

INTRODUCTION TO NOLA RESISTANCE

Grades 6–12

LESSON 1: Stories of Resistance

Dodie Smith-Simmons Oral History Transcript

Smith-Simmons was interviewed by Mark Cave at the Williams Research Center in New Orleans on August 21, 2017, for the NOLA Resistance oral history project. Below is an excerpt from their 96-minute interview.

SMITH-SIMMONS: So. And like I say, we never had a problem with the police, per se, and—with CORE, you always let the police know what you're doing. Nothing was a surprise. The Freedom Ride—James Forman sent a letter to President Kennedy stating what was going to happen. Kennedy never responded to the letter, but he had a copy of the letter. So we did it as a way of having the media protect us against the police, the police to protect us against the mob or the crowd. So every time we did something, they knew. It was not a surprise. And I think that's why when we went to McComb, the bus terminal was closed; said there was a gas leak. A photographer got out and was beaten. And—when we did these test rides—you had testers and you had an observer. Jerome was the observer. That meant he didn't have—on the bus, he had no contact with us. He'd sit by himself. When we went back—after we'd gone to the black community and stayed a while, then around noon we went back to try to reenter the terminal. It was open.

Jerome got off first. And when he tried to get into the terminal, there was an elderly white man holding the door so he couldn't get in, when somebody from the inside had to come out, he stood aside and that's how Jerome got in, so—the rest of us got in. When we—Jerome went to the ticket counter to purchase our return tickets and the four of us testers,

George Raymond, Tom Valentine, Alice Thompson, and myself, we went to the lunch counter and sat there. The manager came out screaming, "Greyhound does not own this terminal. Please leave." George Raymond say to the waitress, "May I have a cup of coffee, please?" and the manager was still ranting and raving. George say to the waitress again, "May I have a cup of coffee, please?" Young, white McComb citizen went to the coffee pot, poured a cup of coffee, walked around the back of George Raymond, poured the hot coffee over his head and hit him in the base of the neck with the coffee cup.

At that point people hadn't realized that Jerome was a part of the group until he signaled for Alice and I to go sit in the waiting room. And when he did that, all hell broke loose. About four or five guys beat him with brass knuckles and through our training we'd been taught how to protect ourselves. Hands behind the back, you fell on the ground in a fetal position and they were kicking him and beating him and Tom Valentine was a little, short, slight guy; they'd pick him up off the stool, throw him to the ground, he would bounce up like a ball. George Raymond was being chased. This was the lunch counter, glass partition like that. He would jump over that glass position, partition. They come around and get him. He'd jump back over. And when he saw how badly Jerome was being beaten, he went over that area and they started beating on him, too. And I think had he not done that, they would have killed Jerome that day.

So when we finally got out of the terminal, Jerome was running, I was behind him. Tom Valentine tried to get into a taxi, was pulled out, was kicked in the head, was beat, I don't know what happened to George and Alice. A pickup truck drove by, being driven by a black man. Jerome dove into the back of the truck. And I'm saying, oh my God, I'm left alone. So I just ran. When we got there, there were no policemen, the first time. No policemen. Never saw one black person. But when I ran around the terminal to the colored section, the terminal was on Canal Street and there's a group of black people and they just encircled me. And I think had it not been for those black McComb citizens, I may not be sitting here today talking to you.

So I say to myself, you're going to calm yourself down. You're going to walk out of this crowd and walk up the hill, like you're going to work in Miss Ann's kitchen and then when you get out of sight you're going to run like hell. Never been to McComb. Not knowing I was in a white neighborhood. But that's what I did. Then I heard—"Dodie!"

Looked around. These white folks know my name. And I ran even faster and when we went on these campaigns we'd dressed like we go to church. I had on heels and I ran even faster. And I heard my name again and I ran faster until the truck overtook me and it was the truck that Jerome had dove into. They had collected the other people. They took us back to the black section of McComb, to the White Castle Hotel and Café. We were treated by a doctor named James Anderson. I didn't know his name at the time, but when I went back for the 50th anniversary of the Freedom Ride I met him and got to thank him, after we cried for a while. And—so after the doctor had treated Jerome, Jerome came over to me and say, "Get Bobby Kennedy on the phone," and I'm looking at him like, man, you've had one too many hits. And I'm looking at him. He say, "Get Bobby Kennedy on the phone," so I'm just looking at—and when I went on these campaigns I always had a pad and a pencil, so I was writing down and singing in my head as the guys was being beaten. So he gave me Bobby Kennedy's direct line, which I didn't know it was his direct line at the time. So I put the money in the payphone, dialed the number. This man answered the phone and I say, "Hello. May I speak to Attorney General Bobby Kennedy?" he said, "This is he," I say, "My name is Doratha Smith and I'm calling for Jerome Smith," he said, "I'm aware of the situation. There are FBI agents out front waiting to take you back to New Orleans." Being all of 18 and a half years old I say, "Oh no they won't. We're going back to New Orleans the way we came, by bus," and I handed the phone to Jerome. I'm sure his conversation started off with Jerome, with what he said to me about FBI agents and—we got into a taxi. Went back to the bus terminal. The crowd had doubled in size. There were police in the cell. And we say, we didn't want another beating. So we went to the highway and we flagged the bus down on the highway and that's how we got back to New Orleans. But during that time when Jerome and I was running and the crowd was—it always bothered me—there was these young white mothers with babies on their hips saying, "Kill the niggers! Kill the niggers!" and I say, I didn't understand—their babies. Why are they out here?