time and got to know some of the lawyers from the Legal Defense Fund [LDF], and that's when Jack Greenberg and others at LDF decided that they did need to have someone who was doing the community-organizing who was not a lawyer. That's when I came on in 1965. I really don't know who took the initiative for starting voter-education.

I know Wiley Branton was very much involved in it, but I really couldn't tell you. I really do not know much about the internal workings of SRC, because most of my contacts [were] with Dunbar and Harold Fleming.

W: Just to drag you back to Mississippi for 1964 again, presumably you had quite a lot of dealings with people like Connie Curry...

F: She was on my staff.

W: Tell me a little bit about it.

F: Well, again, she [became] the southern field representative for the National Student Association, and one of her first meetings was at SRC at the Southern Interagency Conference. I think her first meeting was with them in January of 19[60] or so. I got her to work with me on the schools' situation with me in Mississippi. Then, she became part of [AFSC's] Southern Education Program, working South-wide, but taking on some particular assignments.

W: When you think back about the southern white liberals that you encountered from the late 1950s through to the mid-1960s, maybe even a little beyond, do you think that southern white women played a particularly important role? How would you characterize their contribution?

F: Well, I guess it depends upon where they were. I was telling some people a little while ago that the southern women who were involved with the [student] YWCA, were outstanding women, and women willing to take risks. I remember one of [the] conferences that we organized was in Lexington, Kentucky in the early 1940s [where] we arranged [interracial] housing in black and white homes. Black people who came to that conference stayed in the white rooms and vice versa. There were [white] women who took a very personal stand and implemented it as early as the middle 1940s. Some of them had a very hard time with their own organizational structures [we recognized that some] women who either defied the structures; [while others believed their role was to move] the structures along. [We] had a lot of problems with the white men, [our white male colleagues in the YMCA-who were really] ridiculous. They didn't want to have co-educational conferences and they would always bring up the toilets. What bothered them was thinking of the white and black men using the same lavatory facilities. We'd have endless discussions about toilets with them. You would have thought that what they were really worried about was the black men and the white women, which they were worried about also. Finally, we managed to have an interracial and co-educational conference at a site in western North Carolina. That was my first encounter with the Klan. As soon as word got out that [we] were there, they announced that they were coming to burn the camp down and made all sorts of threats. Well, you know, they didn't [follow through with their threats], and

probably because some of the white men knew enough about how you make the connections to the Klan leaders to shut them up.

W: Were there any other occasions when you were in the South where you encountered the Klan?

F: No, that was the only time. Well, in some of my desegregation work in Mississippi, they weren't bothering me, they were bothering the families who had elected to take their children [to white schools]. They made all kinds of threats, withdrawing credit and threatening to fire people. The situation became very tense in the rural area where I was working [in 1964], in Leak County, Mississippi. We thought we had quite a group of families with their children who were planning to desegregate their schools, but the weekend before school opening, white men from the town just went all through the county making their threats. The Justice Department were there [and] they kept promising that the people would be protected, but you really can't trust those promises when you're really getting down to the nitty-gritty. So, on the day schools were due to open, we ended up with one family with one little six-year-old girl. I will never forget, for as long as I live, talking to her about [that] day and what it meant and giving [her] all the heavy stuff, [when] she look[ed] up at me and sa[id], "what's everybody waiting for, I'm ready to go to school." So, off we went with several carloads of federal marshals who were really anticipating violence, but she got in all right, had a good year, and graduated from high school there eventually. So, [I got] to know some absolutely fabulous black people, particularly in the rural areas. So often [one] thinks that all the desegregation pioneers are going to be the children of the preachers and the teachers and the black middle-class, but they were so vulnerable that they were rarely the ones that stood up. It was usually the ones who were the laundry workers and the children of the sharecroppers and others. That's a very important message about the Movement.

W: Mention of federal marshals reminds me to ask you about your sense of federal power, federal government, during the late 1950s and 1960s. Obviously, when you're first going in, it's the Eisenhower years and then there's John Kennedy's administration and then subsequently there's the beginning of Lyndon Johnson's administration. The Southern Regional Council was full of white liberals who had a very skeptical view of federal government, certainly at the beginning of that period, and knew that they were trying to deal with people in their own region who were very alarmed at the prospect of federal intervention. What sort of sense did you get at that playing out over the period that you were involved in the Southern Interagency Conference?

F: Well, you know, thinking particularly about the role of SRC, they knew the key people, and the key people turned to SRC for guidance on what the government's options were in many of these situations. We will never know what Dunbar and Fleming said in very close, private conversations with people at the

top of the government. I don't know what connections they had in either the Eisenhower or the Nixon years.

W: You're talking about the Kennedy years.

F: Well, no, I'm talking about the Republican years.

W: Oh, excuse me.

F: I wouldn't know about [all of] the connections in the Democrat years. Maybe that's one of the things that you're going to find out.

W: Certainly, by this time people like Fleming and Dunbar are convinced that meaningful change isn't going to take place without some degree of federal intervention.

F: Oh, yes.

W: We've just mentioned a couple people in passing that I'd like to get you to think about. What were your first impressions when you met Vernon Jordan?

F: Well, you know, [the NAACP] is his first job. I guess he had been with Wiley Branton [in a] law firm for a couple of weeks or something, but he was working with the NAACP in the South. [When I first knew him] I think he really came into his role when he was head of the Voter Education Project. He saw then what he could do in bringing about systemic change and also in making it possible to convince major foundations to support a critical initiative from the black community. That was very much a part of his moving upwards. I mean, that's when he became known, in the Voter Education Project.

W: Absolutely, and I think Leslie Dunbar was very encouraging of him as well, I get that impression. The other one [is] Wiley Branton. Did you know Wiley particularly well?

F: I didn't know him real well. Again, he's just one of those great characters.

W: Okay, are there any other things that you'd like, that I haven't prompted you, to talk about, that you would like to mention on the tape while it's still rolling, about the Southern Regional Council and your experiences with the organization?

F: I was very close to the Southern Education Foundation. If you're talking about sort of critical movements in the South that brought together blacks and whites, that is certainly one that you would want to look at.

W: This is the Southern Conference Educational Fund?

F: No, the Southern Education Foundation. By the 1930s, it was a merger of several funds that had started shortly after the Civil War, the Slater Fund, and Jeanes Fund, and some others. When I was asked to join the board in about 1970, the median age was around seventy-five or so. They were all men. They had had one woman, Eleanor Roosevelt, on the board back at one point. These were people who had been on the board, some of them for twenty, thirty, forty years, [and] this was their great contribution to southern education, [especially] black education. They had started out, Peabody and Slater and the Jeanes Funds, making funds [available] to state departments of education to do things that they should have been doing with public funds to support black education. There was just a major revolution within the Southern Education Foundation and it has turned out to be, for all practical purposes, a black foundation. **Elridge McMillan** was the president for a number of years before he retired. [There's] a woman who's the president now. There are several organizations like that **Atlanta-based interracial [work has] strong roots** that go way way back. You're probably interviewing John Egerton [Nashville-based scholar of the South], aren't you?

W: Yeah, we're hoping he'll come to Florida as well.

F: Well, he is, I would say the most knowledgeable person, and a person who has had a long association with this. His book, [*Speak Now Against the Day*,] I think, is a classic. He has several books.

W: Is that just about it then?

F: The Southern Regional Council was the first place you had to go if you wanted information about what was happening, honest information and the kind of introduction you would need if you were going to get involved. [First to] get information, [then to] get involved and angry at what was going on.

W: So you'd say its contribution, if you had to do a CNN sort of sound-bite, was as a facilitator in some ways for actions by other groups, but indispensable in facilitating that. All right, well, thank you ever so much, Jean.

[End of Interview.]