Oral History: Richard Valeriani
Interviewed by Mary Morin

Morin: How did you get signed to your job to cover the civil rights story? When was it?

Valeriani: Well that's an interesting question because of the following. I was, at one point – Let me see. I joined in Havana, worked through, established the Miami bureau, to cover Latin America. Then they sent me to Chicago as a Midwest correspondent. So, as a Midwest correspondent, I covered Birmingham, Selma, and the Dominican Republic. Go figure, through the Midwest.

I got into it just as a young reporter in the hot spots. The first one I recall is "Ole Benny" (Albany), Georgia. People don't remember Ole Benny, Georgia. It was a big failure of the movement. There was a sheriff named Laurie Pritchett, who was a lot smarter than Bull Connor, and Jim Clark, and Sullivan. When he meant non-violence, he meant non-violence. He was arresting everybody and putting them in jail. And I think they finally segregated the library or something.

I always thought of Ole Benny, Georgia, as a training ground for what came in Birmingham and Selma. But, after that, John Chancellor was down in Mississippi, maybe Greenville, covering demonstrations. He had to go back to New York to do something, and so they sent me down to fill in for Chancellor. Right after that, word got out that the Birmingham campaign was going to start. It was non-stop after that. Birmingham. Philadelphia (Mississippi). Selma.

But, I'd also been in Oxford, Mississippi, with the segregation of the University of Mississippi.

Morin: What was your initial reaction? I know you had said in the panel that, at that time, you weren't quite sure of the effect that it would have.

Valeriani: Well, coming out of the North – I grew up in southern New Jersey. We say our only race problem was that we didn't know we had a problem. But, I went to integrated schools, I went to parties and social events with black people – Negroes, as they were called, and colored people. And so when I got to the South and saw this, frankly, I was shocked. I mean, really shocked. There were a lot of people had mentioned the separate lunch counters and drinking fountains and restrooms. So, it was shocking because somewhere in the back of my mind, I'd seen movies or read about it, but to go there and see it. And then, be exposed to the ferocity and bias and prejudice was really a shock.

Morin: In what way, specifically, do you think it was so shocking to you? What specific event?

Valeriani: It's not so much an event as the conditions – just the fact that these people could not go outside. I grew up in a small town in New Jersey. And at school, kids went to the local soda fountain. And we all had sodas or whatever, and fooled around and socialized. The idea that blacks and whites couldn't be together anywhere was the thing that I was so shocked about.

Morin: Why do you think this became a story when it did?

Valeriani: I'm not sure, really, about the timing, except that I think it was a combination of things like Brown versus Board of Education and Montgomery bus boycotts. And, then with King – I can't really talk about the internal dynamics, but various groups seemed to come together at the same time. And I think it happened at that time because of the fallout from Brown versus Board of Education, and Little Rock. That changed the atmosphere to some degree. It made the country much more aware of the problem and, therefore, I think emboldened people in the movement to finally say, "Let's meet this challenge." And possibly the election of John Kennedy. I think perhaps some people saw him as an instrument of change, a young charismatic leader who was going to change things and get America back to life and get America moving. He would possibly be the instrument of our change.

Morin: Day to day, how difficult was it to cover these stories?

Valeriani: Well, it depends what you mean by difficult. In one sense, it was easy, that if there was a demonstration, you pointed your cameras, and you've got a story. The hard part was the danger it involved. We had to be very careful because we were all targets. They'd seen us on television, and they knew who we were. We had our cameras – you couldn't hide them anywhere. They saw our faces on TV and considered us outside agitators. So, there was that constant sense of danger.

Now, there was also more, I must say, as young reporters, you sort of feel like the village idiot. You think nobody would harm you because you're not a participant, but then you realize you were seen as a participant. And that changes things.

Morin: I'm just curious – what kind of tactical difficulties did you have covering this?

Valeriani: I would say the only really serious – I'm not sure what you mean by tactical problem. But, in terms of covering it like any other story, there wasn't a problem. But there was a problem with some of the local affiliates. For example, in Jackson, Mississippi, a station was run by a general manager who was then a member of the White Citizens' Council – a guy named Fred Beard. He used to boast to me. He said, "I went to Harvard Business School. All of them walked out the door and turned left. I turned right." But, the technicians at WLBT

rebelled, wouldn't put the stuff on the air. Some of them just wouldn't do it, but others were saying, "We've got to do this to keep our license." So what they did was they put up a disclaimer.

So, I'd come up and do a story, and the station would come on and say, "This station has no responsibility whatsoever for that fake and phony report you just saw" – or something like that.

Morin: That's fascinating. Were you given any specific rules by your boss where you were told, or was it your judgment?

Valeriani: In anything I've ever covered, I never had any sense of anybody looking over my shoulder – even political stories and stuff. We just were told to get the story. And, that's what you did. The competition was fierce. In those days, the competition was between CBS and NBC. So, nobody ever told you what to write or how to go about it. In effect, we told them. We'd call up and say, "I've got a hell of a good story here, and you better put it on the air."

Morin: What do you think you learned from it? Looking back throughout your coverage, would you have done anything drastically different?

Valeriani: Nothing that I can think of. I would take the same approach. I would get the story and not just the pictures. Looking back, would I have done anything differently? Nothing that I can see.

Morin: What are you the most proud of? Or maybe the most disappointed with or most upset about, throughout the coverage?

Valeriani: There are so many, it's like saying, "Tell me about a favorite meal." One of the things, looking back on, that I enjoyed, was an interview with Governor George Wallace of Alabama. After Viola Liuzzo, a white woman from Detroit, had been killed on the highway between Montgomery and Selma, of course it was a national uproar. I interviewed him on the Today Show live. Now, Wallace obviously was a very controversial character. And he used to be invited to go to New York and be on the Meet the Press and Face the Nation and other shows. And when he got there, everybody went after him like a pit bull. And he'd hunker down and play the role, "Why you pickin' on me?" When he'd speak up in the North, he'd play that same role. And I recognized that if I went after him like a pit bull, it was going to be just one of those interviews where he'd hunker down and play defense and come out looking good. So, I figured you've got to provoke him some way, and that's not the way to do it. So, I just started out asking about this and sort of very gently needling him, and he said something like, "The highways in Alabama are safer than the subways in New York." And that was after the woman just got murdered on the highway. So, I said to him, "Governor, I know that the American flag doesn't fly at the state capitol. Why is that? You just have the Confederate flag." And he said, "Well, the American flag

is around the corner. And, all these kids contributed pennies, and we built this little plaza to put the American flag. And I was still saying, "You have the Confederate flag. Why don't you have the American flag at the capitol?" Then we saw George Wallace.

The best part of it was an article in the Montgomery paper – called the Montgomery Advocate. And the guy that wrote it wrote, "Normally when our governor appears on national television, he hits it home. But, yesterday, he struck out." And you could tell, because at the end of the interview, the announcer was smiling.

Morin: Wow.

Valeriani: Now, the story that everybody asks me to tell is the story about getting clubbed in Marian, Alabama. It was a nighttime demonstration, which were always the worst. I had cameramen who refused to cover them – you had no lights, and it was all dark, and you can't see what's going on. So, in the sort of frenzy of the moment, during the demonstration, a man walked up behind me and hit me in the back of the head with an ax handle. And I staggered and started to fall. And the cameraman was holding me up. We knew there was going to be trouble because when we arrived, they sprayed the lenses of the camera with black paint. So, I'm staggering, and the cameraman's holding me up. And some white guy comes up to me and he looks at me and says, "You need a doctor?" I put my hand to my head, and felt the blood and in this sort of daze, I looked at my hand and said, "Yeah, I think so." And he put his face right into mine and said, "We don't have doctors for people like you." But they did send an ambulance and took me off to the hospital and got the wound treated. A state policeman took the ax handle away from the guy. And what I remember is the sound. He threw it on the steps of city hall. I remember the sound of the ax handle rattling, as it bumped and rattled down the stairs. He did not arrest him, but there was a big uproar obviously. The next day, NBC was protesting it. And the vice-president of the company made a statement. So, then they went and arrested the guy.

It was really traumatic. It was traumatic. But, two days later, I got back on the beat. You know, I got home, recovered, and they sent me back. Fine. Two weeks later, a Presbyterian minister by the name of Jim Reeb was walking in Selma, and somebody walking came up behind him and hit him with an ax handle. And killed him. And then, that's when I had sort of an aftershock – a delayed reaction. I said, "Oh, my God."

Now the difference was the guy who hit me had a round house swing, like a baseball bat. But with Jim Reeb, he hit him overhead. So, he hit him right on the crown and fractured his skull. And it occurred to me that if this guy had hit me that way, instead of the baseball, I'd probably be dead, too.

Morin: Did you say after that, "Why am I doing this?" I mean, you said you went right back to your beat.

Valeriani: If you fall off the horse, you get on the horse and go back. It's a hell of a story. That's what I did for a living.

Morin: That's incredible. What do you think the overall legacy of the civil rights story is?

Valeriani: Well, obviously, I would say the change in the nation. The Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 came directly out of the movement. And it changed the social landscape of this country. I still marvel today.

We talk about the fantasy of establishing democracy in Iraq. Here we are, the world's greatest democracy, and forty years ago, millions of people could not vote – because they were black.

Morin: Haynes Johnson had said that it's not possible to not be involved in the civil rights story. Do you feel the same way?

Valeriani: I disagree with what Haynes said. And I disagree with what Jack Nelson said. Now, Jack comes from a Southern background, so maybe there's a different approach. I tried never to get involved in the story because I thought my professionalism consisted of being objective. That's what we do as reporters. No matter what I think personally, or watching something from afar – when I'm involved in it, I'm there as a reporter, not as an editorial writer. And, there's a cliché in the business, which is, "If you're doing a good job, then both sides complain." And both sides complained to me all the time. The white power structure would complain that I was an outside agitator or aiding the outside agitator, and the movement would complain that I wasn't helping them enough. I'm not here to help. I'm here to report a story.

Here's a curious footnote to that. Several years after Selma in '65, some people went back and did documentaries. The only reporter that Jim Clark would talk to was me. And he said to me, "I don't like you. I didn't like you then, and I don't like you now. But, I thought you were fair." That's how I saw my job.

I'll tell you another one. This is irrelevant to civil rights, but relevant to the question. Once when I was covering Henry Kissinger, traveling around the world with Henry Kissinger, then with the State Department – and he had a special meeting with President Sadat of Egypt. And it was a difficult period of negotiations. We were allowed in for a photo opportunity, and then we started asking Sadat questions, very pointed questions. He got riled and made some very aggressive comments. Kissinger was pulling his hair out because he knew this was going to complicate the negotiations even more. The next morning, he

comes running, and he comes back to the press section and says very angry, “I don’t know why I bring you along. I should never bring you. What you did yesterday was totally out of line.” So, I went to his press secretary, and said, “You should let me talk to him. I think he’s got some misunderstandings.”

Well, the plane took off. And the press secretary came back and said, “He’ll talk with you. You better go see him.” So, we talked about what happened, and I tried to explain to him what to do. And at one point, I said to him, “Mr. Secretary, we’re sitting here in the back of the plane, and as American citizens, we may be rooting for you to succeed in this mission. As reporters, we don’t care whether you succeed or fail. And some of the reporters will probably say it’s a better story if you fail.” And he looked at me as though I hit him between the eyes with a hammer. He said, “You can’t be that objective.” I said, “That’s our job, Mr. Secretary.”

Morin: What is the legacy of the story for press coverage and practice?

Valeriani: I really don’t know how to answer that, except that all the retospectives point out that the press helped change the attitude of the nation. We conveyed that message, especially television, which had the dramatic picture.

I’ll tell a story about checking in to a Washington hotel. And after I signed in and was walking away from the desk, a young black man behind the desk said, “Excuse me, Mr. Valeriani. If I may say so, I’d like to thank you for everything that you did for my people.” And I felt mixed emotions. I felt flattered that he had said that, but at the same time, a little embarrassed that I didn’t see myself as having been there to help his people or to help the cause. I was there as a reporter.

Now, what I think the reporters of that era brought to the story was a great deal of integrity, honesty – accuracy. I’m afraid we’ve lost a lot of that in the media.

Morin: What do you hope for journalism in coverage of civil rights issues now?

Valeriani: I don’t know how to define civil rights issues now. And I think if there is an issue comparable to civil rights then, it would be gay rights today. That’s why I think gay marriages get such attention. I don’t know where that movement, or the gay and lesbian alliance, is going to take things. But, that’s the new battleground, the new struggle, for rights. And, it’s not going to be as dramatic. You won’t have extraordinary marches, you don’t have somebody, the oratory, the Martin Luther King, and a number of other great civil rights leaders like Roy Wilkins and James Farmer and such. So I don’t know, in terms of the coverage, how it will turn out. It won’t be like the civil rights movement.

Plus, it's also much harder. The issues are difficult and much more subtle. Martin Luther King said that once, after Voting Rights Act, that it's difficult because now you've got to move from legal desegregation to something more complicated. With integration, you've got to deal with economics, you've got to deal with housing, and put the implementation in effect, the legal side of it. And, that's just much more difficult. Plus, you have to know how to cover it. How do you cover affirmative action? Plus, there's no national black leaders. What passes for a black leader today is, I think is a really pathetic leader in Al Sharpton. How did he come this? He's an activist, a rabble rouser, a glory hound. In the '60s, he would've been dismissed. Nobody would have paid any attention to him. But there are no national black leaders.

Morin: You had said in the panel you didn't think this was a political story at all. I'm curious – why?

Valeriani: Again, that's why I ask how you define politics. The way I define politics is almost in the Washington sense. You take issues, and there's negotiated lobbying, and trying to get certain factions to go your way. Sure, it's ultimately politics in the sense of legislation that was passed, but it's not what I would call a political story. This was an action story. It was an action-oriented story. It had some political overtones and had, obviously, a political outcome. But, it's not what I would describe as a political story.

Morin: How do you assess the overall quality of the coverage, when you look back?

Valeriani: It's hard to define overall. You look at the reporting of some of the people at this symposium – the New York Times, fabulous; Newsweek, fabulous. The Los Angeles Times was first-rate, when they finally got to the story. And, also, I would tell you NBC.

Morin: When you hear the following phrases – for example, you've covered Selma, you've covered Birmingham – what comes to mind immediately? What do you first think of?

Valeriani: Well, Birmingham, there are two things I think of right away. One, the dogs and the hoses. Two, the children's rights. They were criticized for using children, but they were running out of volunteers. And, so it was a tactic that helped them succeed.

Selma obviously was Bloody Sunday. The troopers waded into the marchers to keep them from Montgomery. You asked me earlier what I remembered or what I highlighted. I was there, and that night – there was no Sunday news then, so they had to send an affiliate feed that went out at eleven o'clock. And, so I sent the story out for the affiliate feed. And what I said was, "Dozens of civil rights marchers tried to go from Selma to Montgomery today. They were stopped by

state police, and this is what happened." And then I shut up. We watched the film for, like, a minute – just showing them wading into them, tear gas, beating the hell out of them. And I said, "The marchers say they'll try again." And, I signed off.

Morin: Did you ever have dilemmas that ran through your head, or ethical talks between the photographers or anyone at NBC about what pictures you showed?

Valeriani: As I said, nobody ever really censored me in any way or told me what to put on the air or what not to put on the air. That decision we made essentially from the scene. Now, there was always a problem with a certain editors who'd say to change a word or they didn't like something in the normal editing process. I've always found that part of the process is, if you have a process, you have to apply it. If I hypothetically wrote and produced the perfect story, an editor would want to change something because they're an editor. So, there was always that factor. But, apart from that, no problem. A lot of it was so obvious that you couldn't miss.

Morin: One last question. How did this change you as a person, covering this story?

Valeriani: I don't think that it did. I felt good about the coverage. I thought more of the medium than I did of myself. I'm a reporter. I'm going to go out and do this story. And I thought those of us who did that were part of the coming of age of television news. We became, for the first time, really respected across the land. And, as I say, it had tremendous impact. The stories out of Birmingham, the dogs and the hoses, marching on Bloody Sunday and Selma, and so that our stories, our reporting, putting those pictures on the air, I think were instrumental in changing the law and bringing about change.

Morin: Thank you so much. I could talk to you all day.

Valeriani: Thank you.