Interview with Anne Butterfield Weills
Date: October 13, 1988
Interviewer: Louis Massiah
Camera Rolls: 3010-3012
Sound Rolls: 305-306
Team: B

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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 II*.

[camera roll #3010]
[sound roll #305]

00:00:12:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Ten, four, mark one.

[slate]

00:00:16:00

Interviewer:

OK. Could you talk about your first meeting or first encounter with someone from the Black Panther Party, where you were, what the circumstances were, the time?

00:00:25:00

Anne Butterfield Weills:

I, I believe my first introduction to the Black Panther Party was Eldridge Cleaver, but I'd had a, sort of, formal introduction, sort of, through his lawyer, Beverly Axelrod. What had happened was a lot of us who had been arrested in the civil rights sit-ins in San Francisco in '64 at the Sheraton-Palace and Cadillac had through a, sort of, a struggle in the courts finally had to go to jail in '66. So, we went to jail for a couple months and Beverly Axelrod was one of our lawyers. And she comes out to talk to me and I'm in jail. And she's telling me about this incredible person. This man that she's representing in, in Folsom, who's the Eldridge Cleaver, and that he's written this incredible book called *Soul on Ice* and he's this brilliant revolutionary. And, and I was, you know, at this point, we had been fighting for civil rights in the Bay area to varying, you know, in varying, sort of, industries and institutions for years. And, and we had come to the point, I think, where we were beginning to think there had to be some kind of a revolution in terms of Black, in terms of rights for Blacks and other minorities. And in, in jail, I had read, you know, Malcolm X's autobiography and that. If there was anything that inspires me, even to this day, it's Malcolm X, and his writings, and his thinking. And at that particular period of history, it was even that much more, I think, sort of, a cutting edge or a turning point for me politically. So, I come out and, and my husband at that time was Robert Scheer and he was an editor of *Ramparts*. And *Ramparts* through Ed Keating, who was the publisher, had given Eldridge a job so that he could come out to jail, come out of jail to a new beginning, so to speak. And so, there was this party for Eldridge and I had just gotten out of jail and I go to this bar where there's this huge party. And here's Eldridge Cleaver. And he was this very—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Anne Butterfield Weills:

—exciting individual. I mean, he was very intellectually astute and very perceptive and—

00:02:26:00

Interviewer:

OK, stop one second.

Anne Butterfield Weills:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

[unintelligible]

[cut]

[camera roll #3011]

00:02:29:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark two.

[slate]

00:02:31:00

Interviewer:

OK. Could you talk a little bit about the style of the Panthers? I mean, the first time you saw Panthers in, in their dress with their leather jackets, their hats, or whatever, describe what they were wearing and what sort of, what you thought about it when you saw it. Just the style.

00:02:45:00

Anne Butterfield Weills:

Well, the style of the Panthers was, I think, extraordinary. For an indigenous American, what became a revolutionary movement, they had this incredible creativity, this creative flair or style. I mean, from the name, The Black Panther Party. I mean, there's no other left group or political radical group that's named themselves after a panther, right. But that had great symbolic value. It's, sort of, like, this is a serious cat, you know. It's going to really defend its family, whatever. And I think the jackets, it was part of a, you know, the media is the message. And I don't think it was calculated in the same way that, obviously, these people calculate to represent themselves in a very, sort of, you know, I don't know, very stylized way but they had this creativity. It was like an imagination I think reflected in both Huey Newton's thinking and in Eldridge's thinking and writing. I mean, Eldridge was outrageous as a person. I mean, if you read some of the speeches from that period, he, not only does he use a lot of profanity but his thinking, and, and Huey too, and to some extent even Bobby. I mean, there's an incredibly high energy, creative, stylistic, exciting kind of character to them that, sort of, started at the beginning.

00:03:57:00

Interviewer:

OK. How did the style of the Panthers, and more than just fashion, how did the style of the Panthers influence White radical organizations at that time?

00:04:05:00

Anne Butterfield Weills:

Well, I think we were very much becoming, there was a transition for us. I think in the early '60s, we were, we were basically reform minded. We wanted to be, to reform the society as we had sort of been led to believe it should be growing up in this society. Then when it refused to change both in terms of civil rights and then later in terms of the war, we became more and more, I think, seeing ourselves as revolutionaries. And the Panthers represented a break with a sort of reformist way of doing things. They were ready to, sort of, to some extent, you know, stand up and defend themselves to create a liberation movement, which, you know, armed itself, which had a military side to it. And that, sort of, appealed to us 'cause—Che Guevara was a hero of mine, right? So, this is, sort of, as we were, kind of, getting closer to the Cubans, and to the Vietnamese, and to the Chinese in terms of their way of thinking, you know, and this militaristic, and organized hierarchical, sort of, institutional structure of a party really became more and more attractive. Because we had been this amorphous, kind of, SDS and student movement and everybody doing their own thing. And this seemed serious to us.

00:05:15:00

Interviewer:

OK. Could you talk about the statehouse, when the Panthers went to the statehouse in Sacramento, the State Legislature? And also, talk about guns in, in California culture as you knew it growing up here.
00:05:26:00

Anne Butterfield Weills:

Well, yeah, I've grown up in California, born and raised. But also, I have my family came here in the 1840s. And I can remember my grandmother telling stories about how, you know, her peers, her, her—not her immediate family but kids she grew up with would go out and kill Indians just for sport. It was like, Let's go out and kill an Indian today. This is up there in these old mining towns in California. And my father, you know, he used guns. He hunted birds and, you know, small animals. And so, you know, I grew up with kids going out shooting guns just for sport. Basically, going up a creek and shooting at cans. And I knew how to use guns. And we used to teach each other how to use guns. So then, this was, like, [laughs] to me, the best thing I had ever seen where actually Blacks for the first time, took control of their own lives and said, Well, we're—if you're going to be armed, you know, we're going to be armed too. And, sort of, demonstrated that by just the physical image of actually carrying arms. And in California, up until that point, everybody had the right to bear arms publicly. And so, in fact, it was the Panthers going up, finally Blacks [laughs] asserting themselves as armed that caused a lot of change where then you had to basically have a, a permit to carry arms. But it was, sort of, part of the culture. This is a western culture you're dealing with in California. They just assumed it for themselves.

00:06:44:00

Interviewer:

Could you speak specifically about the Sacramento Legislature? How you felt when you saw those images on TV or read about it in the newspaper.

00:06:52:00

Anne Butterfield Weills:

Well, I think it was very exciting because one, it was the fearlessness of it. And this, sort of, audacity of it that they would have this great sense of themselves, and pride and, sort of, integrity about their own organization and political ideas that they would go up and assert themselves and say, We're not going to take it anymore. And, sort of, present themselves as this, you know, political force that would, would defend itself with arms if need be. And the history of, of the Panthers does come out of Oakland. And Oakland for twenty years before that, since I think the '30s and '40s, had recruited from the South. Had recruited sheriffs from the South, had recruited police to come to Oakland to work in the Oakland Police Force. So, you had some cracker, racist, redneck police in Oakland and who harassed, who would not even go into the Black community to deal with basic, you know, crimes that were happening, you know, Black on Black. They just ignored, you know, sort of serving that community. So, there was a serious history of being attacked, you know, physically and with weapons on the part of the Oakland Police. So, this was, made me as a Bay area person and intimate with a lot of these, you know, these events very proud that this, you know, organization would finally stand up and say, We're not going to take it anymore. We're going to defend our community and we're willing to fight, you know, with guns if need be. So, to me, it was powerful, exciting and I had great, I was very much inspired by it. It made me want to follow the [laughs] Black Panther Party, you know, for however long it took because I agreed with their goals and their demands.

00:08:22:00

Interviewer:

OK, so, so stop.

Camera Crew Member # :

Do you want to stop?

Interviewer:

Let's stop.

[cut]

[wild sound]

00:08:27:00

Anne Butterfield Weills:

Hearing geese, and owls, and anyway. Out here in suburban, you hear stuff.

Interviewer:

Sense of the land, you know.

Anne Butterfield Weills:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

That's wonderful.

Camera Crew Member #3:

Speed.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

And marking.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark three.

[slate]

00:08:43:00

Interviewer:

OK. So, did you believe that the Panthers were the vanguard in, in terms of, of a revolution?

00:08:50:00

Anne Butterfield Weills:

In terms of an American revolution, yes. Our, sort of, political theory at that time was basically, sort of, adhering to this third world theory that we thought, you know, in terms of liberation movements that they were the leading, the cutting edge against the war, the war against imperialism, US imperialism, and then later US Soviet Social imperialism. And that, you know, the Algerian revolution, the Cuban revolution, the Vietnamese revolution, the Chinese revolution. That those revolutions were setting the tone and Africa. All these African countries were fighting against their colonial rule, if not, already becoming nations. And so, we were, sort of, growing up in, in this period politically. And so we felt that because the United States, as an imperialist country, had so oppressed the rest of the world and also its domestic minorities, in particular, Blacks because of, you know, slavery. And that we actually—and then when you have a party like the Black Panther Party basically culminating a lot of that historical, you know, sort of experience into a viable, to us at that point, a viable political ideological theory as to how you can make revolution in the United States, and also having a practical program that, sort of, synthesized that analysis and that sort of ideological approach, you know, in their 10-point program. We really felt, well, we felt we had a lot to contribute but that since they had, sort of, brought all these things together and they were in, to our minds at the point, you know, the heroes, the cutting edge, the vanguard. I definitely feel we agreed with that at the time.

00:10:26:00

Interviewer:

OK—

00:10:27:00

Anne Butterfield Weills:

And Huey being, sort of, the personification of that because he was the one that in some sense was the most intellectual of the party. Although, Eldridge was but Eldridge was not as serious ideologically, I think, in terms of the party itself.

00:10:41:00

Interviewer:

In terms of the Alameda Courthouse rally, you went to a number of the rallies for Huey. Can you just describe your feelings and what you saw when you went there?

00:10:51:00

Anne Butterfield Weills:

These were the rallies. You know, when Huey was first on trial and then when he was confined to prison, there was a series of rallies at the Alameda County Courthouse demanding his, his freedom and also talking about how basically, you know, how Blacks were basically being attacked in the society. But there would be, like, thousands and thousands and thousands of people. And there would be, the Panthers would be out there all in their black, you know, their black uniforms, black jackets and be marching in unison. And then there would be a series of speeches. And there would also be this sense of collectivity. Like, one thing about the party, the Black Panther Party, is that, and I think because of Eldridge to some extent and because of their, sort of, enlightenment with the third world. I mean they borrowed from Malcolm, right. They borrowed, that there was not a necessarily, you know, serious contradiction between Whites and Blacks. That if you agreed politically on the same goals, you could work together. So, there was this sense of unity and of community that, you, you know, that I don't think a lot of, you know, racial sort of events oftentimes, you know, where you experience that sort of thing. And we felt, we felt unified in terms of fighting for Huey. That he was our leader. And anyway, with this, sort of, beautiful, sort of, group of young Blacks who were very, you know, standing up tall, and proud, and well organized, and disciplined, and who were willing to fight. And that was really inspiring.

00:12:16:00

Interviewer:

Who were you in 1967, '68? I mean, what, what did you see? Where was your life taking you? What, what did you see yourself doing?

00:12:24:00

Anne Butterfield Weills:

Well, I had been a militant sort of activist in the antiwar movement from the beginning. We organized as Vietnam Bay Committee a lot of people who had been then active, actually prior to that in the civil rights movement in CORE and SNCC, friends of SNCC and we—'67 actually was sort of a serious year. I and a lot of other women in this area, organized a women's liberation group, the first in the East Bay. And so, we were fighting. And a lot of what we, a lot of our political theory, and ideas, and sense of identity, or fighting against men in terms of the sexual oppression we felt was borrowed from the civil rights movement, was borrowed from the oppression of the Black people that we had known and experienced, and Frantz Fanon and a lot of the writers. You know, we made that analogy between us as women and how Blacks are oppressed by basically this White supremacist society. So, we borrowed a lot from the Black movement in terms of our own struggle. So, but also, that year, that was the year where we had stopped the draft week where we organized a stop the draft, which was a series of demonstrations in Oakland where there was a lot of arrests.

00:13:31:00

Interviewer:

OK. Let's stop for one second.

Anne Butterfield Weills:

Yeah, I got really dry. [laughs]

Interviewer:

We'll [unintelligible]—

[cut]

00:13:34:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Marker.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark four.

[slate]

00:13:37:00

Interviewer:

Lean to your left a little please. OK. Could you talk a little bit about antiwar, you know, the antiwar work that you were involved with and how the Panthers may have interacted with you in any of the antiwar that you were involved with, and also other, other radical organizations in Berkeley, in the Bay area at that time?

00:13:54:00

Anne Butterfield Weills:

The Panthers were really supportive, I mean, in terms of the antiwar struggle. They, they would come and speak at our events. They had an analysis that they'd put out in the Black Panther paper basically, you know, against the government of the United States in supporting the Vietnamese. They were consistently supportive. Because of the attack on them as an organization and individually, they didn't come in large numbers to our, to our demonstrations but, you know, Hilliard in particular, and there was, there was a group of Panthers at the Berkeley campus. A man named John Turner and Jim Nabors. Actually, I think Turner might have been. Anyway, I think Turner might have been shot. I don't really

know what happened to them. But anyway, they were the Panthers who were on campus. And there were also some, some—Doug Miranda and a group of Panthers at Merritt College. So, they were, sort of, the student faction and they would organize both Blacks and Whites there to support them, to raise money for them, to, to support the Black Panther paper. And they would also come and speak at our events but there wasn't this organizational merger. But there was all this support and basically defense of them.

00:15:00:00

Interviewer:

OK.

Camera crew member #1:

[inaudible]

Interviewer:

Let's stop one second. We're just changing the batteries.

Anne Butterfield Weills:

OK.

[cut]

00:15:07:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark.

Interviewer:

[clears throat]

Camera Crew Member # :

Mark five.

[slate]

00:15:09:00

Interviewer:

OK. Once again, a little bit about—well, let's talk about the Peace and Freedom Party. Could you talk about how the Peace and Freedom Party, sort of, decided to, to work with Eldridge Cleaver and other Panther people in late '67 and early '68, and '68?

00:15:27:00

Anne Butterfield Weills:

Well, the formation of the Peace and Freedom Party came about as we had tried to work in the Democratic Party and were relatively successful in running some antiwar campaigns but never actually winning them. So, we decided that since we had, you know, a fairly large radical constituency in California to form our own party. And so, we organized all these signatures and got it on the ballot. And then there was a first wave of people who ran the first time. And then, I think Dick Gregory for President, and Paul Jacobs for Senate, and She—I don't know. I can't remember exactly. But anyway, the second election was in '68 and we put Eldridge up for President, to run for President. But at that time, it was, like, from the time that we nominated him to the time of the election, the political situation in the state was changing so rapidly. Robert Kennedy had been assassinated who, although not our hero, was beginning to speak out against the war. And a lot of us had some sort of empathy for him because of our earlier, sort of, when we were younger, a certain identification with his brother. And also, then when, when Martin Luther King was assassinated. I mean, you know, just all hell was breaking loose, right? It had just basically destroyed our belief in American institutions. So, although Eldridge was nominated, as I recall, we didn't work too hard in the Peace and Freedom Party. We basically had taken to the streets and had begun to organize for the Democratic Party Convention in Chicago and to basically make our feelings heard there. So, we, sort of—and actually, I went to Vietnam that summer and when I came back, it was right before the elections. And it was, sort of, somewhat low-level kind of organization. So, you know, even though he was nominated in California, at that point, radicals were beginning to leave electoral politics in droves. Because actually, early SDS people had basically trashed those of us who had gone into electoral politics to saying, you know, It's hopeless. Take the streets. The only way is, you know, is revolution. So, we had finally, a lot of the Peace and Freedom Party, the early organizers had pretty much begun to believe that themselves. So, as an institution it was sort of being neglected at that time.

00:17:38:00

Interviewer:

OK. And last question, I think, is you talked before about how this was the first Black organization that you felt some sense of camaraderie with because of the ideology. Could you just talk about that again?

00:17:51:00

Anne Butterfield Weills:

Well, I think a lot of us, you know, grew up in this area and the Panthers grew up with us. I mean, I was at Merritt. My brother was at Merritt. It's, like, you know, through the *Ramparts* connection, I knew Eldridge. And so, we had had since the early '60s struggles in Oakland. The first struggle in fact which, you know, triggered the free speech movement at Berkeley, UC Berkeley, was a struggle over whether or not we could collect money for SNCC and whether we could collect money for tutorials in Oakland. And Scheer actually ran on a program to end the poverty in Oakland, to end the war, and end the poverty in Oakland. And so there's all these, sort of, local connections. So, these are homeboys, right. And we were home, [laughs] and this was, like, this was our group, and these were the people. And at Merritt and a lot of the civil rights movement in the Bay area, there was a kind of, there weren't a lot of the racial tensions, I think, that have been true of Chicago, and New York, and a lot of the big cities in the East or even the contradictions that later developed in SNCC. This Bay area movement wasn't, didn't feel that in the same way. There were the nationalists, but they were pretty much off by themselves. So, the people that were active in the civil rights struggle in '64, '65, '66, basically we worked pretty well together. And I think because we were, sort of, all the same age and there was, sort of, a mutual respect. Even though we weren't Black, we had a record of fighting for civil rights, you know, for going to jail, for, you know, risking, you know, a lot in a sense for Whites to be part of their struggle. And I think then because we were, we were becoming revolutionaries, and we were, sort of, sharing a lot of this political theory, and ideas that we had in common. And I think, as I said before, I mean, they had developed a liberation, basically, an anti-imperialist analysis of the world. They had unity with all these liberation struggles in the world, in particular the Cubans and the Vietnamese, and then, you know, later Che Guevara and some of the third world revolutionaries in Africa. And that's where they learned. Frantz Fanon and a lot of these, these African and, and intellectuals from the third world are the ones that train them how to, sort of, how to think politically. And those were our heroes as well, so we had this common bond, these common heroes and heroines that brought us together, as well as the practical day to day free food, you know, medical support. We believed in a revolution together. We believed an American revolution along the same lines.

00:20:16:00

Interviewer:

Great. OK, thank you.

Anne Butterfield Weills:

Too bad it was all over. [laughs] It's too bad it didn't happen, right?

[cut]

[sound roll #306]

[wild sound]

Interviewer:

Well—

Camera Crew Member #3:

Take.

Interviewer:

Most of them how—

Camera Crew Member #3:

Take six-up.

Interviewer:

—so much of your personal energy it seems, you know, was based on this, you know, outrage of this war.

Anne Butterfield Weills:

Sure, this—also, the racism—

Interviewer:

Right.

Anne Butterfield Weills:

—I mean, I think that's, you know, been throughout my political history, so—and the war just. And another reflection of that if anything, you know.

Interviewer:

Right, right.

Anne Butterfield Weills:

Why are we going after these, as they call them, gooks, right?

Interviewer:

That's right.

Anne Butterfield Weills:

I mean, they're expendable.

[picture resumes]

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark six.

[slate]

Interviewer:

OK, could, could you speak a little bit about the reciprocal relationship between White radical organizations and Black radical and the Black Panther? Wait a second.

Camera crew member #2:

[inaudible]

Anne Butterfield Weills:

[laughs] No.

Camera crew member #1:

OK.

00:21:04:00

Interviewer:

Could you talk a little bit about the relationship between White radical organizations and the Black Panther Party when it came to the war, and also your personal sense of, of your, your involvement in the antiwar work and your feelings that led you to that involvement?

00:21:20:00

Anne Butterfield Weills:

Well, there was essentially a mutual support system. Those of us who had certain skills, like lawyers went and did draft counseling for the Panthers. They worked in their, their legal clinics to help them with, you know, sort of, just the day to day problems that people might have legally. You know, doctors, you know, worked in their medical clinics, do-donated a lot

of their time and energy to help with, you know, those kinds of needs. I mean, people worked in their food programs. There was, there was those of us who basically worked on defense. I mean, I worked a lot on raising money to defend David Hilliard, you know. There was just one defense committee after another, as you can imagine. And we organized our biggest mobilization was in, in New Haven. We organized about twenty-thousand people around basically, the northeast to come to New Haven to demonstrate in support of Ericka Huggins and Bobby Seale. And that was this, you know, we came, brought all these people on planes from the west coast. I mean, that was, like, you know, a show of solidarity. And that happened cont—consistently. The Panthers then would help us, you know, they would come and support our rallies. They would basically, you know, they had a very clear and developed analysis of, you know, the war in Vietnam and supported our struggle against the war in Vietnam. It wasn't, we didn't have the same priorities, but at that time, I mean, I was very much involved in this early women's movement. Also, very involved in the antiwar movement. And also, very involved in the Black Panther movement to the extent that we could support it, and fight for it, and defend it, and saw them as our political leadership. And, I mean, we saw all of this. If you think of now, we've come in 1988 to a period where there's all these single issues. Everybody's in their different organizations. Whereas this was, you know, we were part of this multi, sort of, revolutionary struggle. And—

Interviewer:

Great.

Anne Butterfield Weills:

—in one day, you're struggling on all fronts, right. [laughs]

00:23:11:00

Interviewer:

OK, good.

Anne Butterfield Weills:

OK.

Interviewer:

Back in the—that did it.

Anne Butterfield Weills:

OK, good.

Camera Crew Member #1:

So, cut?

Interviewer:

Cut.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:23:19:00

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