

Interview with **Richard Jensen**

Date: May 23, 1989

Interviewers: Louis Massiah (Interviewer #1) and Terry Rockefeller (Interviewer #2)

Camera Rolls: 3105-3106

Sound Rolls: 347

Team: A

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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 #3105]

[sound roll #347]

[slate]

00:00:13:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

I'm trying to think of [unintelligible].

[slate]

00:00:16:00

Interviewer #1:

OK, we're starting now. You became a policeman in 1966. What was it like being an Oakland policeman in, in 1966?

00:00:25:00

Richard Jensen:

Well, it was a real honor being a Oakland policeman. Like I say, it was a hard, hard thing to get to be a policeman. Only one or two out of a hundred applicants got to be. I was very proud of being an Oakland policeman. I was born and raised in Oakland, and it, I tell you, we

had a lot of problems in those days, however. We had the, lot of militancy going on with the, with the formation of the Black Panther Party and also the, the Hell's Angels were the same kind of a thing, only it was another kind of a group, but a lot, lot of problems. We had riots at the different universities.

00:00:55:00

Interviewer #1:

One, one second. If, if you'd look at me, and just sit straight up again. What was it like being a policeman in 1966?

00:01:03:00

Richard Jensen:

Well, it was a interesting job. I, we had a variety of things to do. Believe it. It was a, I dunno, [laughs] what was it like? It was, it was fun for me. I enjoyed it.

00:01:15:00

Interviewer #1:

OK, could you talk a little bit about your rookie class? Where, where people were from, where the other guys were from, that were in your rookie class.

00:01:24:00

Richard Jensen:

Yeah, I was in a rookie class, so there was maybe seventeen of us, from all parts of the country. Maybe five or six people in the class from Florida and a couple from Michigan that I recall, and a couple fellows from Baltimore, only a couple were from the Bay area. I was one of the two people from Oakland.

00:01:44:00

Interviewer #1:

Why, why do you think they recruited from other parts of the country?

00:01:47:00

Richard Jensen:

They wanted to get the best people possible.

00:01:49:00

Interviewer #1:

OK, make sure you, you refer to who you're talking about. Why did, why did the police department refer, why did the police department recruit from other parts of the country?

00:01:59:00

Richard Jensen:

Well, you have a better choice of applicants when you go all over the United States. You know, there, there was a, they were recruiting from all over the United States, rather, the Oakland Police personnel. They went, they went into all these different college campuses. Michigan State, and, and Florida in particular, they went down and actively recruited the candidates for the Oakland Police Department. You know, we, we got paid more in those days than they did back east, so the people from back east liked to come out here. They could get better pay.

00:02:26:00

Interviewer #1:

OK, who were the Black Panthers? Who did you see them as?

Richard Jensen:

A group of militant young Black people who were—

Interviewer #1:

I'm sorry. If you could, rephrase the question, like, "The Black Panthers were..."

00:02:40:00

Richard Jensen:

Yeah, the Black Panthers were a group of young Black militants who were unhappy with the system the way it was in those days. They didn't like the police department in particular, the, the way the police department was run, and they didn't like the way the economics of the city in general was run. They just, they, they thought that the, the policeman were blocking the way for the Black people's progress. That's, that's what they advocate in their newspapers and things that they said.

00:03:10:00

Interviewer #1:

When they, when they acted on things, like going up to the State House in Sacramento, what, what was your feeling?

00:03:17:00

Richard Jensen:

Well, I didn't have any particular. It was unusual to see people speaking out so, so openly, and, and carrying guns and ammunition belts, and stuff, looking militant, and walking into the State Capitol carrying that kind of stuff. You know, it was a little unusual to see that. You know, it was, I didn't have any particular feeling about it. I...we, we were familiar that these people were capa—capable of carrying guns.

00:03:46:00

Interviewer #1:

You, you, we were talking earlier about the fact that, you know, here are these guys calling policeman pigs.

Richard Jensen:

Yeah.

Interviewer #1:

What was that like?

Richard Jensen:

Oh, that was unusual. I wasn't used to that myself, and—

Interviewer #1:

If you could, rephrase the question.

00:04:00:00

Richard Jensen:

Yeah, well, when someone calls you a pig, for no particular reason other than you're, you're wearing a blue uniform, you know, you didn't do anything to them, it, it kinda hurt you, you

know? I, I didn't like it. I, and I didn't particularly do anything about it either, but I didn't like it. I didn't do anything to deserve that title. It, it hurt my feelings. I didn't like to be called pig.

00:04:24:00

Interviewer #1:

What did it mean to you that this group of Black men were, were taking to, to weapons?
What, what did you, what did that mean to you?

00:04:33:00

Richard Jensen:

Well, I mean, you might run into, to have a confrontation with them at any time. You know, they were, *they were out looking at what the police were doing. We had officers stopping a, a car, and then we would have a, a carload full of these Black Panther people pull up behind them, and watch them, and see what they were doing.* You know, they were, they were looking at what the police were doing. So that, you know, not too comforting to have some people who, you know—actually they didn't have weapons on them, but the, in the—when they were out here, you know. Illegal for them to carry weapons, and they didn't really have them that we could see. If we did of course, they would've been arrested. But, they were out watching to see what the police were doing.

00:05:13:00

Interviewer #1:

Could you cut for a second?

Camera Crew Member #1:

Sure thing.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #2:

Speed.

[slate]

00:05:20:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Rolling. OK, can you hold on one second. Let me get, let me get settled here. [unintelligible]
Thank you.

00:05:26:00

Interviewer #1:

OK, Mr. Jensen, could you tell us what happened on that night of April 6th, 1968, two days after Martin Luther King was assa—

00:05:34:00

Richard Jensen:

Yeah, I'd been, we were all working twelve-hour shifts in Oakland. All on alert to come in and, and not have days off, were canceled. And I was working my day off, a twelve-hour day with—in an area of Oakland I wasn't familiar with. The, the regular beat officer, I was working with him, so working a two-man unit. And along about nine o'clock at night, just as it started to get dark, we were driving down Union, Twenty-eight and Union, and, and we saw a car parked in the middle of the street. A light blue '53 Ford. The lights were on. The car doors, both doors, were open. And the car appeared to be empty, but it was parked in the middle of the street with the lights on, doors open. Then, as we drove up, behind it we saw a young Black man take a look at us. He was standing by an open car door, and he ran. Ran towards the, the houses, and we pull up behind the car. I reach for the microphone to run the plate. It was a Florida plate on the car, and just as I was reaching, I got shot in my arm and, and back. All kind of bullets just like the Fourth of July firecrackers going off. I must've been hit four, five times, and slumped to the seat of the car, and then the bullet, the firing just continued, bullets just flying all over, glass flying everywhere. My head, and arms, and everything's all full of glass. And my partner got out of the other side of the car, and returned a couple of shots with his thirty-eight, and came back in the car to get to the radio to tell other units where we were and what was happening. And he did do that. And of course once the other units heard where we're at, what was happening, you know, then you, then you hear all these sirens coming, you knew that the help was coming. The next thing I remember was, was being lifted out of the car by some people. A couple of who were crying, some police sergeants I used to work for, and they thought I was dead. I had the bullets in my back, and my arm, and my leg. I had, I'd been shot maybe nine different times with bullets going in and out certain places. I had a lot of bullet holes that night, and they, they thought I was dead. I, I wasn't, but the bullets, the firing continued. It was like a, it was like a war going on, you know? They, we found out later there was thirteen people shooting at us. Our car, our black and white car had, later on they counted 157 holes in our car. That don't, I don't know how many missed, or how many went through the windows, but 157 of them hit our car. Several of them hit me. My partner was grazed.

[backdrop falls down]

00:08:03:00

Interviewer #1:

Let's cut for a second.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Sorry.

[cut]

00:08:08:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK. Marker.

[slate]

00:08:12:00

Interviewer #1:

OK, you were working the nights of the draft riots in, in Berkeley and, and in Oakland.

00:08:17:00

Richard Jensen:

There were some draft riots at the draft board in Oakland early in the morning, yeah, at five in the morning. Yeah.

00:08:22:00

Interviewer #1:

OK, could you tell me about the, the first day that, the day you said the police won, and then the second day?

00:08:27:00

Richard Jensen:

Yeah, we had two different, there were demonstrations at the draft board opposing the war in Vietnam. And, and the first day of these riots, we were very well-prepared, the police were. We knew exactly what we were gonna do. We knew which way we were gonna move the

crowd. We knew what areas we were to keep clear. You know? We were very well-run and organized, and when we confronted the demonstrators, we soon moved the demonstrators out and cleared a path for the people coming into the draft board. And there was just no problems in Oakland that day, especially for the, the police. You know, there was a well-run unit and we didn't have any problems. The, the, the crowd was disorganized and didn't know what to do, and they finally left. The police had a lot of police, and they were well—we knew what we were doing that day.

00:09:20:00

Interviewer #1:

And then, the, the second time.

00:09:21:00

Richard Jensen:

The second day wasn't the same. We, we had a...our police chief came back to town. The first day, things was run by our other—deputy chief, named Ray Brown, who was a former military man, he knew—competent man. The next day, we had Charlie Gain come back to town, who was the chief of police. And he didn't like the way the thing went the first day. Evidently the police were involved in some violence that he didn't think was necessary, so the second day of these draft board demonstrations, we stayed in the, in the parking lot, several hundred of us, and watched these people turn over vehicles, and block intersections, and light the cars on fire, and the city was a mess the second day. The police didn't do much. It was two different days.

00:10:08:00

Interviewer #1:

And how did you feel to see this disturbance?

00:10:10:00

Richard Jensen:

Very frustrated the second day, sit there, and watch people destroy property, which you're sworn to protect. You know, you're supposed to protect life and property, and we weren't. Very frustrating. Very frustrating.

00:10:24:00

Interviewer #1:

Could you talk a little bit about John Frey and just what type of man?

00:10:27:00

Richard Jensen:

Yeah, I knew John Frey. John Frey is an officer, a young, blonde, blue-eyed officer who, who confronted Huey Newton one night, the leader of the Panther Party, at maybe three or four in the morning, down on a lonely, dark street. He stopped his car, and the two struggled and shot each other. Frey was killed. Both Newton and Frey were, were similar type people. They were aggressive, cocky young people. And that's, they had a, a, Newton got convicted later on, of manslaughter, served some time, a year or so, and then he got out.

00:11:04:00

Interviewer #1:

OK.

Richard Jensen:

That's, I really don't know, you know, I wasn't there that night.

[rollout on camera roll]

[camera roll #3106]

Camera Crew Member #1:

And marker. Thank you.

[slate]

00:11:14:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Thank you.

00:11:16:00

Interviewer #1:

OK, again, was police brutality a, a major concern of the police hierarchy in, in, in Oakland? And when there were complaints, how, how was it dealt with?

00:11:28:00

Richard Jensen:

Well, police brutality was right on the headlines of, the administration was very concerned about police brutality, and when a complaint was lodged against an officer, they took statements and investigated the claim thoroughly like they do a crime. And in those days, the policemen, we were required to take lie-detector tests, you know? Since then, that's been ruled invalid, illegal. But in those days, you were on the hot seat, and if you did something wrong, it was thoroughly investigated, and like I say, if they couldn't get to the bottom of it, you were put on a lie-detector test. You went over to San Francisco, and have an FBI man administer you a lie-detector. I know many of my friends, three or four people that got fired for brutality, and several of them have been forced to resign over it. They investigated it like a crime.

00:12:17:00

Interviewer #1:

Were there many incidences?

00:12:19:00

Richard Jensen:

Well, in, in a department of six or seven hundred officers, you always had the same thirty or forty officers cause the problems. And the, the same thirty or forty officers almost every time, they were involved in, in an arrest. It involved some kind of physical contact. See, they were just aggressive, that's all. It's just [pause]—

00:12:40:00

Interviewer #1:

Did, did you see the struggle? I mean, the Panthers said that their struggle was part of the, a liberation struggle. Did...in, in any way, did you see the struggle for self-defense that, carrying guns and law books, did you see that as being a part of a civil rights struggle at all?

00:12:54:00

Richard Jensen:

I, I couldn't see the, the justification they had for the displaying of weapons and then, and the shooting at police officers. Myself, the only experience I had was they shot at me, and I had never had a complaint or, or even knew of them. Never had a confrontation with any of them. You know, I couldn't understand why they would shoot me. But, they were unhappy with the

system. They were trying to change the system, and the, what they did may well have helped change it. It did change. The system did change.

00:13:25:00

Interviewer #1:

Once again, you were talking, we, you were talking about your, your, your rookie class. Could, could you talk about where the recruits were from? And you were saying [unintelligible]—

Richard Jensen:

Yeah, all from different parts of the United States.

Interviewer #1:

Once again if you could, rephrase the question.

00:13:37:00

Richard Jensen:

Yeah, the rookie class I was in, there were seventeen of us, and only two of us that I can recall were from the Bay area. I was from Oakland, and so was another kid. The—three or four officers from Florida, three or four from Michigan, Baltimore. A couple from Baltimore, Maryland. And New Jersey, and officers from all over the United States. In those days, Oakland recruited nationally.

00:14:03:00

Interviewer #1:

OK, were you ever aware of any sort of policy coming down either from the FBI or the federal government based on, on how to deal with the Black Panthers? I guess, on Huey?

00:14:14:00

Richard Jensen:

Oh no, there was, there was, if the FBI ever would say anything, it wouldn't be to the unit. It would never to, never to uniformed policemen. They may have talked to our intelligence unit. I have no idea, but never gave us any instruction on what to do. You know, we, ***we were advised by our sergeants, and lieutenants, and captains that the, the Panthers were armed, and violent, and were gonna be aggressive in their behavior towards us. We were advised to, to be aware of that,*** you know? And naturally we were. We knew who the Panthers were,

and then what the, you know, that they were gonna confront you physically. Yeah. That's just something to be aware of, that's all.

00:14:55:00

Interviewer #1:

OK.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Cut.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #2:

Speed.

[slate]

00:15:03:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

[unintelligible]

00:15:06:00

Interviewer #1:

OK, the question is, were you ever afraid? I mean—

00:15:11:00

Richard Jensen:

Well, when you first get to be a policeman, and, and you're working at night out there by yourself, yes, you're afraid right away. But as soon as you jump in the water, then to find out that the water's OK that night and, and, the, being a policeman, you get used to it. Sure, you're afraid. But later on, you're not afraid, and, and you're around so many, so many men that, that been through different wars. I worked with veterans of the Second World War and the, and the Korean War. You know, you're surrounded by brave men, and, and, and before long, you're a brave man, you know? Give me some men who are brave, stout-hearted men and I'll soon give you 10,000 more. And it, it, you know, just, you're strong, because they're strong.

00:15:53:00

Interviewer #1:

But what about after you were shot? That had to be a big—

00:15:54:00

Richard Jensen:

Well, when I was shot, yeah. It's, it didn't bother me. It didn't bother me at all. I'll tell you the truth. It, it turned out to be one of the things that happened to me in life that worked out for the best. I gained a certain amount of notoriety. People knew who I was. I got elected to the Police Union. I, I made sergeant after that. When I got back to work, I was able to work a nice shift. I had to work days with the weekends off. They were treating me nice after I got shot.

00:16:22:00

Interviewer #1:

I mean, what? Were you afraid of the Panthers?

00:16:23:00

Richard Jensen:

No. No, no, no. No, I wasn't afraid of 'em, no. That didn't bother me, that kind of stuff. You know, I knew another officer that got shot by Huey Newton. John Frey wasn't the only one. Cliff Heanes, we had another officer. And he reacted a bit differently than I did about it. He got, he was, he was, I dunno. He just didn't take it the same. He didn't take it in stride. Evidently thought about it too much, you know? I, it didn't bother me. I, I didn't think about it. They weren't after me in particular. They just, they were just after policemen. I happened to be there. That's all. That's what happened. No, no f—no fear. That, that kind of stuff. You get over that right away. And no hostility either. I wasn't really mad at 'em or anything. I, I just couldn't believe that they happened to shoot me, that's all.

00:17:10:00

Interviewer #1:

OK. Cut.

[cut]

[slate]

Richard Jensen:

I don't know what, what they wanna change anymore today. [laughs]

Interviewer #1:

One, one, one, one second.

[slate]

00:17:16:00

Interviewer #1:

All right. Actually, Terry, why don't you?

00:17:20:00

Interviewer #2:

You lived through this very, very dramatic period of change [unintelligible]—

00:17:23:00

Richard Jensen:

Yeah, the period I worked on the police department, from 1965, until the, the mid-'70s, we, we, we had a variety of things, you know, the, the Black Panthers, the Hell's Angels, the demonstrations, and the riots at, at the college campuses and draft boards. It was, it was a time of upheaval, and, and, and change in America. Change in Oakland in particular, that, what I was concerned with. And Oakland did change. It did change, and whether all this was responsible for it or, or these other people that really worked hard in a peaceful way, I don't know who, who would get the credit. All I know is Oakland is a changed city today, run, run by black people today. It wasn't before, so. It did change.

00:18:13:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Cut.

Interviewer #1:

Great.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:18:17:00

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