

Transcription of “Interview with John Shetterly”

Interviewer: Bruce Watson

Length: 16:54

Abstract

On Monday, September 29, 2014, fifteen veterans of the Freedom Summer Project residing in New England arrived at the University of Rhode Island to commemorate the 50th year anniversary of the Freedom Summer Project and record interviews about their historic social activism for posterity. This is a video recording of an interview conducted with John Shetterly, a lawyer in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

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S: John Shetterly

W: Bruce Watson

S - ...the sort of big fancy, well not so fancy but nicely kept house or the yard and that sort of stuff and knocking on the door. The polite people just said they didn't want to talk that we were outside agitators or something rather like that, uhm, people who weren't quite so friendly would call us “nigger lovers” and shout at us, scream at us. So as I recall we didn't do that more than a day or two here and outreach the white community there

W - And were there when you were out in the black community was there any resistance from the white community that you know maybe with running things in and the plantation?

S - There was no acceptance there, whatever reaction there was, was negative. I think I may have told you before about a situation where my partner Jeff and I were where uh, were starting to work on a plantation and in those days there they didn't cultivate cotton with mechanized equipment at all, it was done by hand, planting and cutting out the weeds. And so there was a line of sharecroppers in the field using hoes to chop the cotton, chop the cotton meant to cut the weeds. And we approached them and try to get them into a conversation about registering to vote and each time we said something to them in a slightly different way or a person in a different positions in the line. They would look down and they would not acknowledge we were there. Uh, our backs were to the road, to the dirt road behind us, where the, which ran through the plantation. And so after a while we decided this wasn't gonna go anywhere, we turned around and saw the uhm, the bosses truck sitting there on the road and we realized that this guy was possibly going to be some trouble so we didn't avoid it. We walked over to his truck and there's a great big guy, uh, sitting in there with a shotgun and a rifle on a gun rack in the back and his hand on the, on the seat next to a .45 pistol. So there's a message there just and he said the same sentence several times, which was “Boys, ya'll realize I can shoot you” and he said “Well sir, we're here to try to convince these people here it would be a good idea to vote to hold the Constitution, blah, blah, blah, and he said “Boys, maybe you didn't hear me, realize I can shoot

you. It's my legal right to shoot you, you're trespassing on my land." And he didn't move his hand. I think we did that three times and we said "Yes sir, we're sure going to leave right now."

W - Did you ever go back to that plantation?

S - No. Not during the day. We might have. I kinda think we ran into those people again one night at a church. Cause there was a church just right on the edge of the plantation, so we might have seen them there.

W - They wouldn't have said...

S - I don't think so. I mean technically, they have to have written permission to leave when, this was not officially slavery, but even in those days, they on that plantation, they were required to have a written slip from the boss saying they were allowed to leave the land. No whether that was always honored I'm not sure but we were told that.

W - Now, uh, when you uh, who did you live with in Meadville, where did you live?

S - We lived on a farm, the two of us; Jeff and I lived on a farm and outside of town. On the north side we, it was uh a family called Thomas and uhm, we lived there it was a rather prosperous farmers, and even to by standards of the white farmers.

W - And this was black farm?

S - Yeah, Edward Thomas was perhaps the most successful black farmer. And he had quite a nice little house. I would say it was a three-bedroom house with a, an inside bathroom, which was more than a lot of houses there and uh, he had 200-300 acres of land where he planted cotton and soybeans. He had a tractor, I think he might have had two tractors. So yeah, he was doing pretty well and we uh, stayed with him. He, he was not like Mr. Miles; he wasn't an outspoken leader. But he was tough. And people did not come to his house to shoot at the house, exactly, exactly why I'm not sure. But.

W - Did you ever see any guns he, in the house that suggested he would shoot back as uh... [cut off by Shetterly]

S - I don't think he did. I think at Miles, which was shot at often. Uhm, before very long there was a group of men who came in at night, came around sunset and they, uh, got up on the roof with shotguns. And, uh, and waited when anyone came by they were prepared to shoot. And sometimes they did shoot.

W - Uhm, as you went on the summer was it, did it get harder to be in Mississippi, or easier to be in Mississippi, as it, as July dragged on into August?

S - Well it got easier. I mean in the, the thing was the, for everyone there's, there's the part of what we were doing and then the part of how this was being seen. By about the third, by the second or third week, uhm, as you, as you know from your research, this had become national

news, pretty much maybe not every night for a long time there, close to every night it was on the national news often the lead story. The uh, cover of Time magazine and Newsweek had pictures of Mississippi, of us. So it became in addition to the rest of it, very exciting, we had the feeling that we were in the middle of some very significant national historical event. Which, I don't think most of us really understood. I don't think anybody know because at the time because nobody knew what exactly was going to happen. But in hindsight, it was a major turning point in US history. So, no, it was very exciting. I didn't want to leave. I had uh, in a way an unfortunate, unfortunately won a National Science Foundation's, uh, grant for this summer to uh, do some research in Mexico. And so uhm, I had to leave for a period, and that was for various personal reasons having to do with my brothers who were uh, going to go with me and so forth. But then I came back. So uhm, and I wished I hadn't had the National Science Foundation grant because I would have stayed.

W - So you uh, came back

S - Yeah, stayed back for the rest of the time pretty much, then uhm. So I was not there for the full time. And then I uh, I went back to college. I didn't uh

W - Was it hard to go back to college?

S - Well it, not completely because at that point my expectations of what I was going to do had been completely changed by this. I was a pre-med student before and I decided that being a doctor could not possibly be as important as this. So I decided to become a civil rights lawyer. And uhm, and so thereafter I was very excited about being a civil rights lawyer and I was gonna come back and work with SNCC in Mississippi, doing more. And we would just have one more successful project after another. And then that didn't work out. By the time I got out of law school, uh, SNCC had changed into uh, largely black power organization. Uhm, white people were not welcome, white lawyers were not gonna be accepted in that, and uh, and that whole thing kinda fell apart. For me, in that sense. I did become a lawyer.

W - Did you work in civil rights law for a while?

S - No, uh, I don't think we needed to divert into that, but uh, I worked overseas for four years and got married and by the time, but by the time I came back in and you know could have done that. It wasn't impossible but it was, it would have been very difficult.

W - How do you think Summer Freedom changed you? Not one way but other ways?

S - Uh, well I think it made me, uh, vastly more aware of race in the United States. Uhm, and uh, as time has gone by more, more reflective on not just the, the black viewpoint on race but the white point, the white viewpoint and uh, the extraordinary challenges of trying to make people understand how other people see the same facts. Or the same facts, uh. What seemed to be the same facts, but when perceived by, in the black southern lands and the white southern lands just don't seem to be the same facts.

W - How do you think Freedom Summer changed the country?

S - Uhm, that's, that's a really interesting question, there been a couple of papers and books that have been written about that. It had the effects, that, uh, that uhm, it's been read and I'm not sure if this is true, literally true, but that without, without Freedom Summer the, the Voting Rights Act of '65 wouldn't have happened. Now maybe would have happened but maybe not straight then. But it clearly had a big effect on, the national news attention on the south, uhm, became much more intense. There had been in the, in Alabama and Mississippi in '63, there were more in '65, uhm, but 64 really uh, being on TV, so many nights for the national viewer on, on the channel TV to see when those bodies were discovered in Philadelphia. And the pictures, uh, pictures of them being pulled out of the ground, and uh, I think that brought home to people in the North the, the idea, and people in the South I think it could well be that more white people in the South, didn't believe that was true either. But seeing, but seeing that happen and the local law enforcement officers being uhm, forced to confront the facts really what they'd done which they never admit. But uh, so I think that uh, that made people be able to understand that this country no more racist and divided that apartheid South Africa or many other countries, which we had uh condemned for racism that perhaps the United States was at least and, and, many parts were just as extreme, just as, just as brutal and full of, full of terror.

W - It was a long process accommodating?

S - Yeah.

Watson: Have you been back to Mississippi?

S - Yeah a lot of times. I went back uh most recently for the 50th reunion. But I went back for two funerals, for a wedding, and uhm, for my, my hobby that I had the National Science Foundation grant for is study a group of insects. So I went back to insects. I love Mississippi.

W - What changes do you see?

S - What changes do I see? Uhm, I don't think I'm really qualified to say then. The uh, when we had the reunion, some black people said it had changed completely. And in a way that's true. There are, uhm, the number of elected black officials in the state of Mississippi is greater than any other state. Which is almost incomprehensible by 1964 standards. And uh, I mean living represented there. So uhm, but is it, is it really deep down changed? Are white people not racist anymore? Uhm, I don't know about that, that's a tricky question. Some of the most thoughtful people who were at the reunion said no. Others said uh, said, said, yes that were had been a change certainly superficially and maybe not superficially, it's hard to say when the first time I went back I stayed with Robert Miles and his family again and uhm, one day we, uhm, he had to go down to some land he owned where he, where he had some pecan trees. So we got in his truck towing a trailer that was going to be used to haul something back. And we got down to the, to the land and uh, uhm, and he noticed that the rear wheel of the trailer had fallen off. So we had the wheel, but we didn't have the cotter pin to hold it on to the axel. So there we were on the side of the road and he said we were gonna, uh, look around and see if we could find a piece of wire or a nail, something we could use as sort of a temporary cotter pin. And there we were kinda crawling

around on the ground looking for some wire. Along comes a big Cadillac car, and uh, it's was the sheriff. Now I hadn't.. [cut off by Watson]

W - What year was this by the way?

S - This would have been probably, oh, late seventies probably. So maybe, twelve, fourteen years later. So I remember thinking that we were gonna be killed. And I uh, said, maybe I imagined this but, I think I went to Mr. Miles and shook his hand and said "It had been very nice knowing and it was a great honor and goodbye." Because we were way, way away from any settlement or anything. And he said "No, no you don't understand." So the sheriff got out of his car, he walked over to us, stuck out his hand and shook Mr. Miles' hand and called him "Mr. Miles," which before he would have called him "Boy" or worse. And he shook hands "Mr. Miles you having trouble, anything I can do to help?" And Mr. Miles explained the problem. And the sheriff went to his car, opened his trunk, had a toolbox, and took out a cotter pin. And brought it back, and helped us put it in. So it had changed. Now that, that, at the wedding, one of the more bizarre things of going back was that the woman that was getting was, had, was the granddaughter of the Thomas family where we had stayed. And we knew her as the three year old. It was maybe three or four year old and now she's, now she's 19 or something and, uhm, getting married. And most of the guests were her friends from college. Uh, and they asked us. And so there we were, maybe three or four white people in the middle of, of a black community center, uhm, and then uhm, we got into conversations with the, with the college students to say what were there for. And they didn't say "What are you white folks doing here?" They just said "What brings you to Mississippi?" It was probable in those days that you couldn't be relatives. So we said "Well we were here in, in 1964 for the uh, uh, for the voter registration project. And I didn't, I personally didn't know anybody who didn't know what that meant. So that quickly there had been, uhm, the development of denial about what had been the situation before. Which is a common psychological phenomenon where people do not want to remember. Holocaust survivors don't want to talk about it, they don't want to remember it. And these, and these kids' parents must have been in that, in that same way, not wanting to tell them about it. Why would you want to tell your kid that you were subject to being shot for being black, uhm. So they didn't know it, uh. And that was disappointing really that they wouldn't have and later many things changed. Uhm, people became quite, quite aware we. This summer there in the reunion group, there was something like I think 600 students altogether from many states and they were extremely well aware of the uh, of the history.