



Interview with **Grant Friley**

Date: June 7, 1989

Interviewer: Sheila Bernard

Camera Rolls: 2149-2151

Sound Rolls: 270

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.

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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 #1001]

[sound roll #114]

00:00:11:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Marker.

[slate]

00:00:14:00

Interviewer:

OK. So, what was it like being in Detroit in that week?

00:00:18:00

Grant Friley:

It was an uncomfortable feeling, a feeling of frustration, of realizing that the ultimate had happened in Detroit, knowing that it had happened all over the United States in, in other

metropolitan areas, and hoping like hell it never would happen in Detroit and boom, it happened.

00:00:40:00

Interviewer:

OK. But paint a picture for me, it's nighttime, what's out there?

00:00:43:00

Grant Friley:

No, I'll paint a different picture, it was daytime, it wasn't nighttime when it happened. It happened in the early evening, and it was hot, and when it happened, it was not the explosive situation that a lot of people think it was. It occurred and it was almost frivolous, it was a air of, of—

00:01:06:00

Interviewer:

OK, stop for a second. I'm sorry. I just think we're, we have, we're building a story, we need to know to know what it was like for you.

[beep]

[cut]

00:01:13:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Marker.

[slate]

00:01:14:00

Interviewer:

OK. So, what was it like?

00:01:16:00

Grant Friley:

It was crazy. It was difficult to understand what in the hell was going on and to know that as a police officer, I was part of this problem, OK. And it was chaos, movement of police officers to strategic precincts, a command post being set up, hearing the, the, the, the televisions and the radios blasting about the insurrection and problems and not seeing what they were talking about. OK? And then finally as a police officer, seeing the smoke at a distance and saying, Oh, hell. There's some things burning. And hearing sirens and, and seeing people running and, and, and just being totally confused.

00:02:20:00

Interviewer:

You talked about looting in terms of, you know, it was OK to buy milk, to take milk but, and bread, but can you talk about the looting and what your sense was?

00:02:27:00

Grant Friley:

Well, I don't believe we're ever in the position to say what's in the mind of a person who is in need of something, OK? So, here's a grocery store or a market that has been fire-bombed or the windows are busted out, and you're in the inner city, and you see a thirteen or fourteen-year-old child go in and come out with bologna, bread, milk, cheese, OK? You take a deep breath and you know it's wrong but you can understand that growing up in poverty in the inner city, to be able to get something for nothing, you don't turn your back on it, they did it. But then you get highly frustrated and angry at people taking advantage of the same situation and the television store next door, OK. You say, I'm doin' this because we don't have anything, but you walked by the grocery store and the bread and the milk. And you go in and you grab television sets, and watches, and rings and everything that's available. That's wrong, I don't give a damn whether it was the 1967 in-insurrection or whether it's 1989. It's wrong.

00:03:52:00

Interviewer:

So, you're a cop, what's your response? You're watching this.

00:03:54:00

Grant Friley:

My response at one time to the children doin' it was I stopped them, I talked to 'em and I tried to, to, to make them aware of the dangers of going into a store and grabbing things that didn't belong to them. No, I didn't arrest them. I didn't do anything to 'em because, and in my list of priorities in doing things that day was not dealing with milk and cheese and honey with

children. But I got damn angry when I saw people looting businesses and walking out with televisions and, and, and, and, and other kind of items like that. And we made arrests and we stopped and we talked to people and we, at times, I took items away and threw them back into the store as opposed to arresting people because to just continually arrest and grab people, we would have been there forever because everybody and his uncle was grabbin' things.

00:04:54:00

Interviewer:

OK. Stop. OK.

[beep]

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark.

00:05:01:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Marker.

[slate]

00:05:03:00

Interviewer:

OK. What's the worst thing you remember about this week?

00:05:08:00

Grant Friley:

The frustration of seeing people making complaints about what had happened to them because they were Black and to, to be in the middle of 12th Street and look down the street and see the entire block burning. And know that the very people who were raising all that hell about the problems and why they were doing the things they were doing not having control of their own homes burning. Because they initiated some of those fires and the fires got out of control. And then to see fire departments' engine and ladder trucks coming to attempt to put out the very fires that they had started and these people turning around and

bombarding them with bottles and insults and everything else. And those very fire people having to be escorted by either National Guard or police officers to put out these fires. It was, it was frustrating. It made me mad as hell because the aftermath was—after it was all over, the very people who did it were the very people to make the complaints. And that ate me up, it ate my insides up to see these kinds of things happening. That probably was my low point.

00:06:31:00

Interviewer:

Can you tell me about where you grew up and what, how you felt watching this community?

00:06:35:00

Grant Friley:

I grew up in Detroit on Eight Mile Road and it was, a, a place that was predominantly a, a Black community. After leaving Eight Mile Road and I went to school in the city of Detroit and went away to the service and [unintelligible] ended up coming and, and getting on the Detroit Police Department. And it, it bothered me because [pause] those people who know me knew that I had a, a, a bitterness and a hatred of my own—prior to ever becoming a police officer. And that was something that I had to overcome and I overcame that and I became a police officer attempting to rectify some of the wrongs that I had experienced as a child. OK?

00:07:30:00

Interviewer:

But you had watched as a, as a Marine you were saying you had watched White people being completely abusive to you and by the end of the week you were watching White cops, your fellow cops being abusive to Black people. Can you talk about that? How'd that make you feel?

00:07:43:00

Grant Friley:

I, not only did I see White police officers being abusive, I saw Black police officers being abusive. And it was extremely difficult for me to watch this abuse taking place, but I also understood the frustration that a police officer had at that time. We were—

00:08:07:00

Interviewer:

What frustration?

00:08:08:00

Grant Friley:

We were frightened, we were at the mystery of the unknown, being in an environment, being in a situation that was catastrophic, OK? And here we were attempting to do a job that we were duly sworn to do. And a lot of us did things that, that were terrible, OK? And who is to say whether or not I would not have done it or somebody else would not have done it if the situation would have been the same. It was not a, a, a pretty picture. Any time that people are brutalized or eventually—killed

[camera rollout]

[wild sound]

Grant Friley:

—killed is not a pretty picture. That's not our jobs.

00:08:49:00

Interviewer:

OK. Stop. Are we out?

Camera Crew Member #1:

We are [inaudible].

Interviewer:

[unintelligible]

[beep]

[cut]

[camera roll #2150]

00:08:55:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Marker.

[slate]

00:08:57:00

Interviewer:

I wanna switch gears for a sec. Will you tell me again what it was like being a kid and having the Big Four and what the Detroit cops were like when you were coming up?

00:09:03:00

Grant Friley:

I grew up on Eight Mile Road, as I said, and, and the Big Four traditionally rode around in a big black Buick. And at that time as a child, it consisted of a White uniformed police officer and three other White plainclothes officers and they were the terror. ***When the Big Four pulled up, you jumped*** and that terror was founded terror because they, they'd whip your head. I have seen them beat up on people and they have beat me before and it was—

00:09:41:00

Interviewer:

So, what would you be doing when they would come by, would you be doing anything wrong?

Grant Friley:

No.

Interviewer:

“No,” what?

00:09:48:00

Grant Friley:

No, I wasn't doing anything wrong. It was just the, just that time. ***I mean, when they said, Move off the corner, you moved off the corner. And where do young Black men have but a corner? They don't have swimming pools, they don't have estates, they have corners in cities. And they stand around, they harmonize, they clown, they have fun. But when the Big Four would say, Give me that corner, you gave them that corner, or else.*** I, I have been stopped and checked by the Big Four and my seats were pulled out and thrown out on the street and they found nothing. And then they drove away and said, You put it back in there.

00:10:24:00

Interviewer:

So, it's early '67. Nothing's happened in Detroit yet and you were joining a predominantly White police force. What kind of reception did you get? [background noise]

00:10:30:00

Grant Friley:

I had been in the Marine Corps for almost six years. I was determined to be the best police officer that they'd ever seen. I was going to join the department because I wanted to be a police officer, I had always wanted to be a police officer. The reception was the typical reception. You're one of, of seventy or eighty Black people on a force of predominantly non-minority people. You have to be an exception and I tried to be an exception. I had problems, OK? But they were problems that you dealt with. It was just, just the times.

00:11:08:00

Interviewer:

So, what was unique about your position as a Black officer in the middle of a riot?

00:11:13:00

Grant Friley:

That I had been where the White officers had never been, I had been on the other side of the fence, I had been part of the frustration, I had been part of the racist attitudes that were coming from society. I had been on the other side and now I had sympathy, empathy, but also was a police officer and I had a job to do. So, I had an advantage.

00:11:40:00

Interviewer:

So, did you share—I read that by the first day there was, the police were restrained and they couldn't do anything. And they were watching all this looting going on and they're watching the city go up. And they—there, and there's the sense that if they could have gone in faster, they could have stopped it, and now it's outta hand. Did you have that sense? Can you tell me about it?

00:11:56:00



Grant Friley:

No. I, I didn't have that sense that it, had we, almost like an occupying force, had we been able to invade and, and do this. No. I, I really felt though that the, the first one or two days, had there been more involvement from the community, the community leaders, more positiveness coming from the media than, than a story of fires and destructions and all of that, that we might have been able to do some things. But all you heard of, the country, within the city of Detroit, was the problems, the problems, the problems. So, you know, that's hindsight. I don't know what would have occurred.

00:12:48:00

Interviewer:

So, when you were on the street, can you tell me about being on the street and how, how, you know, about whether you got a chance to sleep, about how you were feeling by the third day or something when, when you...

00:12:57:00

Grant Friley:

I was tired, exhausted, frustrated but I was a police officer and I was determined to do the job that I was paid to do. And I wanted it to end. It was an embarrassment for me as a Black man, it was an embarrassment for me as a Detroit police officer, it was an embarrassment for me to know that our city, the city of Detroit was doing the same thing that the other cities were doin'. I wanted it to end and go away and it wouldn't go away.

00:13:28:00

Interviewer:

And what about the sense that the Black community's wrecking the Black community and not the White targets now? Can you tell me about that?

00:13:33:00

Grant Friley:

It was, it was crazy, to say the least, that you would hear young men and young women damning White people, I mean, damning them and saying, Down with the honkie! Damn the honkie! over and over. And then you watch 'em torch their whole block, break in the very, very stores that they had to shop in, OK. And there was—and I'm not condoning anything but there were all of these surrounding communities, OK, that had all Whites in them so the logic was crazy to say, Whites are no good, and then burn your own house. I mean, it didn't make any sense, OK. And that, that, that blew my mind. I just didn't understand.

00:14:30:00

Interviewer:

When were you most scared? What was the most scary moment for you?

Grant Friley:

[clears throat] On Hamilton and Puritan, on my way to work, being in plain clothes and having a gun and being stopped and being locked up and thrown in the back of a car and taken downtown.

Interviewer:

OK. Can you start again and tell me you were on Hamilton? Say, "I was on Hamilton."

00:14:57:00

Grant Friley:

I was on Hamilton and Puritan in Highland Park, on my way downtown to work in plain clothes and I was stopped along with a, another fellow officer and we were arrested and thrown in a car, all right? And, and on our way downtown before they realized we were police officers. That was terrifying because by the time they got to my identification, OK, they could have done something to me before they got to my identification. They saw the gun, the bulge of that gun, OK, was enough for them to put us in the back of their car and head downtown with us. And that was frightening because I knew what was happening in the city.

00:15:42:00

Interviewer:

Do you think the cops overreacted by the end of the, by the middle of the week? Were, were people really overreacting or no?

Grant Friley:

Yes. We all overreacted by the end of the week. Everybody was walkin' on pins and needles. [clears throat] It was self-preservation and the rumors that were continually going on, unfounded rumors some of them, put all of us in a, in a, in a bit of hysteria. It was a very uncomfortable feeling for whether you were a Black police officer or a White police officer didn't make any difference. You were very uncomfortable.

Interviewer:

OK. If you could tell me that again and lemme know a little bit about what these rumors are.

Grant Friley:

Mass shootings.

Interviewer:

"There were rumors of..."

00:16:24:00

Grant Friley:

Rumors of, of, of, of a police off—a police officer getting shot, police officers being shot at, snipers on buildings, fire trucks under attack, police officers' caravans under attack. The whole situation being out of control, so now we gotta bring the Airborne in. I mean, hell yeah, that put everybody in an uncomfortable state. You know, when you start talkin' about bringin' the Airborne in, OK, you bring the National Guard in, that means that the police department, the Detroit Police Department, Michigan State Police, Wayne County Sheriff, it's sayin' that we could not do the job that was necessary. So yeah, everybody was uptight. It was a very uncomfortable feeling for me.

00:17:08:00

Interviewer:

OK. Stop.

[cut]

[wild sound]

Interviewer:

Did you see, ever see law enforcement people discharge...

[beep]

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark.

00:17:14:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Marker.

00:17:15:00

Interviewer:

So, what was the city like?

00:17:18:00

Grant Friley:

The city was very uncomfortable. Prior to the problems that occurred in Detroit, I had had an opportunity to see what had had happened in Jersey and in LA and, and the interviews that they had with police officers and the films of the police officers. And then boom, here it was, Detroit, and the very thing that I had seen on television I was part of. To be in the inner city of Detroit, eleven o'clock, twelve o'clock at night, a curfew, pitch Black, dark, smell the smoke, see flames, hear sirens in the distance. It is like a combat zone. Very, very uncomfortable. You're walkin' on pins and, and needles and it was, it was an experience.

00:18:08:00

Interviewer:

How, what was your sense of the National Guard?

Grant Friley:

[sighs] That they were brought in to—

Interviewer:

Say, "The National Guard were."

Grant Friley:

The National Guard? They were brought in to—

Interviewer:

No, I'm sorry. You just need to start the sentence—

Grant Friley:

Oh, the National Guard.

Interviewer:

Right.

00:18:21:00

Grant Friley:

I blew that one again, didn't I? OK. The National Guard was, in my opinion, in a very uncomfortable position. They were the men who twenty-four hours prior to them being federalized were your, your clerks and your truck drivers and your lawyers and your doctors, whatever. And now they were asked to play police. And I had the highest respect for them. I had it because they were put in a very uncomfortable position, asked to do a very uncomfortable job that all of us who were duly sworn police officers were having a hell of a time trying to do. Then they bring the National Guard in and they say, Hey, do it, and it, it had to be hell for them. A lotta the young people were from the suburbs, from upper Michigan, and some have never been in Detroit and then you bring 'em into Detroit and say, OK, do the job. It had to be hell for 'em.

00:19:26:00

Interviewer:

But they were also armed and I've, and I've talked to other police being afraid of being shot by other law enforcement people in the craziness. Were you ever afraid of being shot by one of, by a law enforcement person?

Grant Friley:

Yes.

Interviewer:

"Yes," what?

Grant Friley:

By a law enforcement person I was being af, I was afraid of being shot at, I was—

Interviewer:

Can you just start from, "I was afraid of being shot"?

00:19:41:00

Grant Friley:

***OK. I was afraid of being shot by a National Guardsman, I was afraid of being shot by police officers, and I was afraid of being shot by looters and rioters. I was afraid of being shot, period.***

00:19:56:00

Interviewer:

OK. What about as a Black officer? Did you receive any, any special treatment, either negative or—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Interviewer:

—positive from—

Camera Crew Member #1:

[inaudible].

Interviewer:

OK. Let's start another—

Grant Friley:

Hell, yes.

Interviewer:

—[unintelligible]

[beep]

[cut]

[camera roll #2151]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark.

00:20:10:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Marker

[slate]

00:20:12:00

Interviewer:

OK, so you're a Black police officer, you're not even just police. So, what's it like?

00:20:21:00

Grant Friley:

Being a Black police officer during that time was an extremely difficult, it was extremely difficult. Black people would look at you and they'd call you a Tom, you're a Tom, you're doing your job but you're a Tom. Your fellow White police officer would look at you to see if you were going to do your job, OK? So, there you were, here's a White police officer who was concerned about the Black officer next to him as opposed to just being concerned. And then there are the people that you're dealing with who are saying that you're an Uncle Tom because you were a police officer. They didn't realize what this was really all about. They looked at the uniform and they saw that you were Black and you were in the uniform so you were the enemy.

00:21:16:00

Interviewer:

Wh—knowing how you fe—I mean knowing how, how frustrated you were by the, when it just continued to go, can you tell me about how frustrated you were and then try to figure how frustrated if you didn't have, if you were a White cop, how you must have felt? How were you by the end, by, as it continued and continued?

00:21:33:00

Grant Friley:

I was, *I was totally wiped out. It got to a point where I had to watch out for my temper. It got to a point where the, those persons who were yellin' and screamin' about, Down with the Whitey! and, and all of that, I was looking into his eyes and wanting to knock the hell out of him because he didn't know what the hell he was talking about.* And he was the same sicko that was burning down his own house, OK? It, it got to be hell for me. And then I looked at my fellow officer who happened to have been a, a, a, a White officer and I could empathize with what he was going through, OK. Day one, day two, day three, I knew what the hell that was going on inside of me and I knew that he had to be catching hell. And it was basically not only because he was a police officer but he happened to be a White man and that was two strikes against him. He was White and he had the uniform on, so he had two strikes against him.

00:22:44:00

Interviewer:

What about the res, his response to the community since he was White, since he didn't have any ties to the community, and he was living out in the suburbs and it was them and they were the enemy. Did they become the enemy?

00:22:55:00

Grant Friley:

No, I don't believe that. I, I really don't believe that. I believe that, that it was an action-reaction thing, that a lot of White officers were caught up in it, and they reacted and we all react differently. And I don't think a, a, a White officer reacted just because he was a White officer, then a Black officer reacted because he was a Black officer. I think in the heat of battle we all reacted and it was not because of a White officer saying, Hey, these are Black people. Hey, I got a chance to really do 'em in. All right? Like I said, I saw some Black officers get frustrated and tired of the crap that was going on and they vented their emotions also. So, it was for that six or seven days, there were a lot of blue people and all those blue people were people in uniforms.

00:23:50:00

Interviewer:

OK. Cut. Story, besides the house, anything that, any potential moment when—

[beep]

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:



Mark.

00:23:58:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Marker.

00:24:00:00

Interviewer:

OK. So, tell me about where you're sitting.

00:24:02:00

Grant Friley:

I was in the gym, the Detroit Police Headquarters at 1300 Beaubien and I just sat there and I was by myself. And I looked at rows and rows and rows of, of televisions and radios and watches and bikes and just stolen things and stolen things. And it just didn't make any sense to me. I just was totally frustrated and I couldn't do anything, it was too big for me. There was nothing that, that I could do that would have made any difference, because all around me were the goodies and that's what this ended up to be all about. It was not the frustration of, of—

00:24:52:00

Interviewer:

Let me interrupt. Let me go with this. What about the argument that it wasn't their community, people didn't own that community, other people controlled it, White people controlled it. Why not burn it down?

00:25:02:00

Grant Friley:

When, after you burn it down, you know, zero from zero leaves zero. So, you burn down a community that supposedly you say belongs to somebody else. Then you have nothing. Granted that a lot of the shops were owned by non-minorities but a lot of those shops were owned by Black entrepreneurs and, and they also were burned down. And that is not the way to solve a problem, by destroying a community. A community is what the people make it. Has nothing to do with buildings, has to do with what the people make that community. And when they burned that community down, they, they destroyed themselves.

00:25:45:00

Interviewer:

When it was all over, were things different? Were things, what, what cha-changed?

Grant Friley:

Initially, nothing.

Interviewer:

Initially, you have to give me a fuller sentence.

00:25:56:00

Grant Friley:

OK. [laughs] When it was all over, although the looting was completed, there were no more fires, but the aftermath of that insurrection stayed a part of my life and a part of this city's life for years and continues to be a part of our lives. Because all we have to do is shut our eyes for a moment and we can relive it any time we want to relive it. Hopefully, those six or seven days, in time, will be something that we can say made some positive changes.

00:26:37:00

Interviewer:

OK. Stop. What haven't I asked you that you would want—

[beep]

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark.

00:26:43:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Marker.

[slate]

00:26:44:00

Interviewer:

OK. So, can you just tell me again what, what was the most painful part of this week for you?

00:26:49:00

Grant Friley:

The most painful part for me as a police officer was the feeling of frustration. Being a Black man, being on the job and, and, and, and having people despise and hate me because I was a police officer. And to know that those very people, many of them looked up to me prior to the insurrection. And after the insurrection was over, I guess I was OK. But during that time, I was called every kind of damnable name that you can think of and I was treated unfairly by the very people that, that I was part of. It bothered me to know that I could be hated that much just because I had a uniform on. And it was that, that, that feeling that, that the people really don't know what, what good police officers are all about and I really thought I was a good police officer.

00:27:44:00

Interviewer:

And you started to say, "If they hated you that much..."

00:27:48:00

Grant Friley:

If, if they could hate me that much, I had a feeling how much they must have hated my fellow White officer. To hate me as much as they hated me, they had to despise everything about him. And I think that if there was any sniping going on, the sniper did not say, Let's ignore that Black officer. Let's shoot at the White officer. They hated all of us.

00:28:22:00

Interviewer:

Were we two societies like Kerner said?

00:28:26:00

Grant Friley:

Yes. There were two societies like Kerner said.

00:28:30:00

Interviewer:

That's it?

Grant Friley:

That's it.

Interviewer:

OK. Stop.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:28:35:00

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