

THE REV. RICHARD MORRISROE

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The Rev. John B. Morris: Father Morrisroe went to Selma in the Spring with all of the hundreds of others who went down. And then in August he went back to Birmingham and attended the Southern Leadership Conference meeting. There he met Jon Daniels and from there went on down into Selma into Lowndes County. Dick, do you recall any first impressions of Jon from meeting him in Birmingham or any conversations there? Was anything terribly significant in that meeting?

MORRISROE: Well, the meeting was significant in that I wasn't aware of any whites working in Lowndes County, working with Stokely. Stokely is a man whom I came to know better as time went on and to respect for his attitude towards others. I didn't know Jon for a long time. I didn't know him real well, but I came to know him and respect him through his friends.

MORRIS: Were you planning to go to Dallas or Lowndes County or anywhere or was it Jon's idea or Stokely's idea.

MORRISROE: Well, it was my idea. I had been working in Chicago with SNCC to some extent and had grown to meet Jon Love, Sharon Jackson and a couple of others who later came down after the shooting. They had informed me of Lowndes County and of a few people to contact in getting down there. Stokely was one, Norman Silas was another--Silas Norman--and it was through these that I came to go on. These were the contacts I was looking for.

MORRIS: Yes. Can you just tell for the record here something of the sequence of your arriving down in Lowndes on Thursday or Friday and then you all were put.....could you tell us what happened at Ft. Deposit(?)and the sequence

from....your arrival down there and your arrest.

MORRISROE: The sequence would be meeting Jon on Thursday afternoon, eventually going...After that, we went out to get a bit to eat in the Birmingham bus station, the station so famous because of the freedom rides in the early sixties. After that, that night we went back to Selma to stay with the West family. The next day we got up and in the afternoon went down to Lowndes County...some of the people to gain some sense of the County. I stayed in Lowndes County over Friday night; Jon did not. He had to drive some people back to Selma. But early the next morning Jon was back in Lowndes County. We went from Lowndes County to Port...--we went from where we were staying-- I'm not sure exactly where it was, but we went from where we were staying to Fort Deposit to just outside Fort Deposit.

MORRIS: And there you were involved in Picketing a store or something that was going on?

MORRISROE: Yes, there were three establishments that were picketed. One was I think a dry goods store, the other a restaurant; the third may also have been a dry goods store. It was concerning prices and quality of goods that the dispute was over.

MORRIS: You were arrested by the police on charges of unlawful parading or something of the sort?

MORRISROE: Something of the sort. We had hardly reached the pavements of Fort Deposit and were on our way to jail.

MORRIS: You were taken first to a jail in Fort Deposit and then transferred to Haynesville?

MORRISROE: To Haynesville. The jail in Fort Deposit wasn't really much of a

jail. It was maybe 12' by 12' in a small building. So they got one of the garbage trucks from town and put us all in the back after having searched us.

MORRIS: When you got to the Haynesville jail I assume that you and Jon and the other male prisoners were all in the same cell or were you...?

MORRISROE: At first we were in a kind of a kitchen. All twenty-four of us were thrown in this one large room with a table. Then after a couple of hours they separated us into three cells that were smaller cells...adjacent; yes. Jon was with Stokeley Carmichael and Chris Wiley. Chris Wiley and Jon and Stokeley were at one end and I was down at the other end with about eight or ten young fellows from Fort Deposit.

MORRIS: Stokeley was released several days

MORRISROE: Wednesday.

MORRIS: Wednesday and then did you still remain in the separated cells or were you?

MORRISROE: Yes, we remained in the separated cells. It was just that Jon was at that point left alone.

MORRIS: He was in a cell alone?

MORRISROE: Alone.

MORRIS: So, you weren't where you could have intimate conversations ~~because~~ I guess you all talked somewhat in...?

MORRISROE: Right. It was very hard. Had I been with Jon in the cell those two or three days I'm sure I would have known him much better. But it never turned out that way.

MORRIS: What did you all--being able to hear one another, did you all sing any songs or hymns?

MORRISROE: There was quite a bit of singing. Songs, hymns. They would come sometimes early in the morning, sometimes late at night. Jon was again... respected and thought well of by the young men in Fort Deposit, so Jon to some of us came as a leader, a leader of songs, a leader at times of prayer, always considerate of the spirits of the group, trying to help to raise...

MORRIS: Was the morale of the group somewhat low or did he seem to be one who kept it up.

MORRISROE: Well, the morale of the group varied from day to day almost. Some days they would be mad at themselves for having resorted to nonviolence or feeling that this had never worked. Next time they were going to have to be violent. But, Jon did help boost the morale of the group. He ^I think was called Reverend by some, Jon by others.

MORRIS: What was the food like in the Hayneville jail?

MORRISROE: Well, it was mostly new to me. I had never had fat back before. And I hadn't had too many corn muffins and molasses, beans of various sorts, wax beans, navy beans, black-eyed peas.

MORRIS: When I was in jail in '61 with a group of the clergy, I thrived on our ethnocentric food, as they called it...some of my New England friends detested it... Do you recall, Dick, my colleague Henry Stines coming in on Wednesday to visit you all? I don't know whether he stopped at your cell, but he did see Jon? Do you remember?

MORRISROE: There were two of 'em.

MORRIS: That's right. He was with Francis Walder...

MORRISROE: Francis I talked to for a longer period of time. I didn't meet Henry.

MORRIS: Francis, as you may know, is down there now and Director of the Selma interreligious project, carrying on as it were in the tradition that Jon began in part. And the NCC.....is one of the four national sponsoring agencies. Dick, on your release on Friday is--all of the detail--over the lawyer from Birmingham coming down and trying to arrange, I'm too hazy on now to go into, but if I do recall it was--you were--it was--you all were released unexpectedly, and it was because of that that no one was there to pick you up. Do you know any?

MORRISROE: We knew little of what was going on on the outside except that we did know that a lot of people were working to get us released, but of the details I knew next to nothing. I found out later they had raised funds in the North to some extent like in Chicago. They were able to get some of the money. And I think many of the people in Fort Deposit were doing whatever they could to gather together money to be used as bail. But then when

MORRIS: But then when you were actually released it was--what was it--about 1:00 or 2:00, do you recall, on Friday?

MORRISROE: Roughly. I would say closer to 2:00. But I wasn't that sure of the time. We were released...

MORRIS: Yes. Why don't you tell what happened and as much detail as you want to or whatever you feel you want to say.

MORRISROE: Well, we were released, as you mentioned, rather unexpectedly. We were taken down stairs where we signed a paper. I think it was probably a bail paper, something to do with our bail bond. And then we went outside,

and it was good to see the sun again, to feel the fresh air. We sat for a moment at the side of the old jail. There are two jails there in Hayneville, but were told by a group of men in a car--I think they were either the sheriff or his deputies--to move on. And so we did, we moved on about maybe a hundred yards down to the corner from the jail where the Cash store is located. Do you remember the picture?

MORRIS: I've been there subsequently and seen the Cash Store and the jail so I know the locale.

MORRISROE: Right. So, we were at the corner waiting. A few of the young men had I think, Jimmy Rogers and there's another from--another young worker from Mississippi--went to look to see what they could do to arrange for transportation. We had sat waiting for sometime and then Jon said "come on along, we'll go to the store." And I had--still had--a dime or so left, and I was coming along at the tail end of the group with Jon and Ruby Sales and then Gloria, and myself were coming and I was just coming up at the tail end. And I could see a figure in the door and I could hear more than I could see really and the words were: "Get the Hell out of here or I'll blow your head off." I turned and started running really at this and heard one shot and then heard a second.

MORRIS: And the second was the one that hit you?

MORRISROE: The one that hit me.

MORRIS: There was one report that that as you all approached the store--perhaps it was Ruby in front or was Jon actually in front, do you recall?

MORRISROE: Well, I don't recall that well. I noticed there were differences in reports. I recall Glor--or rather Ruby--saying later that it was Jon who had pushed her down and had saved her life.

MORRIS: Yes, this is what I was referring to. Do you recall Jon saying anything to the person in the doorway when--which obviously was Mr. Coleman--when he said "Get the hell out," do you recall whether Jon responded?

MORRISROE: I have a vague recollection of "Are you threatening me?" but it's pretty vague really this far away. I had-a-what I did was shortly after it was to write down all that I knew, and I have that here in Chicago.

MORRIS: You sent a copy of that down to Alabama.

MORRISROE: That's right. What I did was...

(an insert here by Morris: Father Morrisroe says that he has made notes which he has given to a Mr. David Lorenz with Negro Digest. These are notes that he made in the month or weeks following the shooting during his convalescence, which might have further details in connection with the whole incident.)

MORRISROE: This is one of the most vivid recollections I have not so much of the shooting. I was conscious all the time from the time I was shot until I went under the...under the knife and.....I went in first to the one with Stokeley and Silas and Jon or rather with Chris Wiley and I was tempted to go in there but I just thought, 'well, I'll go down. I came here to learn about the Southern Negro but I'd rather spend the time there then and later talk to Jon because it's so easy to communicate say Jon and I or even Stokeley and I but it's very hard to communicate with the negro there. They're deprived... They're not active in the movement for a long time and yet they're very much a part of it. But Stokeley can articulate what the others live. It's not that they don't know or that they haven't lived...deeply, but it's hard to say. So that Stokeley has a wonderful knack of being able to articulate, loud and clear and with many...And his respect of Jon...great deal. Stokeley he was through here. Well, when I was in Montgomery I had one nurse, one

nurse was related to Coleman...a very good nurse though. You know, if we ever got out...Yes. She was a very good nurse. Of the three nurses I had she was the firmest in the sense of getting me out of the bed and wanting me to move, but all of it was a great help. Then I had another nurse who was a very saintly elderly person whose son-in-law and daughter were in Nigeria, one a doctor and the other a teacher, and she was really--everything that I would say she would almost treasure. She's been here a number of times. With her it was possible to have characters like Stokeley into the hospital because during the other one's shift there would have been no chance...

MORRIS: You were just saying that you were conscious after being shot and that....and that some people came to look at you to say were you white or negro. Were these the white people standing around the store then?

MORRISROE: Yes, they were.

MORRIS: They make any effort to help you or immediately?

MORRISROE: Well, someone--I kept asking for water. I was out in the sun and really it was the same water we had gone to the store for or a bottle of pop. what have you. And then someone moved me into the shade and gave me the water. Now I had heard that Jimmy Rogers was the one who did most of this who is working with SNCC. I don't remember the person who was doing it, I just remember them doing it.

MORRIS: You know, in the defense in Hayneville that of course they have it all worked out to make it sound like Coleman was justified. And part of the defense goes on to say that some of the group, meaning Jimmy Rogers and the others came up to you and to Jon's body and removed the weapons from you. I don't know if you knew this--

MORRISROE: No.

MORRIS: But this is what they said. That the whole trial and the testimony was a great farce from beginning to end. When you were shot--of course, Jon had just been shot...

MORRISROE: I kept asking when I was in the hospital. I was, as I say, was conscious but then certainly twenty-four hours after the operation...because the doctor I have here was only down there two nights and I have recollection of talking to him and it was a great consolation to me that one of the nurses was a negress. She had donated her time, a Mrs. Jackson, for the first two nights I was there.

MORRIS: Before I turn this off, this is going to Bill Schneider, is there anything you'd like to ask, Father Morrisroe--I mean that you'd like to have Bill know and be on the tape.

MRS. DANIELS: Well, I don't know that there is. You didn't realize what had happened to Jon, did you?

MORRISROE: I kept asking for him. I presumed he was shot in the head. This was all that I knew and I presumed that he was dead because I kept asking for him, and it was only after about a week or ten days that they told me that Jon was dead.

MORRIS: You didn't actually in the fast succession of events there you didn't actually see in full...?

MORRISROE: No. My back was turned really, because as soon as I saw the shotgun glaring right out through the screen I went.

MRS. DANIELS: I just sort of assumed that you were unconscious and that you didn't know anything that went on from then on...

MORRISROE: No, I was conscious from, as I say, until they got me into the

hospital. I remember well the ambulance ride, being in the x-ray room when they were taking the x-rays, being asked....Well, these. I don't know. I would presume it would be the whites in Hayneville.

MRS. DANIELS: You mean civilians?

MORRISROE: Civilians.

MRS. DANIELS: Not the workers that you were with.

MORRISROE: I don't think they could have gotten an ambulance.

MORRIS: Someone in the store or even the sheriff's office would have called the ambulance--I mean not...I mean they would have done it, not that they had the best intentions.

MORRISROE: It came after about a half-an-hour I think...

MORRIS: Dick, do you have anything that you would like to say regarding Jon, anything that you'd like anybody else to know? Not so much about him because we've already put on the tape here what you knew about him, but in terms of what this whole thing has meant to you, to the church, to the movement, to the country...?

MORRISROE: Well, what I've come to sense is that, see, there are very ^{few} negro priests either in your denomination or in ours, and one of them is a very dear friend, ~~of~~ Father ^{who} who was down there last night. And a couple of years ago I was working with him on the West Side in the Lawndale area which is one of the poorest, most down-trodden in the whole city, and he said that "by right there should be more negro priests in our denomination, but until there are I'm just going to have to learn to think black." And I think Jon had done this. I think this is why he was trusted. This is, as I say, those early fears in the hospital I had myself come to reach this

point psychologically. Most of the problems I had were on this--this inability to trust white people which is latent, and I think Jon knew in the negro people in our country, certainly in the South, where the people of Lowndes County could come to respect a white person, to respect Jon as they did, to revere him, as I saw. Those who had come into the jail while we were there during that week, that he had come a long way to appreciate his fellow man, and so again, just to have known Jon, to have worked with him, to have shared some of his hopes, to have shared in some way with his work, I consider this a great privilege. It's strange really by all--according to most doctors we should have both been dead, and it seems that the Lord wanted one of us to live on and to do just what--I don't know as yet--but Jon was called and I was told to stay, but in my early period of recovery I--the thoughts kept spilling together of "You are my people and I will be your God." The thought of Exodus and the exodus that has taken place now around the country of negroes led, as it were, sometimes by Martin Luther King, although Stokeley would strongly disagree with that! But there is a movement and Jon was very much a part of it. Another--while I was in the hospital, one of the doctors brought me "John Brown's Body" and I listened to it two or three times and thought of Jon Daniels' body a lying in its grave and what--that what John Brown meant well over a hundred years ago, a man who thought black and understood black and fought to save the black man in our nation. The only "true white liberal" according to Stokeley, John Brown. But-a, well I'm getting bearable now, you understand what I mean...

MORRIS: No, that's good and we're near the end of the tape here which will go up to Bill Schneider in Cambridge for some possible use in the book he's writing about Jon. Just one final thing, I know from several sources that Jon had entertained or at least thought very highly of the new spirit of reform running through the ^{1960's} Catholic Church and had even himself considered

Roman orders. Did he ever discuss this with you?

MORRISROE: No, I'm sure we would have, again, as so many other things, but we never did discuss things.

MORRIS: All right. We'll turn this tape off. Thank you very much.