

Interview with **Taylor Rogers**

Date: October 17, 1988

Interviewer: Paul Stekler

Camera Rolls: 4008-4009

Sound Rolls: 401-402

Team: D

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 Taylor Rogers, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on October 17, 1988 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 #4008]

[sound roll #401]

[production discussion]

00:00:13:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Hit it.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Cam-camera roll 4008 continues. Sound roll 401 continues. Sound six.

[slate]

Camera Crew Member #3:

Taylor Rogers.

00:00:22:00

Interviewer:

I want you to think back to that, that first night, I guess it was a Sunday night. What was that...how did the strike start? What was that first meeting like?

00:00:30:00

Taylor Rogers:

Our first meeting was, you know, we was all concerned. You know, we wanted to keep our job, but we wanted some dignity and some decency out of it. And, and, you know, we had tried and tried, and, and T.O. Jones, our president, had talked and talked and did everything that he could to get the boss to try to see some of our grievances. We couldn't get anything done, so we all met that Sunday night and T.O. Jones decided to go up and talk to Blackburn, who was the director, and he couldn't get anything outta those people and he came back and told us, and that's when we decided we just wasn't gonna take any more. And then the next morning there wasn't no work. And we...instead of meetin' at our respective work places, we met at the Firestone rubber hall union on Firestone, and we marched from, from there to city hall where we talked with Henry Loeb and he was talkin' bout his open door policies, You don't need no union. You know, I'll take care of ya. We said back to him that, you know, You haven't taken care, we don't want you to take care, all we want you to do is give us some decent dignity and, and some rights, you know. We didn't have any rights at all. You know, the boss, whatever the boss said that's what we had to do. We didn't have no input in, in the working conditions or nothin'. You know, whatever they said, that's what had to happen. And so, we just got tired and, you know, had to work in the rain, and that was one, really, the main thing that really set off the strike was that they wanted us to go out and work in the rain. And we decided we weren't gonna go anymore. And then when we had our last meetin', when we had that meetin' and all of that was in there and that's really what we was talkin' about, and they wouldn't give us nothing on that so we just said we weren't gonna take it anymore.

00:02:26:00

Interviewer:

You told me over the phone about making a decision to stand up. What did you mean by that?

00:02:31:00

Taylor Rogers:

Oh, well, we made that decision. That's, that's when the word came out, I'm a man. We decided that, you know, if you keep your back bent somebody can ride it, but if you stand up they have to get off your back. So we decided we were gonna be men, stand up and be men, and that's what we did. Thirteen hundred men decided that they was tired and weren't gonna take anymore.

00:02:53:00

Interviewer:

Why don't we stop for a second?

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #3:

Speed.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

00:02:57:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Sound number seven.

[slate]

00:02:58:00

Interviewer:

OK. You were at Dr. King's mountaintop speech. What stands out about that night?

00:03:04:00

Taylor Rogers:

Well, his speech was really...you could tell that he felt that somethin' was gonna happen to him. You know, maybe not the next day, but he knew in the future somethin' was gonna happen to him because he said, you know, "I've seen the promised land. I might not get there with you." You know, and then he said that longevity have a lo...have a, a place, but, you know, he, and, you know, that brought out a lotta feelings among the crowd. You could hear the roars of the crowd. And I believe that night it was really a stormy night on the outside, and Mason Temple was jammed. It was standing room only. It was just, you know, it was just a night, and that speech, it just brought the crowd to their feet and everybody had, had the feeling that he felt that probably that would be his last speech. And that's, you know, I

can always remember that part of the speech. I had, like I say, I had my kids with me again, my wife and my kids and, you know, we was all concerned because—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Calvin Taylor:

—need, I needed to go back to work.

00:04:22:00

Interviewer:

We done with that roll?

Camera Crew Member #1:

Yes.

[cut]

[camera roll #4009]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

00:04:24:00

Crewmember:

Camera roll 4009. Sound number eight.

[slate]

00:04:28:00

Interviewer:

You know, thinking about the strike and thinking about the things that you guys were risking, I mean, you personally must've been risking a lot.

00:04:37:00

Taylor Rogers:

Well, I was. I mean, I had seven kids in school, trying to educate my kids and trying to buy a home. It was just, it was really rough, but I know that something had to happen. That we co-co-couldn't continue on making a dollar four cent an hour. You know, we just couldn't, couldn't, couldn't continue on with that with no benefits. And I saw and knew what the union could do for us. And we had some people that had started goin' back in before that last...before Dr. King was assassinated. We had people goin' back in. But after that, those people came out, and in a couple a days the strike was over. They, you know, they put pressure on Henry Loeb after the King got killed. They put pressure on Henry Loeb to recognize the union.

00:05:36:00

Interviewer:

How did the community come together to help you?

00:05:40:00

Taylor Rogers:

With money. Raised money, they did everything—

Interviewer:

Can I, can I knock you for one second? Just, when you say this, tell us how the, the community did. So then when I say, "How did the community help you?" just say that the community did this as opposed to just "they".

Taylor Rogers:

Oh. OK.

00:05:54:00

Interviewer:

How did the community help you?

00:05:56:00

Taylor Rogers:

Well, the community raised money, and anything that they thought that we needed. And then, then the ministers got involved and, and everybody just got involved. [phone rings] I know

we had meetings at Mason Temple, we could get...pass around a garbage can and get garbage cans of money. And that money went to help the strikers to try to keep those, keep them encouraged to stay out and give them a little money to take home to their families and, you know, have food. Over at Clayborn Temple we had food that people could go down and get to feed their families. And the international union sent money in, and money came in from all over the country so that we could survive, you know. [phone rings]

00:06:40:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Oh.

Interviewer:

That's actually our—

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #3:

Speed.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Sound nine.

[slate]

00:06:45:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK.

00:06:46:00

Interviewer:

OK, I want you to think back. There you are with your two young sons on that march that Dr. King led, led. What did you see? What did you do?

00:06:54:00

Taylor Rogers:

Well, we really couldn't do anything but try to stay outta the way and watch what was happenin'. People was looting, you know, it was...and the tragic part about it, all this happened on Beale Street in the Black community part. Stuff on Main Street didn't get touched hardly. But now Dr. King was at probably Main and Gayoso, and when it all broke out they just surrounded Dr. King, put him in a car and took him, you know, just take him plum outta, outta, outta the picture.

00:07:28:00

Interviewer:

Now, where you were, you were there with your sons.

00:07:30:00

Taylor Rogers:

Right. OK. Like I said, once it all broke then everybody started scatterin'. And most people was trying to get back to Clayborn Temple, and that's when we all went inside Clayborn Temple, and that's when they maced us, you know, and everybody run out. And my car was parked down behind Mason Temple, and I got, got lost from one of my sons and we was tryin' to find him so we could get to the car and leave. But everything just went haywire that day.

00:08:02:00

Interviewer:

Can you talk specifically and tell us, you know, that you were there with your sons and then what you did when violence broke out?

00:08:08:00

Taylor Rogers:

Well, just like I said, we, we just started tryin' to take cover.

Interviewer:

No, no. I want you to mention the fact that you were there with your two young sons. And so, tell me about you and your two young sons.

Camera Crew Member #3:

Were you concerned about their safety?

Interviewer:

Right.

Camera Crew Member #3:

Those kinda questions.

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Taylor Rogers:

I'm tryin', tryin' to get it together. Well, we was marchin' together.

00:08:32:00

Interviewer:

Who was that?

00:08:33:00

Taylor Rogers:

Me and my young son. And my position was to try to see that nothin' happened to them with all the window breakings and glass scatterin' and police cars runnin' and mace sprayin'. So, I was tryin' to protect them. And they stayed with me until we got to Clayborn Temple. We went inside Clayborn Temple, that's where we kinda got busted up. Then me and my other son, we tried to find him before we went to the car. But when we got to the car, he was at the car. So that's when we got in the car and left.

00:09:12:00

Interviewer:

Can you shut it down for a sec, please?

Camera Crew Member #1:

Sure.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #2:

Sound number ten.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Wait. OK, hit it.

[slate]

00:09:16:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK.

00:09:18:00

Interviewer:

So, tell me about the march.

00:09:20:00

Taylor Rogers:

OK. Well, in the march me and my two sons, we was marchin' together when all the glass started breakin' and the noise and the police cars was runnin', the sirens, and everybody was all confused and just runnin' over each other. My concern was to try to protect my two son, to get them back to Clayborn Temple. And when we did get back to Clayborn Temple, got inside of Clayborn Temple, they started puttin' gas in Clayborn Temple. Me and one of my...one of my sons got lost from, from us and we start lookin' for him. And when we come outside the police were still out, and we looked out to catch a chance to get to the car. Well, and another thing come to mind. Some guy throwed a brick at the police and that created another disturbance, so we had to go back inside. And we were still concerned about my son that wa-wasn't with us. So, when things finally quieted down, we went and looked out the door again and we finally got a chance to run out the door. When we got to the car he was at the car. And we got in the car and left and came home.

00:10:28:00

Interviewer:

One last thing I wanna ask you. The march ends, it ends in violence and Dr. King leaves.

Camera Crew Member #1:

I'm not gonna have enough time.

Interviewer:

Not enough time?

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Interviewer:

Good.

Camera Crew Member #3:

That's gonna be a rollout on camera roll, sound roll 401.

Camera Crew Member #4:

That was great.

Interviewer:

That was fantas—

Camera Crew Member #4:

You were really—

[cut]

[sound roll #402]

00:10:43:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Sound roll 402, start sound number eleven.

[slate]

00:10:48:00

Interviewer:

Thinking back to that march, I mean, it must've been an awful day and then King leaves. Did you have any doubts that Martin King would come back to Memphis?

00:10:57:00

Taylor Rogers:

My first thought was that he would come back, because I don't think the march was really organized like he would want it to be organized. And when we did get the word that he was coming back, then he was talkin' about marshals and he want, want it organized to keep those people that was interruptin', to keep them outta the march. And I felt for sure he had to come back to show that...to ensure people that he was nonviolent, because the whole idea of disruptin' the march was to make Dr. King look bad and to say that, you know, wherever he go violence would break out. [clears throat] So I was sure that Dr. King was coming back. And [clears throat] we got the word and we started organizin', gettin' people together so we'd have the march properly organized. And, and, you know, so he never did get a chance to do that march.

00:11:53:00

Interviewer:

So, Dr. King had something to prove? What was that?

Taylor Rogers:

That he was nonviolent.

Camera Crew Member #1:

You have to start out by saying, "Dr. King..."

Taylor Rogers:

Oh.

00:12:01:00

Interviewer:

Start out by saying, what, what do you think Dr. King had to prove by coming back?

00:12:05:00

Taylor Rogers:

Dr. King had to prove that he was nonviolent. In my opinion.

00:12:10:00

Interviewer:

Was it that he was nonviolent or that nonviolence could work?

Taylor Rogers:

He, well...that nonviolence could work.

Interviewer:

So, what did Dr. King have to prove then? Saying, "Dr., Dr. King."

00:12:20:00

Taylor Rogers:

Dr. King had to prove that nonviolence really worked. And he came back, he came back to have a peaceful march. But that march, well, the evening that he got assassinated, I think the march was supposed to be the next day.

00:12:39:00

Interviewer:

Is there anything else that's...that you wanna tell us about that stands out about this whole strike, before Dr. King died?

00:12:46:00

Taylor Rogers:

Well, you know, I...the, the main thing really is, is the courage of the men. They had the courage to stay out because it was difficult for us to try to live with what we were gettin' from the community and what we were gettin' from the unions, to try to make end meet with our family. I think it was outstanding of those men to stand out and stand up and be men as they did.

00:13:13:00

Interviewer:

Thank you.

Taylor Rogers:

OK.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:13:19:00

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