

Interview with **Frances Belser**

November 6, 1979

Birmingham, Alabama

Interviewer: Judy Richardson

Production Team: N/A

Camera Rolls: 7-8

Sound Rolls: 1138-1139

Interview gathered as part of *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*. Produced by Blackside, Inc. Housed at the Washington University Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.

**Preferred Citation**

Interview with Frances Belser, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on November 6, 1985, for *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*. Washington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.

**Note:** These transcripts contain material that did not appear in the final program. Only text appearing in *bold italics* was used in the final version of *Eyes on the Prize*.

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[camera roll 7]

[sound roll 1138]

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: CAN YOU JUST GIVE ME YOUR SENSE OF WHAT IT WAS LIKE—WHAT YOU FELT LIKE BEFORE THE BOYCOTT WHEN YOU HAD TO RIDE THE BUSES?

Belser: Oh, before riding, before the boycott, riding the buses, to me was, well, we just really felt like second class citizens, and I say that because it made us feel so in—harassments that we received. There have been numerous of times that I had tr-, have tried to board the bus, especially during the Friday and Saturdays, when the rush was so very—I mean so many people in town at that particular time. And we couldn't enter the front door, you know, we always had to be—after so would get on in the front and they had the side seats and the first four or five seats were for whites only, and therefore when those people got up to that distance on the bus, then they would start—just like we were a bunch of cows, cattle or anything, and you know, lettin' us get in from the side, the rear door. And after it was filled to capacity then, they would just—you have already paid your money at the front door, but they just—you just had to get on the bus or either they'd just go on and leave and you're standing there and if—whether you had another bus fare or not, you were just stranded. And so naturally when anybody—that, that, that they felt very harassed about it

and you couldn't do anything about it and then there have been times that I have been insulted highly on the bus. I remember I had a, a babysitting job out in the, the white area and so many mornings in getting on the bus, I would get downtown where I would have to transfer to the bus. This was in 1948, I can remember it very much when I just really had it out with the bus driver on the bus. I refused to move then. He said to me—there wasn't anyone on the bus, there was about three or four white women who'd got on the bus, you know, they worked at the state capital and where we were transferring to down there, all the people standing up, so many of them were just standing up and just pushed together, just like so many times some people's pocketbooks would be clipped, their groceries would be taken off the bus when other people would get off, you know, because it was so crowded you couldn't attend to all the things you really had to do. And this particular morning, there wasn't that many on the bus—white people, as I say, there was that whole front sec—area up there and there wasn't—there was, if I can remember, there were two white women on the bus at that time. And there were ten or twelve available seats for us to sit, but it was just so crowded, so very crowded until we just were like, just like sardines I would say [laughs]. And, so this bus, this motorman told me—I, I was sitting where the sign start, you know, colored and white and I was sitting right in that ar-, on that seat and he told me I was still violating the law. I said well if I'm violating the law, it's just going to be violated this morning because I am not going to move. I said, now all those seats are vacant and we'd just had it, you know, and he got up and at that particular time, I think Truman, that was in '48, and so Truman had talked about, you know, civil rights was kind of coming in and he started bringing that up, you know, what you think, this will never reach it here and that—and I refused to get up. And I told him that if I had to get up, I would get off and then I would call the people that I had to go to and let them know, maybe they could do something about it since we couldn't, you know—I, I never was a coward, but I just tried to obey the rules and regulations of our city government on things like that. So, naturally, I was harassed so many times until, if I'd had the money to the time, at that time, we weren't getting anything for our labor, so we just couldn't all hardly always afford taxis, so I think that we had a very, very good reason to boycott the buses and I feel that's the reason we did as much as we could and we felt as good as we could, you know, after we did boycott because we were highly mistreated here on the buses. And I have seen them really strike men, you know, sometime it would, would, would, would frighten you because you don't know what might would happen, you know. Some of 'em temper might would grow and—they couldn't do that now. I have seen them just eject one man, slap them and then—

[cut]

[wild audio]

Belser: —pulled him off the bus 'cause he was standing close to, to [laughs] a white ri-, an area where the white people were. He couldn't move back, that was what was so very bad. He said, I can't get back 'cause it was—all the rest of 'em were just, you know, pushing and so he couldn't get back. And then I have seen colored women beat up white men on [laughs] the bus. One particular one that sam-, that same area. This wo-, this, she stepped up on—

00:04:53:00

INTERVIEWER: CAN YOU JUST HOLD ON THERE JUST A SEC...

Belser: Mmm-hmm.

INTERVIEWER: OK?

[cut]

00:04:56:00

[slate]

[change to camera roll 8]

INTERVIEWER: ... WAS TALKING ABOUT WHEN A BLACK WOMAN WOULD  
SOMETIMES...

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: BEAT UP...

Belser: Oh [laughs]

INTERVIEWER: [inaudible]

Belser: Yes, it would be so—I mean, we—I guess they were tired and they'd know they were goin' to work and this—some, probably this man had worked all night somewhere downtown and when she got on the bus, she stepped up on the bus. They didn't even want you to get on board the bus ahead of them and when she stepped up to get on the bus, he, he had little enough sense to pull her back off, you see. And when she did, she was—see, then he got on and he succeeded in getting on before her, but when she got on, she had her umbrella and she whammed him every way she could [laughs] and the bus driver, he looked around, but then he saw the anger that's on, you know, her face, so he just didn't say anything in this particular incident. Well, we all laughed, we was—that was just about a two or three days after I had been so—asked to move, and I refused to move, you know, from that particular seat that morning. So, we'd always say, well now, I guess he got it back for how they had treated this poor colored man that once—there, you know, they beat him and made him get off the bus because he couldn't move, he couldn't, he couldn't get out of the way of these particular—that little bunch of white people and he'd been working hard all day and I really felt sorry for him. It's really, it—if this thing hadn't have happened, I don't believe we could've just went on. As much—in this particular buses in this area, this is the Washington Park area, and this is the bus where we had so many problems 'cause so many people ride 'em. And then, after the—if you, according to the [unintelligible] after the bus boycott was over, well, that particular morning, when they asked us to stay off the bus, I don't re—they say there was just one black woman that rode the bus. And I mean for at least six weeks, two

or three months, I don't know what it was, those buses drove without anybody on them. And they couldn't absolutely stay in business with the white people that was on it. And then, I think it might have frightened some of the white people that was ridin' not to ride it 'cause they didn't know whether they'd be harassed or what might would happen to them, you know, riding through this particular area and a few that were once living in this particular area at that time. So they just had to just absolutely just close down the bus. We kept it shut down until—I, I, I think for at least ten months.

00:07:16:00

INTERVIEWER: DID YOU THINK THAT BLACK FOLKS WOULD REALLY CARRY IT THROUGH? DID YOU THINK THEY'D ACTUALLY BOYCOTT AND...?

Belser: No, I didn't to start with. But that morning, when they didn't, I think this was an, an incentive for so many people to be at that first mass meeting because they—that bus went totally—I didn't see any, they rode by on that particular morning, I was up, I just decided I would get up 'cause *the bus passed right down in front of my house, you know, and I got up to see it and several buses passed. I was late for work because I was trying to see how many buses was empty, and they were totally empty.* This particular woman that rode the bus, I think she rode the Cleveland Avenue bus, which was in another area and they say she rode it for a while until she was harassed quite a bit about ridin' it, but we—right away, people started sending money from everywhere and our, our church was one church that had a bus—I mean a station wagon and they set up, they had a regular set up of Alabama State, I think, college, they, they—Dr. Simms was over there, I believe, over this dispatching and we would have dispatchers here in the morning in our church and other, some of the other churches would dispatch those rides and they'd stay downtown and us—oh, they were giving you tickets for everything, you know. Traffic officers and all would just—it was easy to get a ticket and you didn't have to violate no law, but we just stayed—and so many people walked. And that particular time, I had just had some dental work [laughs] done the Saturday before, and I walked from this church downtown. I had to go several times to the dentist 'cause I was having quite a bit of extractions and dental work done. So, I'd get out there and walk to town. Cold day.

00:08:57:00

INTERVIEWER: HOW MANY MILES?

Belser: Well, just think from here, I guess it's three or four miles, but I'd walk down there and walk back, [laughs] and then I'd—if I got a chance, you see, if you could catch a ride from here in the morning, but mostly they were dispatching those people. People didn't lose their jobs and it was surprising at how many white people really came and picked up their, their maids, you know, but those that were working and had to depend on that and didn't have transportation, they were at least nine, I think, or ten churches that had the buses—I mean these station wagons and they were very good about getting people back and forth to work in all areas.

00:09:37:00

INTERVIEWER: WHAT WAS THAT FIRST MASS MEETING LIKE?

Belser: Oh, I don't know, I can't hardly describe—we were in meetin' here, as I say, I was secretary of the church then and every—on the first, on the Monday after the first Sunday, we were always having our general mission meeting and we were downstairs and we didn't know it was going to be nothing like that. And pretty soon they just started coming in from every direction, there was—we—all the chairs that we had in the church like this, we were settin' them up everywhere, the balcony was full and they asked us—we had a sound system that went all over the church and we told some people they could go up on—in the Educational building upstairs there and then all—we didn't have this part of it, but all downstairs where the nursery school is, it was filled to capacity. And then people—it was filled to capacity on the streets. I—we had to have the streets blocked off because there wasn't anything they, they—I'd say they called here and told us to cut off the loudspeaker—we turned on the loudspeaker to make it go on the outside. And it was a bitter cold night. It was one of the coldest nights that we had as I remember it so being, and I was the one that was forced on the outside, there wasn't nowhere on the [laughs] inside. I was in there and I didn't know that, I just didn't know that it was gonna, you know, have a magnitude to what it did and so I called myself going home 'cause my children were very young yet, you know, and I didn't want to stay away from 'em, but when the—when I saw the excitement, I just fell right in. And this church carried that mass meeting like that for several weeks and then we started going to a oth—larger churches here, but it was just surprising as many as we, we, we really, at that particular time, we were harassed. The White Citizens' Council, they had at that time would call here so numerous times through the day and I wouldn't repeat some of the insulting words they'd say to us, you know, but we, we had to be strong 'cause....

00:11:29:00

INTERVIEWER: WHY DO YOU THINK PEOPLE MAINTAINED IT? WHY DID BLACK FOLKS SUSTAIN THE BOYCOTT ALL THAT TIME?

Belser: Well, I guess it was time and then I—as I say, if you were harassed as much as that, I mean, and, and, and all of us felt the, the treatments of the, the, the white power structure here until it was, was easy for me, and I don't know about anybody else, but I feel, felt—I think that I voiced the sentiment of them too because it was—I was just so—I just felt that I was doing it for one of the greatest causes, I just had faith enough to know that before it was ended we were gonna enjoy some freedom of ridin' where we could, I mean sittin' where we could on the buses, and I feel like every person, especially that age—at that time I was kind of middle aged, well I wasn't even middle aged [laughs], but I'm saying that I had some little ones there and I'm just so glad when they got grown then they were able to enjoy more freedom than we were, you know, such, it's such a thing as, you know, making footprints on the sand in time and I think this is what this boycott did. I really do. I think that it had as—a great impact on our society.

00:12:45:00

INTERVIEWER: AND WHAT WAS THAT LAST—WHEN, WHEN YOU FOUND OUT THAT YOU'D WON, WHAT DID YOU FEEL LIKE?

Belser: Oh, boy, the elation that morning, I was just—when I read it in the paper that we had this, we had won and the next morning, those buses was rollin'. Dr. King, I think Reverend Wilson and all of 'em, they went downtown, they rode the bus—they, they had, you know, getting on the bus and we just felt so very good. Well, I, the first time I got on there, I don't like those side seats [laughs] but—and to tell you another thing that they had learned, they put the, the most segregated minded bus drivers on—they were so poor and they went through so much, I guess, poverty, durin' the time that they weren't, you know, ridin' the bu—they weren't bus drivers, and they had no other alternative, so some of those same drivers that had harassed us so much, they got their jobs back and they put all those hard, poor, you know, segregationists in the predominately black areas, at that time there was nothin' but black areas and they had to take it and the one that harassed me so much, I almost [laughs] wanted to sit dow—I sat so close to him on the bus 'til I was leanin' over to be lean back this way [laughs]. He probably would've told me I did that because I was just so elated. And we encouraged all of us—they said, now don't go to the back seat, sit up on the front seat, you know, if any of them come in and they don't want to sit by—let them stand, you know. We weren't doin' it out of, and I don't think I've had any just try to get back, but we appreciated being—what the federal government did for us. And we had, had, had struggle and stayed together throughout and walked in rain and it was a hard winter too. We really struggled, that was a hard, cold winter if I remember those three or four months of it and, and in the summer time it was equally as hot and so, you know, to start it in December the 5<sup>th</sup>, 1955 and I don't know exactly when it ended, but it was over a year [laughs] 'fore we first got in there. I can't get the date for that right, we will always remember the date that it got started, right here. And I, I had a—I was so elated if I could've gotten—confess mostly if I'd be off all day, I'd've rode the bus all day long [laughs]. That was just how elated I was. [laughs]

00:15:12:00

INTERVIEWER: I WANT TO THANK YOU.

Belser: All right.

[cut]

[wild audio]

INTERVIEWER: THANKS VERY MUCH. VERY NICE.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:15:17:00

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