



Interview with **Arthur Johnson**

Date: June 5, 1989

Interviewer: Sheila Bernard

Camera Rolls: 2134-2135

Sound Rolls: 263-264

Team: B

Interview gathered as part of *Eyes on the Prize II: America at the Racial Crossroads, 1965-mid 1980s*. Produced by Blackside, Inc. Housed at the Washington University Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.

### Preferred Citation

Interview with Arthur Johnson, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on June 5, 1989 for *Eyes on the Prize II: America at the Racial Crossroads, 1965-mid 1980s*. 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 II*.

[camera roll #2134]

[sound roll #263]

00:00:12:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark. Hit it.

[slate]

00:00:15:00

Interviewer:

So, if you could just tell me how Detroit was similar or different to other northern cities in the late '50s, early '60s.

00:00:21:00

Arthur Johnson:

I think in the '50s and the early '60s, the city of Detroit was very much a racist city, and its practices and policies reflected pretty much the pattern of race relations throughout the North. And it's important to emphasize in that connection that this was racism in the raw and, and it was only different in, in certain aspects, certain characters.

00:00:52:00

Interviewer:

I have to stop you for a second.

[cut]

[wild sound]

Interviewer:

I think if you would be more spec—

[cut]

00:00:58:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark.

[slate]

00:01:02:00

Interviewer:

OK. And if you could just tell us again what Detroit was like.

00:01:05:00

Arthur Johnson:

Well, Detroit in the '50s and, and the early '60s was very much a racist city, and this was a problem which characterized every aspect of community life. Housing segregation was rampant, job discrimination was rampant. A Black person was not able to be hired as a, as a cab driver, Checker Cab driver, nor would a cab, Checker Cab pick a Black person up downtown Detroit unless they felt like it, in spite of the law. Discrimination in public eating and drinking establishments was, was, was common. So, this was a, a very racist city and I think its ways and, and practices in, in that period reflected pretty much the, the character of the racial problem throughout the North.

00:01:56:00

Interviewer:

And was, was progress being made by 1961?

00:02:00:00

Arthur Johnson:

Well, I think we began to, to, to see some, some, some progress. For one thing, the NACP conducted, I think, the nation's first real, real sit-ins in the city of Detroit, in public eating and drinking establishments. So, we, we began to, to break that, that pattern. In 1954, in December of '54, one of the major hotels in Detroit for the first time permitted Blacks to use their banquet facility. And then coming up to, to the election that I think that really had significant impact from a race relation standpoint was when the young Jerry Cavanagh, 33 years old, defeated the incumbent mayor, Louie Miriani, and it was, and, and that defeat was brought about primarily because Blacks had been so aroused and angered by Miriani's police crackdown, which was really directed against the Black community, that, that Blacks really were able to mobilize enough votes and with enough White votes to defeat Miriani.

00:03:11:00

Interviewer:

OK, stop.

[cut]

[wild sound]

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK.

Interviewer:

I'm sorry I interrupted. That was a good answer. That was very clear. [beep] Do you have any, any pers—

[cut]

00:03:16:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark.

[slate]

00:03:19:00

Interviewer:

So, what was the policy?

00:03:20:00

Arthur Johnson:

The police policy in the Miriani-ordered police crackdown was to arrest citizens, unreasonable—

00:03:31:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

I'm sorry [inaudible]

Interviewer:

We've got [unintelligible]

[beep]

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark.

00:03:33:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Marker.

[slate]

00:03:35:00

Interviewer:

So, what was the policy?

00:03:37:00

Arthur Johnson:

The policy, police policy that had been ordered by Mir-Miriani was to arrest suspicious people in suspicious and unreasonable places. Everybody in town interpreted that policy to be directed against Black Detroiters, and the police clearly acted that out because they began to stop, arrest Black people at will.

00:04:06:00

Interviewer:

And what happened to you?

00:04:07:00

Arthur Johnson:

I was victimized by the same kind of arrest in front of my home, just having walked out of my house and was attempting to get in my automobile.

00:04:19:00

Interviewer:

OK. Stop for a second.

Arthur Johnson:

When I was—

Interviewer:

Can you, can you just tell me, without, just tell me sort of just the fac—

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

[coughs] Marker.

00:04:26:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Marker.

[slate]

00:04:28:00

Interviewer:

OK, so could you just tell me what happened?

00:04:29:00

Arthur Johnson:

OK. I was arrested in front of my house when I was about to get in my automobile. But before I could get in police officers drove by, stopped, jumped out, asked me why I was there, and I said, Well, what do you mean? and they proceeded then to search me on, on, on the scene. And I, I, I told them at the time that I would go to the police precinct and complain about that. That was a typical example of what the, this arresting of suspicious people in suspicious places. I, and I didn't understand really why either label should apply to me. I was, I was in front of my home, getting in my automobile. With, absolutely with nothing else in sight that would cause anyone to be suspicious of anything.

00:05:19:00

Interviewer:

And how did that relate to Cavanagh's election?

00:05:22:00

Arthur Johnson:

The Black community reacted against this police crackdown with considerable anger and dismay, and that anger was finally organized and directed to a political campaign to unseat Miriani. And Jerry Cavanagh at 33 years old presented himself, and he came at the right time and he was the right man, and he won the election.

00:05:46:00

Interviewer:

OK, stop.

[cut]

[wild sound]

Camera Crew Member #1:

That was very good.

Interviewer:

That was a very nice answer. I'd like to move into another way of—

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Marker.

00:05:52:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark.

[slate]

00:05:54:00

Interviewer:

So, so what's good?

00:05:56:00

Arthur Johnson:

Detroit in 1967 had its bright spots, at least promising. For one thing, the new mayor had drastically reformed the leadership of the police department. More Blacks were coming into the department. The policy at that time was more respectful of the Black community. There were no remnants, remaining remnants of the so-called police crackdown. The city, the city's economic health was considerably better than it is today and, and I, and, and the employment rate among Blacks was better than it is at, at, even at this moment. The housing was, was fairly plentiful although there was discrimination and segregation, you know, throughout the city. Still, Blacks could find housing, and in many cases they found it possible to find an apartment, but it was more difficult to find "the" apartment one wanted at that time. So, Detroit looked like, a, a rather typical American city struggling with the race problem as all

other cities, and, and, and it was kind of on its way, I think, to becoming a better city. Now, it had much to, to correct, however. Discrimination was, was still rampant.

00:07:29:00

Interviewer:

I'm gonna stop for a sec. I'm sorry, I just need you to, because of the structure that we're [beep] I need you to be—

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK, marker.

00:07:34:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Marker.

[slate]

00:07:36:00

Interviewer:

So, what about good news?

00:07:39:00

Arthur Johnson:

I think Detroit, in 1967, had a number of bright spots. It had a strong Black middle class, it had a fairly stable employment rate. It was even regarded as a great American city, but it had problems of racism which were very serious and which could be seen in the housing market, which could be seen still in rampant discrimination in employment, which could be seen in the school system which still did not have large numbers of, of, of Blacks in administrative positions. When I came to the position of Assistant Superintendent in 1966, one of the daily newspapers in Detroit, in fact the \_Detroit Free Press\_, carried a headline, "Negro Appointed to High School Post." I, I think that's a significant marker of what, where Blacks and Whites were in the city of Detroit in 1967.

00:08:48:00



Interviewer:

OK, stop. So, now I wanna move ahead to July twenty—

[cut]

[camera roll #2135]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Marker.

00:08:53:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark.

[slate]

00:08:56:00

Interviewer:

If you could tell me about going on, on peace patrol on 12th Street.

00:08:59:00

Arthur Johnson:

The Black administrative assistant in the police department, Hubert Locke, called me at about six thirty in the morning, and I think he called several people in the community who were regarded as, as, as Black leaders, I suppose, to come to Grace Episcopal Church. He said we were in trouble, there was a situation developing on 12th Street that seemed to be getting out of hand. And so, when we got to the church, he explained what they had seen, what they knew in the police department and asked if we would assist the police effort by going in teams throughout the area and asking people to leave the streets and return to their homes. I was paired with the then young Congressman John Conyers, and Hubert Locke passed out bullhorns, so John took the bullhorn and I drove my car. We left Virginia Park and 12th Street and had gotten to Hazelwood, which is about six, seven blocks north, when the crowd was so large and the violence, open violence taking place right in the street in terms of trash cans being picked up and thrown against the shop windows and people just walking in and taking things and [pause] the, and fires were already, were burning in different places. ***The crowd, the whole scene was such that I could not drive my car further.*** John finally got out, out of the car and stood on the hood of the, of my car with the bullhorn

appealing to people to return to the streets. Finally, I got out of my car and got on the hood of the car with John, and there is a picture, at least a new—one news photo I've seen—

00:10:58:00

Interviewer:

I'm sorry, I need to stop you and we can pick it up from John getting outta the car, 'cause you said "return to the streets." Can you say—

Camera Crew Member #1:

Should we cut?

Interviewer:

No, it's OK. Oh, you did? He just misspoke.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark.

00:11:07:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Marker.

[slate]

00:11:11:00

Arthur Johnson:

Because the char- of the character of the situation at that point, *John Conyers finally got out of the car, stood on the hood of it and attempted to speak to the people about leaving the street and, and returning to their homes.* I, I watched that for a while *and finally I got out of my car and* I stood on the hood of the car. I *whispered in John's ear*, I think that this is over *and I would like to get my car out of here if I can.* And that was it.

00:11:47:00

Interviewer:

Can you describe the noise, describe the sound?

00:11:50:00

Arthur Johnson:

The, the noise was of a type that I, I really had never heard before and I have not heard since. It was a combination of, something of, I guess you would have to say a, a, a kind of celebration in the air. There were angry voices and there was laughter. There were crashes all around us. There were the sounds of burning. There were shouts of, of, of anger. The combination of all of those sounds is what made for me the sound of the riot that I cannot forget. And I don't think that one is likely to hear it except in that kind of a, a, a violent situation, out of control.

00:12:47:00

Interviewer:

And you had said you felt you had lost the battle. That the community had lost control and had failed.

00:12:54:00

Arthur Johnson:

No. Well, I don't think, I don't say the community lost control. After all, the large, the larger number of Blacks didn't participate in the riot. Most people were in their homes trying to make sure that they could isolate themselves in, in a sense.

00:13:08:00

Interviewer:

In terms, in terms of you wanting to retreat from 12th Street.

00:13:11:00

Arthur Johnson:

Oh. I thought the situation on 12th Street, the, the, the, the scene there was out of control. And no one could appeal to reason in that situation. I finally determined that. I should've known better, I think, at the outset.

00:13:26:00

Interviewer:

OK, stop.

[cut]

[sound roll #264]

Crew member #1:

Mark.

00:13:32:00

Crew member #2:

Marker.

[slate]

00:13:34:00

Interviewer:

OK. If you could tell me again about going home and then getting a call.

00:13:37:00

Arthur Johnson:

By Sunday afternoon, when I returned to my home, Judge Damon Keith called me and said, Arthur, the people who are really responsible for all the decisions that are being made as to how we treat this situation are Whites, and I think that there ought to be some Blacks present who could in some way offer some assistance and at least be consulted. And he suggested that we go to the police department and I said, I think that's a good idea. And so, the two of us went. And we were welcomed by the, the Commissioner of Police, Ray Girardin, and the Mayor, Cavanagh, and the Governor, George Romney. And from that point on we stayed in close touch with them right up to the point of being asked our, our views as to whether we felt the situation was such that federal troops should be called in.

00:14:50:00

Interviewer:

OK, stop for a sec.

[cut]

[wild sound]

Interviewer:

I wanna keep going with that. Can you talk about that in, in the, the sense—

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Marker.

00:14:57:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Marker.

[slate]

00:14:58:00

Interviewer:

So, if you could first give me the sense of just the growing—

Arthur Johnson:

I think by the second day of the riot there was a feeling of great desperation among all the people in town who had any sanity left about this, and—

Interviewer:

I'm sorry, I have to stop you. It was the first day still.

00:15:11:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Still rolling.

00:15:13:00

Interviewer:

So, if you could just start with the, the growing sense of fear and don't put a date to it.

00:15:19:00

Arthur Johnson:

OK. OK. *The, the growing sense of, of, of, of concern in the community was that the situation was out of hand, that no one knew where it was going, when it would end, or even how to end it.* And I think the great fear among many Blacks was that to, to, call on, on, on federal, federal troops to put an end to this would carry with it the high risk of, of considerable bloodshed. And I think there were some people who were understandably concerned about that. Although I, I, I felt and, and I know that Judge Keith felt that that is something that had to be, had to be done if, if this was going to be stopped.

00:16:13:00

Interviewer:

So, could you tell me about the, about the decision to bring in troops. How did—

00:16:20:00

Arthur Johnson:

The, the, the governor and the mayor and the chief of police had been in touch with the White House, President Johnson. And, in fact, the president had sent out his emissary, Secretary Vance, to examine the situation and try to determine for himself what ought to be done. But as we all looked at it, and certainly Judge Keith and I joined in, in, in reaching the decision that federal troops should be called in. Governor Romney, to his credit, although we had no official position or responsibility there, asked what was our judgment about it before he finally decided to make that, that call to the White House.

00:17:09:00

Interviewer:

OK, stop.

[cut]

[wild sound]

Camera Crew Member #1:

This will be take twelve.

Interviewer:

I have [unintelligible] questions. How, how would you want to, in the, in the process of me going—

Arthur Johnson:

Oh, I, I—

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Marker.

00:17:27:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark.

[slate]

00:17:30:00

Arthur Johnson:

Because Black leadership had not given Whites in the leadership of this community a clear signal of pending trouble, perhaps had not warned them of the great danger of such an experience, they, a number of them began to feel that they'd been talking to the wrong leadership in the Black community. That was a, a, a comment on the record of this whole experience I think that is significant, and I think it's regrettable. The Black community leadership was grossly offended by this because they did not accept the responsibility of, of, of, of, with certainty telling anyone how the Black community would react on a given day under the weight of the racial oppression that existed in this city. And when it did happen, I think Black leadership, in many cases, was as surprised at the form it took as anyone else, and they were entitled to be surprised, I think. The, the, the, the ultimate challenge here, I think, in, in how this whole process and, and how this experience was viewed by Whites and Blacks came at the point at which within the organization of New Detroit there was, a, a, a challenge to the board of New Detroit to support a hundred-thousand-dollar grant to a new Black organization. A number of us Blacks, and as well as some Whites in the board of New Detroit, felt that that was virtually an insult to the established Black leadership and to the established Black organizations. And so, they very strongly opposed that. This is, I think, the first critical, very serious issue that developed within the, this new organization called New Detroit.

00:19:47:00

Interviewer:

Stop for a second.

Crew member #1:

We could change, change here.

Interviewer:

Yeah

[cut]

[camera roll #2136]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Marker.

[slate]

00:20:00:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

[coughs]

00:20:01:00

Interviewer:

So, what happened on 12th Street?

00:20:03:00

Arthur Johnson:

Well, as I sat in my car looking at that scene and listening to that scene, terribly aware that John Conyers is desperately trying to get the attention of people to persuade them to return to their homes, I had many thoughts. One, that there's a, there's a terrible distance and, and some difference between me and the people who are, who are doing this. I was seeing something I had never seen before and that was citizens, in all other respects normal looking citizens who, and young people in particular, who pick up trash cans on the street, break windows of



a modest little shop, climb in the window and take whatever they want, cross the street, and nobody's in a position to do anything about it. There was some laughter at some of this, there was anger being expressed, there was, the sound of, of, of sirens, there were this—

00:21:12:00

Interviewer:

And how'd you feel?

00:21:14:00

Arthur Johnson:

I, I felt, I felt terribly afraid in this. I was, I was, I was quite frightened, and I had never been so frightened in all of my life because I'd never been in a scene like this. And as I've said before, I felt that sitting there in my car I was witnessing a freight train coming at me and that I was on the track and, and, and, and couldn't move off.

00:21:41:00

Interviewer:

OK. Can you just tell us that one more time without saying "as I said before"? 'Cause we won't have heard it before. How did you feel sitting in that car?

00:21:51:00

Arthur Johnson:

Well, I felt like a, a freight train was coming and, and, and that I was almost stuck on the track.

00:22:00:00

Interviewer:

And what do you say to somebody who says this was a rebellion and it shouldn't have been stopped and they shouldn't have brought law and order in, they should've let it happen?

00:22:07:00

Arthur Johnson:

Oh, I think that that's nonsense. The fact of the matter is, the si—the situation that had developed—highly explosive, very dangerous, and also very damaging at that point—was

one that no one could control. It was out of control. Now, nobody in his, her good mind, would want to say, Don't stop this. So, you know, that isn't, that's not a, that's not a, that's not an acceptable alternative. I mean, you don't have an acceptable alternative. At some point it has to be ended.

00:22:48:00

Interviewer:

Cut. Anything else?

Camera Crew Member #3:

No, I think it's good.

Interviewer:

Is there anything we haven't asked you?

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:22:57:00

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