

Interview with **Rutha Mae Jackson** and **Willie Hill Jackson**

August 29, 1979

Money, Mississippi

Camera Roll: 18

Sound Roll: 11

Interview gathered as part of *America, They Loved You Madly*, a precursor to *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.

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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*.

00:00:02:00

[camera roll 18]

[sound roll 11]

[wild audio]

INTERVIEWER 1: A LONG TIME, ALMOST TWENTY-FIVE YEARS.

Willie Hill Jackson: Yeah.

00:00:12:00

[cut]

[slate]

INTERVIEWER 1: WERE YOU HERE THEN BOTH OF YOU?

Willie Hill: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

INTERVIEWER 1: CAN YOU TELL ME A LITTLE BIT WHAT HAPPENED? I KNOW YOU WEREN'T THERE DIRECTLY, BUT—

Willie Hill: Well, well, not—I can't tell you just what happened. All I can tell you is what they said, see, that's all. But he went in the store and whistled at this, at this lady or—

INTERVIEWER 1: THE BOYS WENT HOME RIGHT? THEY DIDN'T MAKE ANYTHING OUT OF IT. THEY WENT BACK TO THEIR GRANDFATHER?

Willie Hill: No, they, when he left there they said he went to Greenwood, you know. They, they was on their way to Greenwood anyway, they just stopped by there, so. And they left there and went to Greenwood and then they come back home sometime, oh, eleven, twelve. Between eleven, twelve o' clock that Saturday night. I think now, I'm not sure. And so this lady's husband wasn't, wasn't home. He was off on a, oh, I don't know, a vacation or went off on a trip, something like that. And, when he come in someone, someone told him what had happened. Then he, he and they say it was some colored fellow was up there. And he got this fella and they went to, to go show him where this, you know, where this boy lived. And they went down there and got him out so. So the boy was missing for what, almost a week, I believe, or about a week.

INTERVIEWER 1: WHERE'D, WHERE'D THEY FIND HIM?

Willie Hill: In the Tallahatchie River in [pause] Sunflower, no, that not Sunflower. In Tallahatchie County. I believe that's right.

00:02:30:00

INTERVIEWER 1: CAN YOU TELL US YOUR NAME PLEASE FOR, FOR THE CAMERA? I KNOW I'VE—

Rutha Mae Jackson: Rutha Mae Jackson.

INTERVIEWER 1: AND DID YOU KNOW EMMETT TILL?

Rutha Mae: No.

INTERVIEWER 1: DO YOU KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT—DO YOU KNOW THE STORY?

Rutha Mae: No.

INTERVIEWER 1: BUT WHAT WAS, WHAT WAS MISSISSIPPI LIKE '55? THAT'S THE YEAR YOU GOT MARRIED.

Rutha Mae: It was nice.

INTERVIEWER 1: NICE. [pause]

INTERVIEWER 2: YOUR, YOUR FAMILY MOVED AWAY AFTER—

Rutha Mae: Everybody moved.

INTERVIEWER 2: WHAT WAS THAT LIKE WHEN EVERYBODY WAS LEAVING? YOU WERE A, A NEWLYWED? I, I GUESS YOU'RE—

Rutha Mae: No, I hadn't gotten married.

INTERVIEWER 2: SO, BUT YOU WERE IN LOVE AND—

Rutha Mae: Yes.

INTERVIEWER 2: INVOLVED WITH SOMEONE AND PROBABLY A CRITICAL POINT IN YOUR LIFE.

Rutha Mae: Yeah, I got married, at 30 so, '55. That year, in November.

INTERVIEWER 2: UH-HUH. SO THAT, THAT WAS SOMETHING THAT HAPPENED RIGHT BEFORE YOUR MARRIAGE.

Rutha Mae: It happened before I got married.

INTERVIEWER 2: YEAH. YEAH.

00:03:27:00

INTERVIEWER 1: THEY SAY THAT ROY BRYANT IS STILL LIVING UP THE WAY HERE. IN FACT WE'VE TALKED WITH SOMEONE TODAY. SOMEBODY—THE LAWYER TOLD US THAT BRYANT WAS LIVING AROUND.

Willie Hill: Oh man, I don't know about it. I didn't, I didn't hear anything about that. I really don't know whether he's still living. I don't see how the way he was looking the last time I saw him.

INTERVIEWER 2: WHAT DID HE LOOK LIKE THE LAST TIME YOU SAW HIM?

Willie Hill: Whew [sic]. Man, he was nothing but skin and bones and just looked real terrible. Like he hadn't eaten in a, in a week or two.

INTERVIEWER 2: WAS THAT IN THIS AREA? I MEAN—

Willie Hill: Oh yeah. Mmm-hmm.

INTERVIEWER 2: YEAH.

Willie Hill: At the café. He used, used to be right up there. Right in—used to be a café on this side of the road, right there on this side of—where you see your place is.

00:04:11:00

INTERVIEWER 1: WHAT, WHAT HAPPENED TO BRYANT'S WIFE? DID SHE MOVE AWAY?

Willie Hill: I never knowed [sic] what happened to her. Never heard from her. Really people don't even—they don't talk about that. That's something that nobody say a word about.

INTERVIEWER 2: WHY'S THAT?

Willie Hill: Well, it was pretty rough for a Negro to say anything about it in the beginning, you know. So, but the white people they don't even talk about it either. So, nobody says anything about the Emmett Till case. Every once in a while, you know, you hear it in the, in the big news, you know, on TV or something like that. Someone might say something about the Emmett Till case, you know, talking. They, well, they mostly be talking about something else and they'll bring that, you know, that word up. But around here, nobody says anything about it. White or either black.

00:04:58:00

INTERVIEWER 1: DO YOU EVER THINK ABOUT IT?

Willie Hill: Oh yeah, I think about it, yeah. But that's all. I mean, everybody was sorry. I think it hit everybody a pretty hard lick. And really I think a lot of white people saw it too, after. You know, yeah. I think because it was a great big hurt on Mississippi and it brought, well, it brought a lot of changes. And I, myself, I believe that's the beginning of [pause] this civil right movement here. I believe that started all that, you see. Cause really wasn't too much going on in the behalf of civil right and—before then. So after then things really got stood up. So that's—I think that's one of the things that's—as far as there is today on the civil right.

00:06:01:00

INTERVIEWER 1: IT MUST HAVE TAKEN A LOT OF COURAGE FOR SOME OF THE BLACK WITNESSES TO GO TESTIFY AT THE TRIAL UP IN SUMNER. WE WERE UP AT THE COURTHOUSE TODAY AND PEOPLE WERE TELLING ME WHAT THAT WAS LIKE. THEY HAD SOME BLACK FOLKS TESTIFY.

Willie Hill: Yeah, yeah. I'm sure. Well, we don't—I don't know any—anyone. There wasn't anyone from this area, I don't think, you know, somebody from up there where they—what they said they did, to mention it, you know up in, out of this county. So—

INTERVIEWER 2: WHERE WAS MILAM'S FARMHOUSE? THE BARN? YOU DON'T KNOW? IT WASN'T IN THIS AREA?

Willie Hill: It's, it's in another county, see.

INTERVIEWER 2: YEAH, YEAH.

INTERVIEWER 1: BUT THIS, THIS THING ABOUT THE WITNESSES, THEY MUST HAVE—

Willie Hill: They were someone living up in the area too. See, from what I hear, yeah.

INTERVIEWER 1: THERE ARE A LOT OF THINGS THEY COULD DO TO YOU IN '55, TO SOMEBODY WHO—

Willie Hill: Right, there's a lot of things they could do to you. And well, it's—a lot of things they can do to you now, you know. But things just ain't as bad as it used to be. So, course now, you still get in a lot of trouble, just by this talk here, see. You could. Now you might not, I don't know, but you could. See, I may have to move tomorrow. See, [laughs] you can't ever tell, once he find out who you all is, what you all doing.

00:07:23:00

INTERVIEWER 2: GO ON.

INTERVIEWER 1: WE'RE, WE'RE DOING THINGS OURSELVES. TWO PROGRAMERS—

Rutha Mae: Y'all [sic] not putting this on TV are you?

INTERVIEWER 1: IT WON'T BE ON TV FOR A LONG TIME. IT'LL, IT'LL BE A LONG TIME BEFORE YOU SEE THIS. ARE YOU WORRIED ABOUT THAT? BEING ON TV?

Rutha Mae: Yeah. Cause I have to live here.

INTERVIEWER 2: WHAT WOULD THAT MEAN TO YOU? I MEAN WHAT DO YOU FEEL WOULD HAPPEN, IF SOMEBODY SEES IT?

Rutha Mae: I don't know what might happen.

INTERVIEWER 1: WHAT ARE YOUR GREATEST FEARS?

Rutha Mae: Well, just like you. You'd be afraid to stay here. You don't know what might happen.

00:08:06:00

INTERVIEWER 2: HAVE THINGS, YOU KNOW, CONTINUED TO HAPPEN HERE SO THAT BLACK FOLKS ARE, ARE FRIGHTENED TO TALK ABOUT WHAT THEY

FEEL AND WHAT, WHAT THEY SEE?

Rutha Mae: Not really. Some—I imagine some things they be scared to talk about.

Willie Hill: Well, there ain't too much—

INTERVIEWER 2: OK.

Willie Hill: Ain't too, too much, you know, going on as bad as that. You know, so. So if it come down to something like that, you know, it still might be, you know, a lot of people might—wouldn't want to talk too much about it right off. Even if they know something about it, it's gonna be, they gonna talk slow, cause when you're born here and raised here and you got this in you, see, and it's hard to get it out. So, I mean fearing the white man. So, you know, you gots [sic] a lot of people that from way back, you know, from what I've heard and read that they didn't fear 'em, you know. But those are the main ones that—some of the first ones that was dead, see. So anybody that's kind of scared of dying, you know, you gonna be kind of scared to talk about things like that.

00:09:19:00

INTERVIEWER 2: MRS. JACKSON, WHY DID YOU AND YOUR HUSBAND DECIDE TO STAY HERE? WHEN YOUR FAMILY LEFT AND YOUR KINFOLKS GOT UP AND LEFT AFTER THAT HORRIBLE THING HAPPENED, WHY DID YOU AND HE DECIDE TO STAY?

Rutha Mae: Because his mother's here. All his relatives here. And he didn't want to go now.

INTERVIEWER 2: DID YOU WANT TO GO?

Rutha Mae: Yes.

INTERVIEWER 2: [pause] HOW DID YOU FEEL ABOUT STAYING HERE?

Rutha Mae: Well, I felt OK because he was here with me. I felt kind of safe.

INTERVIEWER 2: AND HOW'S IT BEEN FOR YOU HERE?

Rutha Mae: OK.

Willie Hill: Yeah, it's been, OK.

Rutha Mae: We haven't heard, you know, we don't hear anything about that anymore since it happened. Not anything.

00:10:09:00

INTERVIEWER 1: THERE HAVEN'T BEEN THINGS LIKE THAT LATELY?

Rutha Mae: No. No.

INTERVIEWER 1: IF ANYTHING DID HAPPEN AS A RESULT OF THIS TALK, YOU'D LET US KNOW RIGHT AWAY WOULDN'T YOU?

Rutha Mae: Pardon me?

INTERVIEWER 1: IF ANYTHING DID HAPPEN AS A RESULT OF—

Willie Hill: I don't know. How? I mean we don't know how to let you know either. That's—

INTERVIEWER 1: WELL, WE'LL MAKE SURE YOU KNOW WHERE WE ARE.

INTERVIEWER 2: WE'LL MAKE SURE.

INTERVIEWER 1: PE—PEOPLE SHOULDN'T SUFFER FROM TALKING THEIR MIND. TELLING THE TRUTH.

Willie Hill: No, they shouldn't.

Rutha Mae: But they will [laughs].

INTERVIEWER 1: THANK YOU BOTH VERY MUCH.

Willie Hill: Welcome.

INTERVIEWER 1: CAN WE GET YOUR, YOUR NAMES SO WE CAN SEND YOU A LITTLE SOMETHING FROM BOSTON?

Willie Hill: Willie Hill.

INTERVIEWER 1: BRIDGET, CAN YOU GET IT DOWN?

INTERVIEWER 2: YEAH.

INTERVIEWER 1: IF WE JUST SEND IT TO CARE OF MONEY DOES THAT—

Willie Hill: Greenwood. Route 3, Greenwood.

Rutha Mae: Y'all through?

INTERVIEWER 1: YUP.

Rutha Mae: Thank you.

INTERVIEWER 1: THANK YOU.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:11:17:00

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