Oral History: Charles Moore
Interviewed by Mary Morin

Morin: My first question is, what was your job when you first became aware of the civil rights story?

Moore: I think the most important time, other than knowing that growing up in Alabama – knowing that there was a separation of the races and there was a mix up that came up with, fortunately, with family that taught me the right way. And that I was not to treat anyone differently or badly, although they didn't try to get me out there to make changes at the time because I was just a little kid.

But when I graduated from high school, I went into the Marine Corps. When I got out, I needed to go to school. I decided I wanted to go to Brooks Institute of Photography in California. So I did that, I came out, I studied fashion, photography and commercial. But when I came back to my hometown, a little hometown in Alabama, I asked myself, what in the world I am going to do. I mean, I got this training and all this talent and, well, supposedly I had some talent. But there was really nothing I could be doing with that – unless I moved to some big city.

But, anyway, I found out that the newspapers in Montgomery needed a photographer. And Ray Jenkins, who is here of course, was the editor of the Alabama Journal. They had two papers at the time, one in the morning and in the afternoon. And Ray – I'm just so thrilled to see because I haven't seen him since the newspaper days. So I got a job and it turned my life around. I mean it literally turned my life around. Because I had found something that's more important than fashion or commercial or whatever, or even more important than money. And that is what you can do with a newspaper and what you can do in telling stories.

So I spent six years there, and the newspaper offices were only about three blocks away from Dr. King's church. Then not far up the hill was the capitol of Alabama. So I first met Dr. King at his church, where I had an assignment. And from the very beginning going in, it was a sermon he was doing and talking about the rights of the people, and I was in awe of his voice. His speech was just so incredible. I knew, not maybe the first time, but after two or three times of going there, that this man somehow had power. I was impressed. That began my interest when I heard what he was preaching. Other than his regular church sermons, he was going to be a leader. So, I wanted to continue doing that – and did – so that was the beginning. Because I grew up being taught, not to treat people badly because of race and that was not really an issue at that time. My dad told me, "Son, you don't treat people badly because they are a different color." Black wasn't a word that was used and the "N" word certainly was. But the word that was the nice word was "colored" folk. And that's what he would

say. "Those are colored folk – don't you and your brother use that 'N' word. It's ugly, it's not nice, and the people are just human like we are." So I learned a lot in the beginning from him. Then the newspaper job really turned my life around. And there is where I truly learned what's really important in photography.

I didn't realize that a photographer could help make a difference. Even in our society and the world, and the many photographers we have. I'm proud that my photographs of the civil rights movements have had an effect on society. When I see it published in different things and the photograph of the three kids against the wall in Birmingham – Carolyn McKinstry is a friend of mine now. She was a southern belle of Birmingham. And she is that fourteen-year-old girl who's with two young guys huddled against the wall, a stream of water hitting them in the back. I saw it that way – I didn't want the firemen to get mad, I just wanted everyone to see how hard the water looked as it hit them in the back. It's not about me. It's the photographs, and the photograph meant something. It is in a book about photographers that changed the world. It was chosen as one of the hundred most important photographs, and I'm very proud of it. You know it's – when you see that you have to feel proud that the granddaughters and grandsons don't have to grow up with that. They can have peace – so deeply – of people who are different.

Morin: What was the response to the photo at the time when you took it?

Moore: That photo – the power of it. People liked it, and it got published a lot. It told a story all on its own.

Morin: Was there resistance from the management of the newspaper to send you to cover the civil rights stories?

Moore: No, not at all. The city editor was the editor of the afternoon paper, and Ray is here on the program with us. No, they did not hesitate to cover the events. Our paper did a very good job covering the events. I had to fire one of my photographers because he would not photograph anything like that. He would not go out and photograph little black children in a little black school. He would tell me he wasn't going to photograph none of those people. And I told him to get his check - you are out of here. No, I'm very happy that the paper backed me – completely. I was arrested once, the paper stood behind me, and got me out. I was arrested in a little town in Birmingham. I was working on an assignment for Life magazine that time.

Morin: How did you deal emotionally with the events you saw unfold?

Moore: Emotionally, that's how I dealt with it. I did have emotions. When I'm working with a camera, I'm focused on what I'm doing and I'm aggressive. I'm gonna get out there. You are going to have to kill me to keep me from doing the pictures I want to do – because it was so important to me. Why? Maybe

because of my background, maybe because I love photography, and it was a dramatic event. Because I felt the way I did. I did not like seeing what I did, and I'm a fighter. If I had – and I have – fought before with my fist, but in this, I fight with my camera. That's my tool. That was my weapon. I believe in something strongly, and I'm going to stand up for it. And I knew and my father knew – he taught me, that I better not ever mistreat people, just because of color. That is really where I come from.

Morin: When you think back to your goal as a journalist during the civil rights movement, what are the strongest memories?

Moore: Birmingham. Birmingham. My mother developed cancer at the age of 26, and my father would take her to Birmingham for treatments and I would go. She had two brothers there, so I liked to visit with them. I liked it as a kid in Birmingham at that time. And had good memories to see these things happening in the town and having relatives. Of course as a kid, I didn't focus on the fact that there was separation of the races. But I also was taught that I treat everybody the same. And my dad was a Baptist minister for a number of years at the church that I go to sometimes. With his teachings, I was not to treat people badly and those teachings were important to me. I grew up as a normal kid, went to school, played football I was fortunate. I guess that is the beginning of anyone, unless they go astray somehow. I've done that – gone astray, lived a crazy life. But my belief system is there deep down inside me, and I will fight for what I believe in.

Morin: As a journalist covering the civil rights movement taking these incredible photographs, what do you specifically remember about getting those photos? Are there a couple situations you'd like to share?

Moore: Well, there was a lot of danger, as we heard in the discussions. I think that Birmingham was pretty tough for me, yet I was very aggressive. I was determined because I hated to see what happened in Birmingham. But I did get arrested, and with my reporter who was working along side me. I went on my own when I resigned from the paper and decided to freelance. And I went to Mississippi when I knew there would be some problems. It was important for me to become involved. Birmingham was the most important.

There were other types of situations, like going down to hike through the swamps and go with the searchers that were looking for the missing civil rights workers – everyone was pretty sure that they were dead. Then later having to face off with this sheriff that was involved in the killing that threatened me and the people in that little town in Philadelphia (Mississippi). So many events like that, but the big one was Birmingham. This was my home state, and I think of all the places, that disturbed me. Seeing this happening and voting registration was very special. Traveling through the back roads of Mississippi, especially knowing the hate that you encountered. Some of the people were racist.

We had rental cars, the press. We would go out, and the agency would give out information to people of what we were driving, the tag number – so they could know who the people were who were coming down from the press. When you are driving down a country road at night where there is a board of registration going on and you are trying to get back to your motel that you hoped hasn't been invaded, then a pick-up truck comes up on you. Right on your bumper and then they bump you. You look back and see two guys with a gun on the gun rack and they keep it up, trying to get you to pull over. It was constant harassment. Fear of trouble. In an area were we have no friends or no one to help us and the fear of confrontation – I never liked that. So that was always troubling, that we'd get into. The back roads of Mississippi were a pretty scary thing. There were many scary situations – too many – and it was very dangerous. But that's the way it is when you are a journalists.

Morin: Were there times when you were covering civil rights stories when you asked yourself, 'Why am I doing this?'

Moore: This is not what I planned to be. I wanted to be an art photographer. I wanted to shoot beauty, and I did some of it and it was fine. But it wasn't important. I worked with a lot of people, and it was fun, it was fine, but it wasn't important. What was important was trying to make a difference with your pen, typewriter, recorder or camera. And that's when I realized what I was doing was what I wanted to do.

Morin: Thinking back to all of the stories you covered over your lifetime, how would you rank covering the civil rights movement?

Moore: Number one. Without any question. Without any doubt. Not because it is important to me, just for me. What the important thing is about those photographs, I made them, and other people made photographs. If I made some photographs that I felt so strongly about doing out there over a period of time, then I'm very happy. But it is about the photographs – it's not about me. It's the photographs that can change people's mind – I can't. If they can change people's minds and make an effect on people where they can look at them and say, "Gosh, that was wrong," then the pictures made a difference. I'll be gone one day, but they won't.

Morin: What do you think the legacy of this story is for this country?

Moore: Dr. King's legacy: "I have a dream. I'm going to do something about it." He led the people. For me, I'm going to leave my pictures as a legacy. I hope one day they are in a very safe place made available to the public to be for the schools. The children are our future. They're the people who need to be educated from the very beginning that we never forget. Let's not ever let that happen again. And go out and make a difference somehow.

I'm so happy to be here, with people I haven't seen in so long. What we are doing here today is what should have been going on during that period. And it was at one point, and that is the education of the people that have been misled – that the South is this wonderful white society, but it is not. I have to say where I'm living now – north Alabama – I see an incredible difference. But, not everything is perfect.

Morin: What do you think both black and white people learned from this?

Moore: Very simple. That we are all human beings. We are all here on the earth and that we got here the same way. That we should honor each other, or at least respect each other. And if we can't do that, we at least have to respect human rights. And civil rights. Those are two big words. Civil rights. We all have that right – the right that our government promises us. I think the South learned a lesson the hard way. There was a war – a civil-rights war. People marching, praying, crying out to give us our rights. We are human, too. I heard this so many times – we want to be part of the community – and it happened. The laws had to be changed and to be enforced, and mindsets had to be changed. You're going to still find the racist, but a lot of changes have been made.

Morin: Thank you, Mr. Moore.