Interview with **Bernie Schweid**
November 5, 1985
Nashville, Tennessee
Production Team: B
Camera Rolls: 328-329
Sound Rolls: 1314-1315

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 Bernie Schweid, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on November 5, 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.*

00:00:33:00

[camera roll 328]

[sound roll 1314]

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: MARK.

Schweid: Nashville.

INTERVIEWER: HOLD ON ONE SECOND.

Schweid: Oh, sorry.

INTERVIEWER: OK. SO TELL ME ABOUT NASHVILLE AND THE PEOPLE THERE.

Schweid: Nashville is a, basically, a re—they call a small town. Most people thought they knew most everybody else and there's a lot of personal feeling. The town, at that time, was still a city that was—had hardly annexed any of its suburbs and it was all before all this metropolitan government that came and doubled, doubled the size of the population in the area of the city. So in those days, it was much smaller. Downtown was a quarter of the shopping area. Suburban centers were just beginning, weren't in full bloom yet. And you just had a feeling of, of everything was quite personal and small. The town was run by some powerful pe—business people who wanted to carry—keep it the way it was. They really,

unlike say Atlanta, they didn't go out scrounging around real hard to get new business, new industry ‘cause that would upset their control and also raise wages, they felt, and would make it not as economical for the way they wanted it. So that's the way the town was.

00:01:53:00

INTERVIEWER: LET ME TALK TO YOU ABOUT THE PEOPLE OF NASHVILLE AND, AND THE IDEA THAT IN THAT, THAT TRADITIONAL SMALL TOWN THEY CARED MORE ABOUT EACH OTHER AND PER—THINGS OF PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP KIND OF THING.

Schweid: I think that was the main thing in your relations with people, is that, if they liked you, they would be willing to overlook some eccentricities and there were some eccentric, and always had been, some real eccentric people here. Sort of like you find maybe in England. And I'm not—you could have certain views that didn't agree with whether it was on race or politics or whatever and you could discuss it without getting in any great personal dislike or threats or things like that. There were some people who were really extreme and they might, you know, not—say I'll never do business with you anymore or something like that. But, I think, that wasn't as widespread as a lot of business people seem to fear. I don't think people take that all into so much account least down here. And if they liked you as a person, I think, that was the main thing. You could talk about things and the, the personal relationship was the main business. I think the—a lot of black people were, were—you had dealings with ‘em all the time. It wasn't like up north where you were so that separated. You were constantly in contact with each other. And it was sort of a paternalistic feeling. But there was this sort of strange kind of love that existed between, in many cases, between the races.

00:03:27:00

INTERVIEWER: NOW, OK, IN 1960 THE, THE SIT-INS STARTED THE PROTESTS STARTED. WERE THEY TAKEN SERIOUSLY IMMEDIATELY OR—

Schweid: Well, probably not, by most people—

INTERVIEWER: SAY—YOU GOT TO—TELL ME WHAT I’M TALKING ABOUT

Schweid: ***Most people did not take the sit-ins too seriously at the beginning because they felt, well, you know, these are not, these are outside, these are agitators, these are students that have come from New York and other places and they're not the one, they're not our, Negroes. Our Negroes are happy. They're well off, and we know them, and we'd even sometimes ask, you know, some of these people would ask their maid or something, I mean, this is a joke? You know? And the maid would say, oh, I don't pay no attention to ‘em. No-good trash. And then she'd leave and she’d go off to the NAACP meeting.*** I mean, this was Harry Golden’s story. But I don't think there was a great understanding of the seriousness of what was going on by most of the white people in, in Nashville when its, when all this began. It took a while for it to really sink in.

00:04:32:00

INTERVIEWER: WHAT, WHAT EVENT? DID ANY ONE EVENT—

Schweid: I don't know if there was one event that made it sink in. What made it sink in for the retailers, those the ones that I knew best being a retailer myself, you know, and I was on Church Street then in the main part of downtown Nashville. ***When it hits, starts to hit your pocketbook, then you realize, hey, this is serious.*** And, you know, all of a sudden there was a pretty effective boycott that the black people were having and that didn't mean you didn't have any blacks come into the store, but there weren't many. And ***then there was some violence. Blacks and some sympathetic whites were hit over the head by these blond-headed hoods that seemed to come out of the sewer for such occasions. And those who were standing in line in a movie or trying to get into a restaurant or cafeteria, they were very hurt and this created a, a fear so that then white people started to be afraid to come to sh-, shop, too.*** And, so, ***the merchants were getting it from both sides.*** And there was very, very little traffic. One merchant, who wasn't sympathetic with the boycott, said to me, you can roll a bowling ball down Church Street and not hit anybody these days. And this was on a Saturday which used to be the big day for shopping for everybody. So there's a lot of fear in the air. ***And that was the main feeling I remember about those times, I fear.*** Some of the older blacks were afraid of some of the younger blacks. What they were doing. They thought they were trying to go too fast. Some of the young ones afraid they're gonna be put in jail and then the whites afraid and the businessmen afraid their business were going bankrupt.

00:06:11:00

INTERVIEWER: NOW. LOBY'S [sic] HOUSE, LOOBY'S HOUSE IS BOMBED. WHAT DOES THAT, WHAT DOES THAT DO TO YOU?

Schweid: Well, when that—there's always seems like there's always an event like that that sets things into motion. You know, when Looby's house was bombed it just seemed to be like one of those milestones. One of those events and when those things happen it seems terrible, at the time, and, it is terrible, but sometimes it creates a new situation where something else has to move in to take its place and this was, I guess, one of those occasions. Alexander Looby, he was the man who was the leader who—of the blacks. He was defending the kids and he was a symbol. And when this happened, the so-called respectful whites, they couldn't say, hey, he you know, he deserved this for it. ‘Cause he was not—he was an older man and, I think, it didn't make every—all the white people say, hey we gotta, we gotta do something about this. We gotta integrate the lunch rooms and let 'em in the movies and this kind of thing. It didn't do that, but it did—it couldn’t come out and say, well, I sympathize with the bombing like that. It was something that—I had a black friend I called at—next day and he said, you wait. Something good'll [sic] come out of this. This is terrible, but this is gonna be the beginning of something.” And, I think that bombing was.

INTERVIEWER: OK. CUT.

00:07:32:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

INTERVIEWER: WHAT I'D LIKE TO TALK ABOUT NEXT IS—

00:07:34:00

[cut]

INTERVIEWER: —I'D LIKE TO GET TO THAT MOMENT—

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: —WHEN THE MERCHANTS DOWNTOWN FINALLY DECIDE THAT THEY HAVE TO DESEGREGATE. I WANT YOU TO TELL ME WHAT, WHAT IT IS THAT MAKES THEM MOVE THAT WAY?

Schweid: Business got worse and worse over this period of the boycott and with the violence that was going on and everything else there wasn't hardly anybody coming into town. Finally, the students had a large, another—maybe the largest march yet, where they went down and confronted Mayor Ben West. Now Mayor Ben West was a really consummate politician, but, I think, basically, on this issue he was a decent man. And, when he was asked, I think it was by Diane Nash, you know, said, you really think that merchants in town should sell things to people and then not let 'em sit at a lunch counter or try on dresses or whatever, this-'n'-that? He said, well, he thought about it and he said, in my heart I have to say I think that's wrong. And that seemed to be kind of a, a turning point, because I think the merchants, who were afraid to move on their own, were almost looking for an excuse for—say, well, if that's what the Mayor thinks then we oughta [sic] go ahead. Because it's very hard for most, most everybody-it's, it's—in—a merchant wants to make money and they're afraid to change things or do something different 'cause it could hurt their business. And this is a thing they think about and people worry a lot about—have fears of stuff that never come to pass. And this is true that people that travel abroad or anything else are always afraid of something foreign. And so, here, this was an excuse they had. It kind of—the time just all seemed to come together and they decided to go ahead and start integrating some of the lunch counters and then the skies didn't fall in when that happened.

INTERVIEWER: OK. I WOULD LIKE YOU TO JUST TO RESPOND TO A COUPLE OF—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: I THINK YOU BETTER RELOAD.

INTERVIEWER: OK.

[cut]

00:09:33:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: SECOND STICKS.

[sync tone]

Schweid: I think it’d be safe, but you might want to check it out for sure.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: YEAH.

Somebody like, probably, George Barrett would know.

INTERVIEWER: OK. I’D, I'D LIKE TO TAKE YOU BACK TO '60 AGAIN.

Schweid: OK.

INTERVIERWER: OK. WERE IN—THIS IS ABOUT MARCH, 1960. AND THE ARRESTS—THIS IS THE FIRST MASS ARREST OF STUDENTS AND THEY’RE PLACED OUT TO SHOVEL SNOW. TALK TO ME ABOUT THAT AND WHAT EFFECT THAT HAD ON JUST THE WHITE COMMUNITY AND, AND, AND PEOPLE IN NASHVILLE, AT THAT TIME, SEEING THESE STUDENTS ARRESTED AND OUT THERE SHOVELING SNOW AND WORKING LIKE THAT.

Schweid: I think, you know, most people just don't get too involved in that and in taking a stand when something like that happens. It's—when, when some—like the students getting arrested en mass unless you've seen it—were there and saw, you know, these white hoods digging cigarette butts into black kids who are sitting there and got shocked by that. Most people, they read about it in the paper but they go on with their lives and, I, I think, it wasn't—didn't have all that great an impact. As this thing continued and violence escalated then people started to realize it wasn't gonna go away.

00:10:51:00

INTERVIEWER: WAS IT WHEN THE VI—VIOLENCE CONTINUED WAS THERE, WAS THERE CONCERN THAT IT WASN'T GOING TO GO AWAY OR WAS THERE A CONCERN FOR YOUR COMMUNITY? WAS— DID IT BECOME A COMMUNITY-TYPE THING, CONCERN?

Schweid: I don't recall any cohesive community concern about the sit-ins. There, there was, of course, there were certain, you know, small group of liberals that you always find who would make resolutions for integration and against the violence and things like this. But any widespread community concern, I don't think it really came up until folks, a lot of people, find their pocketbooks were hit and the economic thing, I believe, was stronger than the fact that maybe some people quietly thought, you know, this is against their religious beliefs or it

was immoral or something along that line. People—it seems like people don't give up stuff until they almost have to. Till some supreme violence or an economic hardship forces them to do it.

00:11:59:00

INTERVIEWER: OK. TALK TO ME ABOUT THE NEWS AND TV AND THE PAPERS HERE. JUST THE FACT THAT THE COVERAGE AND HOW THAT HAD AN EFFECT ON, ON EITHER ESCALATING THE VIOLENCE OR RESOLVING THE SITUATION.

Schweid: I think that the, as I recall, the news media might have been a little slow to get in on this, but—and pick it up and they were a little reluctant to, but when they got into it, I think, it had a tremendous impact. And they did eventually. There were rival papers with different outlooks and TV, although it didn't have the impact it does today, was still—it had a—it was visually effecting people and, I think, eventually it built up and did have a lot of impact.

INTERVIEWER: OK. LET'S CUT.

[cut]

00:12:48:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: I'M SORRY, I DIDN'T REALIZE YOU WANTED TO ROLL.

INTERVIEWER: NO I DIDN'T. I WASN'T SURE.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: I WAS TAKING NOTES.

INTERVIEWER: OK.

Schweid: When the sit-in movement started here—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: BERNIE, I'M GONNA HAVE TO HAVE YOU START THAT OVER AGAIN AND—RIGHT THERE. THERE YOU GO.

Schweid: When the sit-in movement began here in Nashville I don't think many people realized this was part of a great—gonna be a great outburst nationally. They thought this was something that was happening because of the students here, the radical students at Fisk and A&I, and it was a—it wasn't until, maybe, the white paper came, an NBC, and they saw we're part of a national news and the impact it had that a lot of folks here realized there was more than that. Course there were always certain people that had worked here. You have to realize white—some whites had worked here in race relations all their lives and so they knew, but the vast majority were like everywhere tuned in on their own families, problems,

and business, and things like that. They didn't take any such broad outlook about it. It was only the inconvenience that it caused them.

INTERVIEWER: OK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: THAT'S A CUT?

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:14:06:00