Interview with **Judy Varley**
Date: April 10, 1989
Interviewer:
Camera Rolls: 1074-1075
Sound Rolls: 133
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 #1074]
[sound roll #133]

00:00:12:00

Camera crew member #1:

Marker.

Camera crew member #2:

Mark one.

[slate]

00:00:16:00

Interviewer:

How did you come to hear about the march, and how did you end up going on the march?

00:00:22:00

Judy Varley:

I had worked down in Mississippi and Alabama the two preceding summers, and as a member of the Medical Committee for Human Rights, we served to provide medical

presence at marches. We do other things, but when there's a march, we have found that local emergency rooms are none too accessible. And so, we go and provide first aid, and I of course heard about it through the papers, made arrangements to go down.

00:00:56:00

Interviewer:

Did somebody give you a, make a call to you, and say come, or did you just?

00:01:00:00

Judy Varley:

The, the local Medical Committee for Human Rights chapter, which I was an officer, started to send down a group, and what we needed most of all was an ambulance. So, I went up to Washington, met somebody who had a van that they were willing to donate, and we drove down to the march.

00:01:24:00

Interviewer:

Terrific. What were your expectations about going South again? Were you—how did you feel about returning, seeing friends, or—?

00:01:32:00

Judy Varley:

To be very honest, I just did not plan on going South that summer. I had the two preceding summers and felt I had to good advantage, but things had begun to change. Although it was already what, June? I did not see myself going South, because I wasn't sure that I still had a role to play down there. There are many activities, you know, in New York City, that I could spend my time on equally as well. I—when the march started, I went down expecting to do nothing but what we've done on previous marches, and that's provide medical presence. Conduct foot clinic at night, pass out salt pills in the morning, and take care of whatever occurs in between. And, that's—I assumed that it would be very much like the other marches I had been on. It was not.

00:02:27:00

Interviewer:

Wanna tell me?

00:02:29:00

Judy Varley:

The attitudes were, oh, much different this time when I got down there. There was some po, polarization, I, I think was the best way of putting it. To illustrate, I had been in Greenwood, Mississippi, in the summer of '64, for some time. Made friends there, because I didn't drive, and I had a Vietnam vet who, for gas and meals, would take me where I had to go, and help me with what I had to do, give me entree into those areas where I might not otherwise have gotten it. He and another young man who had just been shot by a drive-by shooter outside of Lulu's Cafe in Greenwood, had a tracheostomy, a hole in his throat that I had to dress every day. And three of us just went round and round the county and the surrounding areas. In fact, the whole central part of the state. On the first morning in Greenwood, I was passing out salt pills, and as I walked up to them, I recognized them and was ready to throw my arms around them, and locked eyes with Jimmy, and he said, We don't need any of that White man's crap. And, they both pivoted, he and the Ajee boy, McGee boy, excuse me, pivoted and turned their backs on me [sighs]. And, that smarted, but it, it gave me a good indication of the winds of change, the directions they were taking.

00:03:57:00

Interviewer:

Let's stop for a minute. I wanna0151

[cut]

00:03:59:00

Camera crew member #1:

And marker.

Camera crew member #2:

Mark two.

[slate]

00:04:02:00

Interviewer:

Tell me how you felt about returning to Greenwood?

00:04:05:00

Judy Varley:

Since Greenwood, Mississippi was my base of operations in 1964, I was real excited. I knew that I would see people that I knew there, people that I had grown to really like, and the marches that I had been on before had been filled with a, a, a tension, but a very positive excitement, and there was a, a strong sense of solidarity. You're all in this together. That was not present when I arrived in Greenwood this time, unfortunately. There seemed to be two camps, to some extent. [clears throat] Excuse me. The people, the few people that I knew were not at all cordial. In fact, didn't even choose to recognize me in a couple of instances. However, I did break out of the line of march and run off to a side street the next day, to see the lady with whom I had stayed, boarded while I was in Mississippi, and she welcomed me with open arms, just because she's a very warm, loving lady, and we had a great relationship, but she told me that things had changed a great deal in the two years I had been gone.

00:05:28:00

Interviewer:

What were the signs that you saw?

00:05:31:00

Judy Varley:

As I say, lack of cordiality on the part of people I knew, and I think that there was less openness, less give and take. The dynamic was different this time. I felt that we were all down there to do a job, but not necessarily together.

00:05:53:00

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm. What were the two camps? Can you describe them?

00:06:02:00

Judy Varley:

I have to say that, at least in part, they were Black and White. I hate to say that, but I, I, it is true. I think it was also the outsiders and the locals, and that is something that we've not had in the past. We had not. The locals have always, you know, opened their arms.

Interviewer:

You mean the Black locals?

Judy Varley:

Yes.

Interviewer:

Can you say that?

Judy Varley:

The Black locals have opened their arms and, in almost every instance, and been a part of us and we a part of them, and I did not feel that kind of perception, that kind of openness, when I arrived in Greenwood. And, I won't say it was there was a physical polarization, because no. You know, we had a big tent, and boys were on one side, and the girls on the other. But, the socializing was not what I had experienced in the past. There was probably what I would call a color barrier there.

00:07:01:00

Interviewer:

What was your routine generally on the march, as a medical person?

00:07:07:00

Judy Varley:

When the march fell into line every morning, well, before the march fell into line, and we had our breakfast such as it was, very likely again, bologna sandwiches and tepid Kool-Aid one more time, we would hold clinic, a very brief, half-hour, hour clinic. And, people with minor ailments and broken blisters on their feet and so on would come in. And, we'd pass out salt tablets as the march took off. And grab the ambulance at the end of the march. Medical people never were up front with the news cameras. They were always from the middle to the very end of the line of march, because that's where they were needed. You needed to be there to pick up stragglers and wait for the ambulance if that's what was needed. And, get your first aid or your whatever, and your Kaopectate, and then rejoin the line of march. We took turns marching and riding in the ambulance, the van, and—

00:08:16:00

Interviewer:

Can you tell a story about whether, how scary it was sometimes? I'm thinking about Dottie.

00:08:22:00

Judy Varley:

Oh. After we left Greenwood, we marched to Belzoni, the heart of Dixie as they call it. We were staying in a very large, old churchyard next to a, a Black Baptist church. No street lights, no amenities, nothing. We couldn't even set up our tent. And, at the end of the block, there was a service station owned by Whites, and we had been told that across this low brick wall that separated the empty lot from the service station that there were people with guns. But, that was nothing terribly new. We faced guns before, frequently. And, so we held evening clinic. We had no lights, no streetlights even, so the press gathered their cars into a semicircle and turned on their lights so we could dress blisters and other foot wounds, and, and give out aspirins, and whatever. And, after clinic, we, Dottie and I, my friend and I, decided we would sleep in the van, since there was no big circus tent, and we were laying down. Everything was quiet, and all of the sudden there was noise of a 55-gallon drum that had been filled with bottles and cans being pushed over. Horrendous noise, followed by a whole bunch of gunshots. At which point I looked over, and my friend was on the floor dressing, in a lying-down position, just as fast as she could, swearing she'd never take her clothes off again in the state of Mississippi.

00:09:54:00

Interviewer:

Let's stop. Let's stop.

[cut]

00:09:57:00

Camera crew member #1:

Marking.

[slate]

Camera crew member #2:

Mark three.

Interviewer:

Tell me about White hostility on the march from the local?

00:10:04:00

Judy Varley:

We had a minimum of contact with local Whites, except along the roadside. They were there with their flags, and spit, and assorted other gestures of goodwill. The ambulance, as I said, always rode at the back, and we were running low on gas, so we pulled out of the line of march one afternoon. And, it was no, no place. An absolutely flat grasslands, wasn't even tilled, and found a gas station well ahead of the line of march. But, it had been boarded up, and it looked like brand-new boards, I mean, it was in fine, the place was in fine shape. It wasn't abandoned. And, as we stopped and approached the service station, we could hear signs, sounds of pounding, and I knocked on the door and asked if possibly we could buy some gas. And the gentleman inside told us in no uncertain colorful terms that he would not sell us any gas. What are you gonna do? What he had forgotten to do was unplug the Coke machine. Now, you cannot know how valuable—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild audio]

Judy Varley:

—when it's 105-106 out on the pavement, what that Coke machine was worth. We dug quarters up from everywhere and ran it dry. And, we were very grateful to him for the privilege. Thanked him when we left, through the battered door.

Interviewer:

Great. Basically, we're gonna do it again, all that.

Judy Varley:

OK. I love the sound of my own voice.

Interviewer:

Good.

[cut]

[camera roll 1075]

[slate]

00:11:29:00

Camera crew member #1:

And, marker.

Camera crew member #2:

Mark four.

[slate]

00:11:31:00

Interviewer:

So, tell me about White, local White hostility on the...

00:11:34:00

Camera crew member:

I'm sorry. Can we let [inaudible] clear for a second? Let him walk out.

Interviewer:

OK.

00:11:41:00

Judy Varley:

On this march, we did not have a lot of contact with local Whites, because we're on the move. They were at the roadside with their Confederate flags, and spit, and other kind gestures. But, very little contact. We did pull out of the line of march at one point, and there was just nothing around there but one service station, and we needed gas. So, we were well ahead of the line of march. Pulled in there, and the entire place had been boarded up. And, we still heard pounding inside, and I went to the door, and knocked, and asked the gentleman if we could buy some gas, and he told us in very specific terms no, that he wasn't selling us anything. So—and he was still pounding in there. I guess he was barricading the door from the inside at that point. He must've been very frightened. And, what he had forgotten to do was unplug the Coke machine. Now, you've got to know, in 106 degrees, pounding the pavement, what an ice-cold Coke is worth. We scrambled around, got every quarter we could find, including going through the upholstery in the van, and bought out the Coke machine, and thanked him very much for having forgotten to unplug it.

00:12:58:00

Interviewer:

Can you tell me some about [coughing in background] anti-White sentiment on the march? Can you think of any incidents or specific moments?

00:13:06:00

Judy Varley:

Other than the incident involving the McGee boy and Jimmy, I did not have any anti-White per se.

00:13:14:00

Interviewer:

What were the people doing that chanting?

00:13:15:00

Judy Varley:

There were some people who did some, Honkies gotta go, type chanting. But, it kind of was amusing. Most of the time, if you were anywhere around there, they'd pat you on the back, the chanters, and say, But that's not you. You know? We don't mean you. We're, we're talking to them, meaning the people at the roadside or people gathered to stare.

00:13:39:00

Interviewer:

Did you feel that was true?

00:13:40:00

Judy Varley:

I just didn't feel as comfortable. At—the sense of, of, of kinship that I've had in the past with people on a march was not as marked on this march, and I felt that some of that anti-White sentiment could as easily have been directed at me. I don't know that it was, but it could have been.

00:14:06:00

Interviewer:

Now, can you tell me what your reactions in Greenwood were to Black—to Stokely Carmichael's speak about Black Power?

00:14:15:00

Judy Varley:

That was a very dramatic evening. He was up on a jerry-rigged dais of sorts, platform, with Klieg lights, more light than we had ever seen at night on a march. And—

00:14:30:00

Interviewer:

Yeah, I'm sorry. Can you say Stokely Carmichael?

Judy Varley:

I'm sorry.

Interviewer:

It's okay.

Judy Varley:
The night of Stokely Carmichael's speech was kind of a dramatic one. He was up on a jerry-rigged platform with a lot of Klieg lights, a lot of...

Interviewer:

Sorry, [unintelligible]

Camera crew member #1:

I'm sorry, there's—I, I don't know if [unintelligible]

Camera crew member #3:

[inaudible]

Interviewer:

Oh. We have a door. Some extraneous noise. So, we get to do it one more time.

Judy Varley:

OK.

00:14:53:00

Interviewer:

OK.

00:14:55:00

Judy Varley:

The night of Stokely Carmichael's speech, it was kind of a dramatic event. It—he was on a jerry-rigged platform, and great Klieg lights. I've never seen to many lights on, on a march, and we listened, and there was a lot of, lot of cheering. Lot of yelling, a lot of enthusiasm when he spoke, and he spoke of Black Power. But, I came away feeling that the Black power he was talking about was essentially the good old American way. The only way you'd get power in the United States is either through the ballot box or the cash register. And, he was saying that Blacks have got to seize both of those. In, in their own self-interest, and I felt that, that was a perfectly acceptable, perfectly fine message. It did indicate to me that, I think, our time was passed in the South, that we needed to go back North and, and make some real, serious changes. I—that we needed to clean up our own backyards. And, I did not feel badly about that. I felt I had done my good down here, and there were a lot of things to be done back home.

Interviewer:

Let's stop for a second.

[cut]

00:16:14:00

Camera crew member #1:
OK, and marker.

[slate]

Camera crew member #1:

Great.

00:16:19:00

Judy Varley:

I had known, as I said earlier, about the change in attitude down South, the feeling, just a very vague feeling that I did not really need to go down anymore. And, I went down for the

march, for that specific event, but the night of Stokely Carmichael's speech, it all kind of came together for me. And, it, it was very definite then in my mind, that my work was done down South, that I needed to go home and clean the house.

00:16:54:00

Interviewer:

Can you describe the most frightening moment you had on the march?

00:17:02:00

Judy Varley:

Hmm. Well, the day the cherry bombs went off in Philadelphia, but really, the most frightening was that night that they were shooting. I imagine it was over our heads. We never saw any gunshots in the side of our van or whatever, when we parked, camped in Belzoni, but yeah. It is. It's very scary when you're in pitch dark, and there are guns going off, and you know that it—they aren't the guns on your side.

00:17:36:00

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm. Now, can you tell me at the end of the march what you felt and what you [inaudible]?

00:17:40:00

Judy Varley:

I unfortunately had to leave the march before we got to Jackson. I had an abscessed tooth and a high temp. And also a very bad case of chiggers. Slipped out, and [laughs] really got an infestation. I felt badly having to leave before the triumphal entrance into Jackson, but I felt that I probably would never be back down South, at least not in that role, not as a member of the Medical Committee for Human Rights or within the framework of the movement, and I was right. That was the end of it.

00:18:18:00

Interviewer:

OK, that's it, we're done. I wanna check with [inaudible]—

[cut]

00:18:22:00

Camera crew member #1:

Marker.

Camera crew member #2:

Mark six.

[slate]

00:18:28:00

Interviewer:

Tell me about that, about other people's reactions and about the *New York Post*.

00:18:31:00

Judy Varley:

Immediately after the speech by Stokely, we drifted back to the big tent, where we're sleeping. And a number of us sat up and talked about it afterward. There seemed to be alarm on the parts of, of some of my colleagues. They read a great deal more into the speech than I did. I felt that the call for the use of Black Power was legitimate. And, and, the way he expressed it was. Later, when I got back to New York, and the march ended, a press conference was held, and a, a small headline appeared in the *New York Post* saying, "White Nurse Endorses Black Power." And, it was surprising, the amount of flak I had to take. There, there was a lot of misunderstanding about the term. It was a phrase that was fraught, for some people, with very, very serious overtones, and I did not see this. I—

00:19:36:00

Interviewer:

What kinds of overtones?

00:19:38:00

Judy Varley:

Black violence, violence stemming from the Black areas. A thrust to overtake the government, as it were. And locally, down, especially down South, where they hold the majority, or in New York City where Blacks hold the majority of the ballot box, that's as it should be.

00:20:01:00

Interviewer:

What'd you think about Stokely Carmichael? What do you think of him?

00:20:10:00

Judy Varley:

Stokely was, well, let me, let me put it this way. I was a, a very, very true follower of Dr. King's and Dr. King's methods. I, I believed very strongly in non-violence and do today. Stokely was a bit more enthusiastic than that. He was a bit more rabid. And, rabid's kind of an extreme term. I don't, take that off. Clip that. He was a bit more enthusiastic, and he was a, a firmer, harder sort of doctrine, and that appealed to a great many people, especially the young people.

00:20:54:00

Interviewer:

What did you think of him? Did you like him?

00:20:59:00

Judy Varley:

I didn't dislike him. I did not want to become closely associated with him particularly.

00:21:04:00

Interviewer:

Was he frightening?

00:21:05:00

Judy Varley:

Not frightening, no. No, he was, he's just a real hardliner, and I think I shy away from real hardliners of any persuasion.

00:21:15:00

Interviewer:

I think we're done.

Camera crew member:

That's a cut?

Interviewer:

Yeah.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:21:20:00