

Stewart Meacham  
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Mark Greenberg  
Interviewer

MG This is an interview with Stewart Meacham for the Green Mountain Chronicles on January 19, 1989 interviewed by Mark Greenberg and I'm speaking in Montpelier, Vermont with Stewart Meacham. Okay, why don't we kick it right off with what you were starting to say a few moments ago.

SM Well I was just going to say, I was just starting to say that the Vermont New York Youth Project existed within a context of activities relating to the Civil War, great Civil Rights Movement in the south that began with a project called Vermont and Mississippi in 1961 - '62 which was a community house in Jackson, Mississippi. And that, the group that had, had come together to create the Vermont and Mississippi Project were very strong supporters of Phil Hoff and that network of people concerned was one of, was one of the strong networks that Hoff had run on in 1962 for Governor. And the, it was not surprising that after the events of '67 - '68 in which King and Kennedy had been killed and so on and so forth, the current commission report that the Hoff administration which had always been close to people with these kinds of concerns tried to come up with a response that made sense to the situation that was going on in the country. And it was not surprising either from the point of view of Phil Hoff or from the point of view of Ben Collins who was his closest political aide. So it was, out of the the \_\_\_\_\_ commission report, and all of the things that were going on in the country at that time, that this project evolved. And I think the, the truth is that there were great things to say about the project. The project was both too early and too late. It was too late for the basic feelings that in the white community that had, had gotten it started. It was coming after the, the eruption of the early, of the urban violence and was in a response to it, but was still in the modality that all we had to do was to get together and be equal on the, and the problems would be solved. And there was a kind of sweet naivety about the, about the, about the project that really is quite understandable in historical retrospect. But at that time was not, was not so clear to many of us. And by the second year of the project, it was becoming clearer but there did need to be things like the project. The great tragedy in the United States I suppose is that there weren't projects like the Vermont-New York Youth Project attempted in 15 or 20 states at the time. It may have been that we could have gone through some less, we couldn't go through less agony, but we could go through less difficulty in getting to the point where we now are had there been a wider response of this type. But it was very difficult in both of the years, in the second year particularly. And particularly on the site that I was at.

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MG Okay, let me interrupt for a second, what was your title at that site?

SM I was the, at the, I was at the Saxtons River site and Clarence Ramey was the, was the site director and I was the program director at the project site.

MG And why was that the particularly difficult site, what happened?

SM Well what happened was that...

MG I need one second. Rather than all of the details.

SM Right.

MG You know, summarize them to say.

SM Right. The great problem was that the site was late in getting organized, point number one. And point number two, became the place where other project sites which for one reason or another had not opened, that's where the kids were channeled, so instead of about 150 - 175 kids which is what we thought we were going to have, we wound up with pretty close to 400 kids. And this, this was the largest site and had an age range of from eleven to nineteen. And so we were just, we were really kind of dumped on in a sense and it's I think something of a tribute to ourselves that we were able to get through the summer in as good of shape as we got through and also a tribute to the confidence and courage of Ben Collins who was the overall leader of the Vermont-New York Youth Project to hang in there with us and help us through our difficulties and, and believe in the experience that we were producing there.

MG What, so you were I take it understaffed and over populated and what kinds of problems did that lead to?

SM Well, by the second summer, there, people were beginning to feel confident enough in the project and in the basic goodness of intention of the project to be more themselves. And it was within that confidence that we began to get the expressions of outrage and anger and upsetness that had been somewhat muted in the first summer. And it turned out that Vermont with a population that was, that's as white as anyone in the country, didn't have any quick good answers to that anger. And it needed to be recognized, it needed to be expressed, it, but it wasn't an unrelieved happy experience of all the kids out there together just loving each other. It was tough.

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MG When you say Vermont didn't have a quick answer, what aspect of Vermont are you referring to? That is, was this an internal problem in the site and the program, or was it one that spilled over into the larger community which then responded in a negative fashion?

SM Well both things happened. The, the on sight program, the on campus program had, had, had its problems. And those in fact did spill over into the surrounding community. The surrounding community was uneasy about bringing a bunch of city kids, black city kids up into Vermont. There were even then quite a few people who had moved to Vermont to escape those problems or stayed in Vermont to escape those problems. The Town of Grafton was just a town over from Saxtons River and the Town of Grafton is the town where the last Catholic Church that was burned by the Ku Klux Klan in Vermont, was burned by the Ku Klux Klan in the 1930's. So the idea that everything was fine in Vermont and we knew how to handle all of these questions and the people could just live together and love each other and that was all that was going to be asked of us, was very quickly dispelled. I mean we had people in the river valley there who were extremely nervous and upset about the fact that the project was going on at all and it took great courage, not only for the political leadership of Vermont to back this effort, but it also took great courage for, for the Vermont Academy at Saxtons River to allow us to use their campus and they were not happy about some of the ways in which we ran the project on their campus, but it was something that they hung in there with throughout the summer. Although they had questions from time to time about whether or not they wanted to continue with it.

MG So again for the sake of clarity...

SM Right.

MG ...there of course I think it's very important to separate these threads.

SM Right.

MG There's a community with a history of incidents such as the Ku Klux Klan...

SM Right.

MG ...at Grafton. Being 30 years or so before this project, it's arguable whether there's any residue from, from that incident. It's there historically, so my question I guess is again, did anything happen, actually happen, that would cause the townspeople alarm or was it simply the fact...

SM Well,

MG ...that all of these people were here and they heard about stories on the campus that set off whatever inherent, implicit, hears they had?

SM Well yea. There were things that did happen in town. I mean there were cases of petty shoplifting and one thing and another. What you would get with I suppose any group of, of teenage kids that you pulled at random from the air. And there were some few instances which were marginal of people responding negatively to the black kids. Some of those instances there were maybe a half of dozen or ten of those, of those instances throughout the summer. Some of those instances were responded to very strongly by certain of the black staff members. Terry, the woman that we were talking about before who's in the film was a, was very sensitive to that kind of thing as you can imagine and brought up a couple of the instances. But by enlarge, we got away with it. There wasn't anything that couldn't be handled by going and sitting down and talking with people. And there were, I don't recall anything, I remember there was a, there was an incident with a, with a store in which undoubtedly the storekeeper had noticed stuff gone. The question was always whether or not this particular kid had been the kid involved. And the storekeeper was suspicious of this kid and, and we were a good deal less suspicious of that particular kid, although we were a good deal more suspicious of a couple of others. It was a situation in which people generally in the area were working hard to be on their best behavior. And most of the kids were working hard at it too. But not everybody was working as hard as everybody else.

MG Okay. Stuart, can you give me, give me a synopsis, let's say give me a three to five sentence summary of what brought, of what the problems with the project were in the second year that led to its discontinuance?

SM Well I think of giving you a sort of an avenue into what the major problems, how the major problems evolved in the second year. I would say that they were second year problems. The first year had gone very well, very successfully, been very clean and everyone had a good

experience. Alright, in the second year, there were people who had, who had been there in the first year, there in the second year. They were staff people who had, who were there for the second year. There was a certain level of greater confidence in the situation the second year and that meant that people could be more open. And the result of that was that more deeply held issues came out in the second year than had come out in the first year, more deeply held feelings. And I think that this was particularly true at Saxtons River because of the pressure of the numbers, of everybody being there. The fact that in order to produce the program at all, we had to be much more open and rely much more on each other than had perhaps been true with the, with the more highly organized sort of pattern in the first year. And the thing was, because of these pressures and the need for a greater cooperation, a greater openness, and the greater confidence that people had that they could be themselves. Some of these, some of these things really began to pop loose and when they began to pop loose, when people began to express their anger, when people began to express their disappointment, when people began to, to confront each other, blacks confronting whites with the issue of privilege and, and to do so openly, white folks in the situation began to feel attacked and they were being attacked and begin to wonder what the fabric of a relationship could be. And this was extremely difficult on staff. We had marathons, staff meetings, trying to deal with this. It was very difficult on the kids. Although the kids did better with it basically than the staff folks did, and particularly the younger kids. It was difficult for the school, for the Saxtons River Academy, because they sort of saw this situation of a group of people in, in turmoil and began to wonder whether or not there was going to be a stick or stone of their school left. And by the time the eight weeks were over, which there was, I mean there was, there was some damage but my understanding of it, it wasn't much worse than, than what they experienced in the course of a semester at their school. And, and all of these forces began to interact in ways that had we gone around trying to keep the lid on everywhere, I'm sure would have shredded us very quickly and Clarence and myself took early on, took the attitude that the only thing that we could do would be to try to take this, these explosions and turn them into something positive so that people could communicate with each other and begin to learn the ways in which to do that. But it didn't make a pretty picture Mark to show the rest of the world. There were, there was not in 1968 - '69 a general commitment on the part of the white population of the United States to go through the riggers

of this kind of process to get to the point where black people and white people could live together in this country. And I must say that I think that, I've followed the experience of several of the kids, Vermont kids who were part of this experience and Ken Dean for example who was, has turned out to be a fairly upright citizen, ran the Gary Hart campaign here in Vermont over the years and so on and so forth. It seems to me that, that the kids survived and learned something and have come out and done well with, with the experience. But I don't have any doubt because there were kids who left the site during the, during the project that there were kids who found the, the situation more than they could handle easily. And more than they could handle with a little effort. And I think that, I mean I personally as a program director and a staff member of the project feel badly about those kids and wish that we had been able, we had had conditions under which we could have had a happier time than the time we had. I don't know any of those kids how they turned out to be \_\_\_\_\_ racists you know because of the experience. I just wished we had a better project for them. They deserved a better project and they didn't get it.

MG I need to just say for the record here since this is going on tape, that this is really, this interview is meant as an adjunct to Karen Lane's interview in which you got into a lot of things in detail, so in asking for conciseness or giving you limits, that was a very expansive three to five sentences.

SM Yea.

MG But, so it goes, I'm doing that because I'd like to try to get your own words into certain small spaces in a radio program.

SM Right, right.

MG And so anyone in the future, who might be reading through this and say what to hell is he doing. (LAUGH) That's what I am doing. (LAUGH) So having said that, can you give me, as concisely as possible, what the, what the positive aspect of this program was even in 1969 when it was fraught with all these problems you've just enumerated?

SM I think the, the great benefit of the project was that it gave kids, black kids from New York and white kids from Vermont, an opportunity to really confront each other in a protected situation. It was definitely a cross cultural experience for both sides and I think that on the whole,

85 - 90% of the experience was extremely positive for both sides. And I'm quite certain that it affected deeply all of the kids at the project and I'm sure that, that the experiences although quite strange for many of the kids. I mean you know you got New York kids who've never seen a critter outside of a cockroach and suddenly they're in the countryside and Vermont kids who literally have never seen black people and had been hearing all of this stuff about black people on the television and suddenly there they are in the experience. And I think that it was consistent, the effort was consistent with a great historical commitment on the part of Vermonters for understanding, for between people.

MG Good. Was the, to go back to the difficulties of Saxtons River, were they directly related to lack of, loss of Federal funding for a third year. According to Governor Hoff, there was State funding available, there was private funding available, but the Federal funding which was, from what program, do you know?

SM I don't know.

MG Was it \_\_\_\_\_?

SM I don't know what the, what the, what the Federal funding, I don't know what the funding situation.

MG Okay. In any case, according to Hoff, in fact it was the lack of Federal funding that deep sixed the program for a third year.

SM That's probably true.

MG Okay. In that case, was there a, was that because of the hubbub at Saxtons River or was it due to \_\_\_\_\_?

SM Oh no, oh no, I'm sure it didn't have anything to do with that. The Saxtons River site, there was quite a bit of hubbub, but you know nobody got, no one was physically hurt. You know, no one, it was, it was, the school wasn't burned down. I mean it was, it was an extraordinary hubbub in interpersonal relations. But, on the whole, I think it was very positive. And not without its, not without its casualties, but, but a positive thing and I'm sure that that didn't have anything to do with it.

MG Okay. Did the media follow what was going on?

SM Well the media was, was pretty sympathetic. The media did report tensions in the project and surrounding the project. But I would not say that the media was the main problem. The, the media to the extent that it had any position whatsoever, I would say on the whole tried to, tried to help the project as much as it could. It, you know, if, there might have been one or two pointedly negative stories coming out of the thing, but, but really the, the way in which negativity was expressed in the media was much more generalized and much more people's fears and usually people not closely related with the project.

MG One final thing that was stated at the ceremonies on Monday and Governor Hoff has said it both in his interview with Karen and my later interview with him, and you've confirmed this also in your interview with Karen that this project really was critical in bringing about his political downfall as it were in his race for the Senate in I guess it was 1972.

SM 1970 I think.

MG 1970.

SM Yea, yea.

MG He wasn't entirely sure.

SM Right. I think it was '70.

MG Okay, that works a little better in terms of the time frame.

SM Right.

MG The question then is: To what do you attribute that, what was it about the project that took away those votes that were so critical?

SM Well I think, I, you see, I think that, that any political establishment is a coalition of forces. And in this particular case, the Civil Rights part of the Hoff coalition was very strong, but it was a little bit like the free, the Nuclear Freeze Movement. It could be perhaps even the strongest single element in an establishment, but it's not the only element in an establishment. And there were people who really felt that this was not a proper use of public policy in Vermont. And I don't want to characterize those people as racists, I don't think they are racists by enlarge. I think that



they were wrong, I think that they, I would wish that they were more open and openhanded than they are. But they're not and they're good people and upright. They're not, they're not like some of my relative in Alabama who you know still, would go back to the old way if there was a way to get back to the old way. But they, they disagreed with this initiative. And I think that, that the Governor's campaign for the Senate suffered from their having less than strong feelings for him coming out of this. And a feeling rather, rather strongly on the other hand that this was a little bit flaky and something that he shouldn't have done.

MG So again as with the question about Federal funding, you, it sounds to me like you relate that loss of support or lack of support to the, to people's reaction to the overall project, it's conception, the way it was partially State funded, etc., rather than to specific incidents, whether they were \_\_\_\_\_?

SM Oh, I think that's true, I think that's true. In fact, I think if people, the Saxtons River site was a particular situation in which we had more kids and less time and money than we might have had, you know all things being equal. But that happens in any, in almost any kind of camp program from time to time you have those kinds of difficulties. The, the overall experience, the experience in Ripton, the experience at Windham College, the experience elsewhere, was much smoother than the Vermont Academy site could be. But people were as upset, those who were upset were as upset about Ripton as they were about you know any other, any other place, so that I don't think that, there were certainly no great explosion at, at Saxtons River that did the project in. And as a matter of fact, I think Mike \_\_\_\_\_ son is working on the staff of Patrick Leahy which means that the headmaster of the school did not immediately turn to other political (LAUGH), other political parties and camps you know because of this experience. I mean, you know, it was, there were problems. We certainly didn't do everything right. That was, that was for sure, but we did everything the best we could do it.

MG That's good, that really helps me fit all these different elements together.

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SM Yea.

MG One last thing that I have to do if we just sit quietly as  
I have to get the sound of the room for about a minute.

SM Uh huh.