Interview with **Virginia Durr**
February 21, 1986
Production Team: A
Camera Rolls: 202-205
Sound Rolls: 1151-1152

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 Virginia Durr, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on February 21, 1986, for *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*. Washington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.

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[camera roll 202]

[sound roll 1151]

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: OK, ROLL SOUND. HALF FLAGS.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: LOOKING TO HAVE YOU DESCRIBE FOR US MONTGOMERY IN THE 1950s. A TYPICAL SEGREGATED CITY.

Durr: Well, you realize, I had been gone from Montgomery since 19—I'd been gone from Alabama since 1933. And we didn't go back until 1951, and so at that time Montgomery hadn't changed at all. It was just exactly as it was in the beginning. It was absolutely segregated and everybody took it for granted and the thing that I have to tell you and anybody truthful will have to tell you is that ***if you were born into a system that's wrong, whether it's a slave system or, or whether it's a segregated system, you take it for granted. And, I was born into a system that was segregated, and denied blacks the right to vote, also denied women the right to vote. And, I took it for granted. Nobody told me any different. Nobody, said*** that ***it was strange or unusual,*** or it ***wasn't like other states.*** And it really wasn't until I got to Washington that I began to realize how varied—a bunch of variance we were with the rest of the country and how very wrong the system was. So Montgomery, when I came back to it, it was like going back into my past, if you know what I mean.

00:01:33:00

INTERVIEWER: HOW, HOW WOULD YOU DESCIRBE THE WAY BLACKS AND WHITE INTERACTED UNDER SEGREGATION?

Durr: Well, they reacted, the same way, you know, they reacted for forever. I mean in two different ways on a personal basis a, [coughs] a black woman or white woman would be very friendly and they would talk to each other and be, you know, very friendly indeed, but then that would be on a personal basis. But then when it came to a basis of the status it'd be the white woman that would give the orders or pay the salary and it would be the black woman that would be the servant or the maid in the house. And that was almost all the jobs they had, the black women, were maids and servants. There was not much industry and very little for them to do other than that. And Mrs. Parks, of course, had a job as a seamstress at a department store. And she did work in the, for, you know, there and she made twenty-three dollars a week and that was considered a pretty good salary for a woman. And then she earned that twenty-three dollars a week she lived in a public housing project and she had a sick mother and her husband was sick a lot. And how she ever did it, I don't know, but she sewed at night and then she sewed on the weekends as well to make ends meet.

00:03:10:00

INTERVIEWER: DID MRS—YOU WERE FRIENDS WITH MRS. PARKS. SHE, SHE WORKED FOR YOU SOMETIMES?

Durr: Well, we were friends indeed. I knew her in two different capacities. Mr. E.D. Nixon, who was the head of the NAACP, used to bring my husband clients a lot. P, People who had been beat up by the police or cheated by the loan sharks or any variety of things. And so through Mr. Nixon we met Mrs. Parks who was the secretary of the NAACP. And she—I was saying to Mr. Nixon one time that I had so much trouble having time, I was my husband's secretary in his law office, getting all these clothes fixed for my daughters. I had three daughters. And my sister, who married Hugo Black, had a daughter and very—[coughs] sent her clothes to my daughters [laughs] which was very nice for her to do and it helped a great deal but the thing was it all needed taken in or up or down so he said well Mrs. Parks sews at night and on the weekends. And so I went to see her and took her some clothes and took her some daughters and we—they, they, she fixed the clothes for them and I'd often stay and help her. And then Mrs. Parks was really a lovely woman. She was well-educated. She'd been to Ms. White's school, you know, which is a very famous school which had been started by a New England Congregationalist after the Civil War was over and it was the schools especially for black women. So she was very well-educated but also being, in addition to being well educated, she'd also been taught by these New England old maids most of whom came from Boston, by the way, in this area that she was an American citizen and that she had the rights of an American citizen and she learned that and she felt it very strongly.

00:05:13:00

INTERVIEWER: DID SHE EVER TALK TO YOU ABOUT HER DISPLEASURE AT THE BUS SYSTEM?

Durr: Oh my. See that's one of the things she talked about all the time not quite often. Because—

INTERVIEWER: COULD I ASK YOU TO STATE, THE BUSES WERE?

Durr: Well, the buses, you see, were segregated in a, in this manner. If you were black you got on in the front and paid your money then you had to get off and run around and enter the back. And then you seated from the back the blacks did. The whites seated from the front. But when they got to that sort of indeterminate area in the middle of the bus where—then the blacks were supposed to get up and move back and it was that, after they'd paid their money, and it was that that was made her so angry. And it was that here she would pay her money and get on the bus and after a long day's work and then the driver would just turn back and say, nigger move back. Well she felt it was very humiliating and degrading and also, she's a very gentle woman, but it made her very, very angry. And she never plotted a plan on this particular day to defy the law, as it was, but she was just absolutely worn out with doing it, getting up and giving somebody her seat, so she refused. And, and she was arrested and taken to jail and then Mr. Nixon, who was head of the NAACP, [coughs] he was a great friend to Mrs. Parks and a great friend of my husband's and mine too, he called my husband and said that he called down to the jail and they said she was arrested but they wouldn't tell him what she'd been arrested for. So I—he, he said he'd come by and take my husband down to the jail and they'd see if they could get her out. And, and now the lawyer for the NAACP was Fred Grey who was a very bright young fellow who had just graduated from Ohio State, but he was out of town. So then Mr. Nixon called my husband, who was friendly, and we went down to the jail and, [coughs] and they—Mr. Nixon paid her bond and Mr. Doug got her out of, you know, legal, whatever it was that she had to sign. And she was arrested for breaking the segregation law of, you know, the city. And, now this was not a state law it was a city law. And so we took her home, she came down behind the bars with the matron, you know, holding on to her, she wasn't in handcuffs, and we came and took her home and she told my husband then that she wanted to take the case up to the Supreme Court. And so he told her well it's gonna cost a fortune and you gonna have to get the NAACP to pay for it. So they did get the NAACP to pay for it and Judge Carter from here in Boston, who is a federal judge, came down from the NAACP to help Fred Grey on the case, but my husband also helped 'em too. He worked on the case although he wasn't on record. But the Judge Carter is a very—do you know him?

INTERVIEWER: YES IN FACT WE'VE INTERVIEWED HIM. WE, WE—I JUST WANT TO MAKE A CHECK HERE ON THE, ON THINGS TECHNICALLY—

00:08:43:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

Durr: —wrong indeed. She's a wonderful person.

INTERVIEWER: SHE LOOKS QUITE WELL.

00:08:49:00

[cut]

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: FLAGS.

Durr: Yeah she looks better than she did a few years back.

INTERVIEWER: NOW—

Durr: Well, well—

INTERVIEWER: I'M WON—I'M WONDERING HOW WHITE MONTGOMERY REACTED TO THE NEWS OF THAT VERY FIRST DAY OF THE BOYCOTT. DID THEY THINK IT WAS NOTHING IMPORTANT?

Durr: Well, it was, you know a matter of great concern it was on the front pages of the paper and, but ***there's a strange thing that happened, was a kind of a play between white women and black women.*** In that none of the white women wanted—***the*** older ***mayor of the town*** issued a-, all the black maids had to be dismissed. Break the boycott and such. Well the thing is that white women didn't want and their reply was well tell the mayor to come and, you know, do my work for me then, etc. ***So, the white women*** would all—is the black women, you know, they, they ***went and got them in the car,*** which they did. ***They said they did it because the bus had broken down*** or ***any excuse you could possibly think of.*** And then the black women if you pick one of them up who was walking they'll tell you that they were walking because the lady that brought to work with her child was sick so here was this absurd sort of, you know, dance going on. The white women wanting the black maids and the mayor of the ci-, city wanting them to refuse to, to ride 'em back and forth. And of course a lot of them did walk but then a lot of them couldn't walk it was just too far. And it was such a curious kind of—I saw a woman that worked for my mother-in-law and I, she, they were asking her, do any of your family take part in the boycott? She said, no, ma'am, they don't have anything to do with the boycott at all. Said, my brother-in-law he has a ride every morning and my sister in law she comes home with somebody else—

00:11:00:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

Durr: —and they just stay off the bus and don't have nothing to do with it. [laughs] And so when we got, got out of the room I said to Mary, I said, you know, you have been really the most biggest [sic] storyteller in the world, you know, everybody in your family is involved in the boycott. And she says, well, you know, when you have your hand in the lion's mouth the best thing to do is pat it on the head.

INTERVIEWER: [laughs]

Durr: Always thought it was a wonderful phrase, when you have your hands in the lion's mouth.

INTERVIEWER: IS THAT THE ROLL?

00:11:30:00

[cut]

[slate]

[change to camera roll 203]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: HALF FLAGS.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: MARK.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: TWENTY SECONDS

INTERVIEWER: WHY DO YOU THINK THAT, THAT, THAT, THAT IT WAS THAT THE WHITE WOMEN WERE WILLING TO BE SO MUCH MORE HELPFUL THAN THE WHITE MEN?

Durr: Well, I don't think it was exactly the desire to be helpful, I think, it was the desire to have somebody cook and clean up and nurse the children and, you know, do the work. You see, the whole thing about the system of segregation you have to get to the bottom of it and from slavery on the whole thing has been to have cheap labor. I mean to have somebody else do the dirty work. Well if you go back into history back to Pharaoh you find that the great desire of men—mankind, or you even take an African chief in Africa, the great desire of mankind is to have somebody else to do the dirty work. And a lots of time in the feminist movement you hear all the time about how the women do the dirty work and the men don't. But I do think that in the South, particularly, the great—the whole motivation of, of segregation and slavery and—was to keep cheap labor, and I must say that if you've ever lived in a big house with—which I used to do when my grandmother was alive, where you

were waited on all the time it's very luxurious. When it was a hundred and five outside it's very nice to have somebody do all the dirty work and let you sit there and, you know, do nothing. And it doesn't—I, I often have arguments with black friends that I have in the South because I really think that they feel that the white people actually, you know, hate 'em or dislike 'em or are out to get 'em or something and they don't seem to agree with me that the treatment it's for one purpose and one purpose only which is cheap labor. And it's, the way they fight the unions, you see, to keep wages down. Now Mr. Ni—Mr. Reagan has made it so that there're so many vacancies and so many un—so much unemployment, he's keeping wages down that way because there's about ten people for every job that opens.

00:13:50:00

INTERVIEWER: I'M GOING TO STOP YOU THERE THOUGH CAUSE WE WANT TO STAY IN OUR, IN OUR TIME PERIOD. I—YOU'RE RIGHT. I'M NOT DISAGREEING THERE. I WANT TO COME BACK TO THIS QUESTION OF WOMEN BECAUSE I THINK THAT IT'S PRETTY CLEAR THAT THE BLACK WOMEN REALLY KEPT THE BOYCOTT GOING.

Durr: No doubt about it, but the men helped too.

INTERVIEWER: COULD YOU TALK ABOUT THAT?

Durr: Well, I can't say that women did more than the men did, they both, you know, took chances on losing their jobs. They both, they both took chances on losing their insurance. They both took chances on, you know, being killed. That they both, and I don't see it that one women or men were braver than the other but the women did more of the sort of raising money and having barbecues or whatever to raise money and the—see the, the whole movement was more or less founded in the church and the women more or less run the church because they have time to at least the ones that don't have full-time jobs. And right now they're not very many full-time jobs for black women or black men either.

00:14:59:00

INTERVIEWER: DO YOU THINK THAT AT ANY POINT IN, IN THIS WHOLE, I MEAN IT'S A YEAR LONG THIS BOYCOTT, DO YOU THINK THAT OPINION CHANGED DURING THAT YEAR, IN, IN THE WHITE COMMUNITY? WE KNOW THAT THE BLACK COMMUNITY JUST KEPT GOING, BUT DID THE WHITE COMMUNITY GET HARDER OR DID THEY GET MORE SYMPATHETIC? DID THEY CHANGE AT ALL?

Durr: Well, I would like to say that they changed after they knew they were going to Atlanta. If they didn't change and that's when they changed minus the federal penitentiary. It would never have changed unless the federal government accepted and unless the federal government, I mean, the fact that King had the movement and the fact that Mr. Nixon had the movement and the fact that the movement grew, certainly influenced the whole country, but it would never have changed, in my opinion, unless the federal courts had stepped in and told

‘em well either you do this or you go to jail and that was a simple answer they had. It wasn’t a question of debate, you—it, it, it was the Supreme Court of, you know, my brother-in-law, Justice Black, was on the court. And he came from Alabama, for forty years they wouldn’t invite him back to Alabama. He was an absolute outcast and pariah and they—well it’s just a question of law and order. If the, the courts hadn’t stepped in, I think we’d still be struggling.

00:16:19:00

INTERVIEWER: YOU DON’T THINK THAT THAT, THAT THE WHITE—THAT THE GOVERNMENT IN MONTGOMERY WOULD EVER HAVE SETTLED WITH THE MONTGOMERY IMPROVEMENT ASSOCIATION?

Durr: Uh-huh.

INTERVIEWER: DO YOU—WHY? COULD YOU TALK TO ME ABOUT THAT A LITTLE? COULD YOU TELL ME.

Durr: Listen, you ought to talk to one of the black men here. They know a lot more than I do about it.

INTERVIEWER: WELL, YOU WERE THERE.

Durr: What’s that? I was—

INTERVIEWER: YOU WERE THERE.

Durr: Well I was there, well I know, but if they came from the South all the way from Texas up to Virginia the same thing it wasn’t just Alabama. Well it was just, as I say, the whole basis of the system as I can see it, and, was cheap labor.

INTERVIEWER: I’M, I’M SORRY I, I WAS TALKING VERY SPECIFICALLY ABOUT THE PEOPLE IN MONTGOMERY.

Durr: I know, but I’m trying to tell you is they wanted to keep the cheap labor. There would be advertisements from the Chamber of Commerce, come to Alabama, you know, and, twenty-five cents an hour, cheap labor, that was the one thing they wanted. And they didn’t change at all and all the, the businessmen, the Chamber of the Commerce, all the, you know, passed resolutions they went up before the Supreme Court and they argued and all. And it’s, now that it’s over with, some people are changing, thank God, and there’s now, you know, some of a big change taking place, but not enough. Because there still is the terrible fact of the unemployment and they don’t have enough jobs to go around. And so they don’t—the young people, the young black people, they are not at all thrilled and appreciative of what Mrs. Parks did. They don’t want to hear about Dr. King much anymore. They say, what good did it do us? We haven’t got a job. So I mean what is the right mean to us when we don’t have a job? What does it, it’s fine to say you can go into a movie and you can to the theater you can go to this, if you don’t have any money what does it mean to you?

00:18:11:00

INTERVIEWER: THAT'S EXACTLY TRUE. NOW DIDN'T THE BOYCOTT HURT THE CITY? I MEAN THESE PEOPLE WHO DIDN'T WANT TO CHANGE NOW WEREN'T THEY THE MERCHANTS BEING HURT FINANCIALLY?

Durr: Well, they were hurt and the—they began to get a lot of pressure from Washington and one of the people named, named Red Blunt was the Postmaster General and he got all the businessmen together one Sunday afternoon I remember and he told them it was hurting the city and at least we had very little violence.

00:18:45:00

INTERVIEWER: WHAT KIND OF, IT, ITS, WHAT KIND OF WAYS WERE THIS, WERE THE MERCHANTS HURT? WAS THERE LESS BUSINESS?

Durr: Well no the main thing in the newspapers was that it—industry wasn't coming to—see the only industries, don't have much industries in Montgomery, Alabama anyway. The biggest industry we have is the air force fields, you know, Maxwell Air Force and—the—no, it was the fact that the industry wasn't coming to Alabama. They just were going other places because they thought it was too much turmoil—

INTERVIEWER: SO JUST THAT THE CITY WASN'T GROWING?

Durr: Well the city wasn't growing and people weren't moving there and people, some people moving away and some military installments that were due to be built there were not built there but somewhere else. And it, it was just sort of, you know, losing, losing things from it. But it's, Montgomery, it's, you know, it's—you've got to realize you're talking about a whole section of the country and I've got to say something in my, for, you know, in defense of my own state and that is that the—this situation had gone on, I mean, the, the, you know, the blacks being denied their rights, that had been going on since 1876 when you had the Hayes-Tilden deal and the federal troops were withdrawn. And the rest of the country just sat there for that hundred years and never did a thing. Do you realize that from, that from 1876 until 1932 when Roosevelt came into power, not one Congress, not one Senate, not one Supreme Court, not one state, nobody raised their hand about the treatment of the blacks in the South? And now when Roosevelt came in it did begin to happen and Mrs. Roosevelt was one of the leaders in it, but I think it's a, you know, very disgraceful thing in a way that nobody in the north anywhere else ever raised their voice. Now one of the things that did help was that, you see, the South got so poor that a lot of blacks went north to Chicago and Toledo and all kind of places like that and they did attain some political power so that through that political power that they gained in the North, and the fact that the federal government was on their side is what did it.

INTERVIEWER: CAN WE STOP FOR A MOMENT?

[cut]

00:21:28:00

[slate]

[change to camera roll 204]

INTERVIEWER: I, I WAS JUST THINKING THAT WHAT—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: FLAGS.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: —TELLING A STORY AND I WAS THINKING ABOUT SOMETHING—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: SECOND.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: —YOU TALK ABOUT IN YOUR BOOK. WHICH IS YOU TALK ABOUT KIND OF THE DOUBLE VISION THAT, THAT YOU HAD ABOUT BLACK PEOPLE AS YOU GREW UP THAT YOU, YOU WERE BROUGHT UP—YOU WERE SAYING THAT YOU AND YOUR HUSBAND BOTH WERE BROUGHT UP BY BLACK PEOPLE WHO LOVED AND TOOK CARE OF YOU AND YET AT THE SAME TIME YOU WERE TAUGHT THAT THEY WERE INFERIOR. AND, I WONDER IF YOU COULD TALK ABOUT THAT. DESCRIBE THAT FOR US.

Durr: Well, it's just so hard to describe a, such a, you know mixed up situation. If you were a, a child you, you were taken care of by a black woman. If you had money enough to pay her and God knows you didn't pay her much, five dollars a week, maybe, but they took care of you and they—you couldn't help but love 'em. I mean they'd put you to bed, and fed you, and dressed you, and bathed you. And they were so kind to you. I've often wondered that, so marvelous to me, that the black women of the South had taken care of white children and as far as I've known have never done 'em any harm. I can't remember in my whole lifetime even hearing of a black woman who had ever done a white child any harm. And so they were your protector too. And so you did come to love 'em very much indeed. And, but about the time you started going to school was the time that they began to tell you, you know, well you can't do this and you can't do that and you can't do the other and, and so just little by little, you know, and of course the schools were segregated too. And you got to the point where you didn't actually need a nurse. And so little by little the relationship was, you know, widened and so it's a, a curious experience. I had, when I was in Washington and working for the Democratic Committee there was a newspaper woman from Chicago who was very attractive and bright and she came from Birmingham. And so she came to me one day and said that her mother-in-law would like to see me and that I said, well what was her name?

And she said, Mrs. Smith or Jones or something. I said, well I don't know any Mrs. Smith or Jones. And about a year later she told me again that Ms. Smith was in town and wanted to see me and I still couldn't remember. And then the next year she told me she died. And I couldn't imagine why she kept telling me that Mrs. Smith and Mrs. Jones had died whom I couldn't have the least recollection of. And then her sister-in-law came and she said, Mrs. So and so wants to see you, and this was another name say, Ms. Robinson. I said, Ms. Robinson? I don't know a Ms. Robinson, she said, well her name is Sarah Robinson. Well, Mrs. Smith had been my nurse and Sarah Robinson was a little girl I'd played with all my life, but you see the lady, the wo—black woman from Chicago wouldn't call her by her first name to me. If you, she felt that was undignified. And I had never even known their last names. I mean it just shows you how difficult, you know, here was one of the closest and most warmest [sic] relationships of my life and yet, you know, I didn't know her, I didn't even know her last name. And the woman from Chicago, she wouldn't use the last—the first name because she felt it was degrading to say, you know, Nursie wants to see you. But I always felt that was just a sad example of the division, you know, that exists.

00:25:21:00

INTERVIEWER: I'D LIKE TO BRING YOU BACK TO THE BOYCOTT IN, IN MEMORY AND DO YOU REMEMBER WHEN YOU HEARD THAT THE BOYCOTT WAS GOING TO BE OVER THAT FIRST DAY OF, OF WHEN PEOPLE GOT BACK ON THE BUSES? DO YOU REMEMBER WHAT YOU FELT LIKE?

Durr: Well I knew it was going to happen anyway because there on—a meeting on Sunday and Mr. Nixon had gotten up and said that the boycott was going to take place on Monday when she went to, to the—but it was only supposed to be for one day. And I remember Mr. Nixon getting up, you know, he was a Pullman Car Porter, and he got up and he said to this big church group, he said, look, we have worn aprons long enough and time has come to take off your apron and be a man. And so, sure enough Monday morning when Mrs. Parks' trial was started the whole court, you know, was filled with black men, all the front of it was filled with black men. It's—with these black men here I feel so, you know, constrained as telling what it's like.

INTERVIEWER: NO I'M INTERESTED IN YOUR VIEWS, NOT—

Durr: Well, the thing is, it's very difficult for you to realize what a chance they took going to that trial and filling the court. And, you know, being there. This is something that was, that, you know, was taking up terrific chance. One of losing your job, one of not getting a loan or not getting a car or having, you know just all kinds of economic troubles they could get in besides being arrested or beaten up. And I have a—I think the black men have had a far harder time than the black women because the black women have been much better treated than the black men in the South. And I feel like that was a very brave thing to do so I knew that they were gonna have a boycott and I just took it for granted, I mean, Mr. Nixon was going to have a boycott he had a boycott and, and I—it never was any real violence there it was only—it was just the fact that they stayed off the bus and walked.

00:27:35:00

INTERVIEWER: AND AT THE ENDING WHEN IT WAS OVER DID, DID YOU FEEL EXHILARATED?

Durr: Look, I felt not only exhilarated I was absolutely thrilled. I felt that, you know, that here were people who had been treated, I thought, so badly, finally coming up out of the mud as it were and standing up for themselves. And I think that's one of the most thrilling things that can happen in human history is for people to finally stand up for themselves and stop being treated badly. Now, there's still a lot to do but this was the beginning, this was—and the fact it was woman that did it first didn't mean that the men didn't stand by her. And I just think for a whole race of people to suddenly decide that they're going to rise up and do something is just absolutely thrilling. I don't—it makes you feel like the, you know, that human beings can't be held down, you can't beat 'em down, you know, that finally they gonna rise up. Well, look you know, it's not—you said you were part Jewish, look how they were being beaten down by Hitler, but don't you think that a great many of 'em rose again? Well I do too.

INTERVIEWER: [laughs]

Durr: Well, you see, I'm from—I'm—blacks, you know, I'm not black but there are Southerners like I am we've lived in the same part of the country for three hundred more years, I have been on, you know, close terms with many of them. And when they rose up and began to show their manhood I felt that I myself was being—enlighten—not enlightened, that's not the word, made bigger. You know, that I was being made larger.

INTERVIEWER: [laughs]

Durr: I don't think I'm expressing it right but maybe somebody will understand what I'm trying to say.

INTERVIEWER: STOP FOR A MOMENT. BUT I—

[cut]

00:29:32:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: FLAGS.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: MARKER.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: ACTUALLY WANT TO GO BACK A LITTLE EARLIER EVEN THAN, THAN THE BOYCOTT, WHICH WAS THE BROWN DECISION IN 1954. NOW

DO YOU, DO YOU REMEMBER THE REACTION IN MONTGOMERY TO THAT DECISION? WERE THEY HORRIFIED?

Durr: Well, they were indeed they—horrified all over the South and with the terrible events that happened, as you know, you know, they—before the Brown decision came in my husband and I were both called down to New Orleans for Jim Eastland and accused of overthrowing the government by forcing violence. And what they were actually trying to get at is the fact that my brother-in-law was on the Supreme Court and the Supreme Court was just about to issue the Brown decision and so they got head—Jim Eastland was running for the Senate and he got headlines and the paper saying, relative of Justice Black in favor of Brown decision, or being tried by Senator Eastland for Communist affiliation, or some kind of crazy stuff. And so Jim Eastland was a—you see head of the—is in town security of the, so he—a group of us who had been working for integration for years and years and working for the vote for years and years since 1933 when Roosevelt was elected, Aubrey Williams and—he had us down there and he accused us of overthrow—overthrowing the government by force and violence. And so we, no, it was, the whole thing was so crazy. There was a, an informer from the Justice Department, a guy named Paul Crouch who accuss—

00:31:16:00

INTERVIEWER: I ACTUALLY THINK I CAN'T, I CAN'T REALLY USE—IT'S A GREAT STORY BUT IT'S GONNA CONFUSE PEOPLE A LOT. LET ME BRING YOU BACK TO THE BROWN DECISION ITSELF I MEAN—

Durr: Well the Brown decision did get people very upset and the reason I was telling you about Jim Eastland because that's one way he had of, you know, fighting it. Making you think it was a Communist decision, and putting the smear of Communism on it, he could. But there was a—what happened was that the—there was various reactions. And people said they weren't going—there's gonna be a boycott of the schools and there was in some places and then some people said there'd be a boycott of the teachers, and there was in some places. Some people said the students were gonna, you know, not come anymore or anyway. There was various reactions in various places. And then, you know, there were schools burnt down and bombed, and then don't you remember the pictures of the little—

00:32:18:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

Durr: —children going to school in New Orleans the women spitting. Well it was really a very painful time and I can tell you I sent my children off to school. I was able to do it because I had friends here in Boston actually who gave 'em scholarships or got 'em scholarships, but it was not my husband they were so mad at it was my brother-in-law, Justice Black. And they'd tell my children, you tell your uncle we're not gonna do this and

we're not gonna do that, and, you tell your uncle your teacher said this. Imagine a child thirteen or twelve years old and—

INTERVIEWER: STOP PLEASE TO MAKE A CHANGE.

00:32:55:00

[cut]

[slate]

[change to camera roll 205]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: SORRY, JUST WAITING.

INTERVIEWER: '57 TIME THAT WE'RE TALKING ABOUT.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: SECOND.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: SECONDS RIGHT THERE.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: THANK YOU.

INTERVIEWER: QUICK QUESTION IS WHY THERE WAS SO MUCH RESISTANCE TO CHANGE IN MONTGOMERY?

Durr: Because they were afraid that if—

INTERVIEWER: SORRY COULD YOU PUT MY QUESTION INTO—

Durr: There, there's, there was so much resistance to the schools being integrated because it, it would be the first time that black boys and white girls had gone to school together. And they, they, they kept, you know, screaming there'd be mixture of the races and miscegenation and so forth. And the only mixed couple I know as far as Alabama is concerned is Johnnie Ford who's the mayor of—and he married a white girl from Bullock County. And—but they live—he's the mayor of Tuskegee and as far as I know it's never been any trouble or, you know, about it at all, not in Tusk—not in Tuskegee.

INTERVIEWER: OF COURSE IN 1955 HE PROBABLY WOULD HAVE BEEN LYNCHED.

Durr: Well, not Johnnie Ford, I don't think.

INTERVIEWER: [laughs]

Durr: Because he had—everybody in Tuskegee was on his side. I don't think that they would have dared gone into Tuskegee and lynch Johnnie Ford. He's—but he married a white girl from Union Springs. But that is actually the only legal mixed marriage I know of.

00:34:19:00

INTERVIEWER: CAN I ASK YOU AGAIN TO TELL US YOU, YOU, YOU TOLD A STORY, I THINK IN, IN THE LAST INTERVIEW ABOUT HOW THE NEWS OF THE BOYCOTT GOT OUT THAT A BLACK WOMEN BROUGHT HER, BROUGHT HER NOTICE OF THE BOYCOTT TO THE WHITE WOMAN SHE WAS WORKING FOR. COULD YOU TELL US THAT STORY?

Durr: No that, that, I don't think that was quite it. I think that it got into the Sunday newspaper and all the, I think, that Joe—Tom, what was Joe—

INTERVIEWER: AZBELL.

Durr: Azbell, I think that Joe Azbell—Mr. Nixon gave it to Joe Azbell, the story, and Joe Azbell had it on the front page of the Sunday paper and all the preachers all over town, the black preachers, told everybody in their church to stay off the bus on Monday because of Mrs. Parks' trial and they did. And then that night, you see, they had the big boycott—a big mass meeting at the Holt Street Baptist Church and I went in but I couldn't get in cause it was so crowded. But that was the night that Dr. King made his first speech to the people of Montgomery. That was the beginning really, that was the—that whole episode, you know, the, it was the, her refusing to move, the trial, the mass meeting that was beginning and it never has gone back. The thing that is so mar—marvelous about it is that it spread all over the world. I understood it from a paper I got from South Africa that, they were actually using Dr. King and Mrs. Parks' name in the rising in South Africa.

00:36:10:00

INTERVIEWER: WE HEARD, WE HARD THAT. YOU KNOW THERE WAS, YOU TOLD, I JUST WANT TO GO BACK OVER ONE OTHER STORY THAT YOU TOLD US AND THEN I WILL STOP ON THIS, WHICH IS YOUR TELLING US ABOUT THE WHITE WOMEN AND BEING ANGRY AT THE MAYOR BECAUSE HE DIDN'T, DIDN'T WANT THEM GIVING RIDES. COULD YOU TELL YOU THAT STORY, SORRY TO ASK YOU BUT I, I, FELT YOU MIGHT—

Durr: Well, I don't think they were actually, the, ***issued an order*** or issue advice or whatever from saying that if the white women of Montgomery would stop taking their maids back and forth, that the boycott would be ended because then they would have to walk through the snow—rain and not in the snow. And from say way out in one part, see, Montgomery is divided. There's the west side which is all black and then there's the middle which is mixed to some degree and then there's the east side which is almost all white. And it's changing a bit now too. But the thing is that he issued an order ***saying if the*** black, ***white women would***

just stop carrying their maids back and forth that ***the boycott would be ended. And so, I don't say all of them, but some of them replied and said, well, if he wants to come out and do my cooking and laundry and nurse the children and clean up, he can.*** But unless he does I'm gonna keep, whatever the name of the maid, was she had. Because her whole life was built on this maid. I mean, you know, she was free to play golf or go to the market or—free of the children, she was free to, you know, garden, see cheap labor is a very insidious thing. I've experienced it and I know how insidious it is because it gives you freedom to do what you want to do and how, you said, you, you've talked to me about having—why did I get into politics or how did I ever get interested in the race issue. Well the thing was, is the reason I had the leisure to do it—[coughs] was able to do it was because I had black women at home whom I paid ten dollars a week to. Now I think that was a, you know, a disgraceful wage. But that was a going wage I didn't feel like I was being exploitive. But I had a maid, I had a cook, I had a yard man, and I had a washerwomen. So I could get into politics because [coughs] they were there to do—otherwise I would have been, you know, tied down. But—

00:38:30:00

INTERVIEWER: YOU'RE SORT OF SAYING THAT THE, THAT THE, THE WHITE WOMEN THEN, THEN THEY WERE SUPPORTING IT AND THE BLACK WOMAN, THE BLACK WOMAN, THEY WERE LYING FOR EACH OTHER IS WHAT YOU'RE SAYING.

Durr: Certainly. I mean the black women were not saying that they were supporting the boycott and white women were not saying that were taking their maids back and forth but they were both things. In other words they were depending on each other the black women needed the money and the white women needed the, the services and wanted them anyway. And I just think it was a tremendous kind of game they were playing. But I think that, of course you may think I'm—sound old fashioned, and—but I really do actually believe that most of the bad feeling between groups, you know, I don't mean only the black and white, but ethnic groups or religious groups. If you dig down deep enough, if you get down beneath the surface it's nearly always rests on somebody wanting to exploit somebody else and keeping 'em down so they can. And all these groups that came to this country from England, I mean from Europe, [coughs] you know, they were all treated very badly too. The only difference between the groups that came over here, the ethnic groups, who came as immigrants and the blacks is the blacks didn't come willingly and the other ones were looking for a better life and the blacks, you see, were brought over by force and violence as it were.

INTERVIEWER: STOP FOR A MOMENT PLEASE.

[cut]

00:40:20:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: FLAGS. MARKER.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: WAS—WE WERE WONDERING IF ONE OF THE WAYS THEY TRIED TO STOP THE BOYCOTT WAS TO CALL THE PEOPLE WHO WERE RUNNING THE BOYCOTT COMMUNISTS. DID YOU HEAR THAT?

Durr: No.

INTERVIEWER: IT WASN'T, WASN'T—

Durr: No I don't, I don't remember that, that failed. I mean they tried that with Dr. King but it, you know, it fell by the wayside. Because, you see, Dr. King, was extremely astute politician he, he knew that blacks were in the minority and he wanted—didn't want to provoke violence cause he—I'll tell you a little story you maybe don't have time for it but I always thought it illustrated his point of view so well. I was in Washington and I had dinner with my brother-in-law Justice Black. I can't help but quote him because, you know, he played a very important in the whole thing and he said, when you get back to Montgomery you tell your friend Dr. King to take those children off the streets and those people off the streets or they're gonna be massacred. And I said, well you know it's very difficult for me to go to Dr. King and tell him what to do. And he said, well you tell him I said so. That I said that if he didn't get those people off the streets they were gonna be massacred. So when I went back to Montgomery I went to a meeting and he was there and was speaking probably and after everything quieted down I went and spoke to him and I said, well I had a message from my brother-in-law Justice Black. And I told him what he'd said. And he looked at me and he said, Ms. Durr, he said, you tell Justice Black that I feel exactly the way he does. I'm terrified those people are gonna be shot down and massacred. He said, they never go out on the streets that I'm not terrified. But he said, there's something more important than that. Makes me cry almost when I think that, you know, that he died. He, he said, the black man and the black woman the, the black people have been, so long been frightened, they, they have for so long been terrorized, you know, by overseers or policemen or whatever. And he said, the only way they're ever gonna become able to be men and women in their own right and stand up to the world is to lose that fear. And you can't expect one lone black man or woman to come out and face dogs and horses and, you know, cattle prods and police and—he said, but if you get a hundred out or five hundred out or a thousand out then they can do it. They can stand up to all those police and cattle prods and—but he said, the thing they've got to do is learn not to be afraid. They have to got to learn to stand up against, you know, the kind of terror. And he said, and, and if they do get killed, he said, it will be the most, you know, terrible sorrow to be [sic], but they've got to do it. And this, tell doc—Justice Black if they do die or any of 'em die that it will give me the most terrible sorrow but they have to do it. And then he died.

INTERVIEW: STOP PLEASE.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:43:50:00