

Interview with **Laurie Pritchett**

November 7, 1985

Production Team: C

Camera Rolls: 544-546

Sound Rolls: 1519-1520

Interview gathered as part of *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*.

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[camera roll 544]

[sound roll 1519]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: I HAVE FLAGS AND MARK.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: JIM, IT'S ALL YOURS.

INTERVIEWER: ALL RIGHT. CHIEF PRITCHETT, I JUST WANT TO REMIND YOU OF SOMETHING THAT'S QUOTED ABOUT YOU, IT SAYS, YOU WERE—YOU SAID I'M NOT, "IT'S NOT A MATTER OF WHETHER I'M A SEGREGATIONIST OR AN INTEGRATIONIST, I'M A DULY CONSTITUTED LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICER DEDICATED TO THE ENFORCEMENT OF LAWS." SO—WITH BEING REMINDED OF THAT QUOTE, I'D LIKE TO KNOW EXACTLY WHAT YOUR POSITION WAS IN THOSE DAYS. WERE YOU A SEGREGATIONIST? WHERE WERE YOU COMING FROM?

Pritchett: No, as I stated, my position was Chief of Police of the City of Albany. It didn't deal in segregation or integration. My responsibility was to enforce the ordinances and state laws of that city and state. As I've told Dr. King many times, I did not disagree with his motives or his objectives. It was his method. I believed in the Courts. He believed in the streets. So I've never been classified as a segregationist and not as an integrationist. I was administrator of the City of Hi—of Albany Police Department.

INTERVIEWER: ONE OF THE VERY FIRST ENCOUNTERS THAT MIGHT HAVE TAKEN PLACE DOWN THERE WAS WHEN SOME OF THE MEMBERS OF SNCC SAT IN AT THE TRAILWAYS BUS STATION TO TEST THE NEW ICC RULING ABOUT DESEGREGATION OF PUBLIC FACILITIES USED FOR INTERSTATE TRAVEL AND THEY WERE ARRESTED. AND THAT CAUSED QUITE A CON-BIT OF A CONTROVERSY, THAT IT WAS A VIOLATION OF A FEDERAL LAW TO ARREST THEM. WHAT—WHY WASN'T IT A VIOLATION?

Pritchett: Well, they were not arrested on a federal charge, they were arrested on a city ordinance of failing to obey the orders of a law enforcement officer, had nothing to do with interstate commerce. The SNCCs were the original ones to come in to Albany, Georgia. They dealt mostly with the young people. So I would say that their arrival upon the scene and then going into the churches, talking to the young people, the college students, the high school students, this started the Albany movement. This SNCC movement later coordinated with the Albany movement and from there into Dr. King's movement.

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INTERVIEWER: SO WHAT, REALLY, WERE THEY VIOLATING?

Pritchett: They were violating a city ordinance. They were asked to leave. They was not on any bus; they were not eating at counters; they were obstructing the flow of pedestrian travel in and out of the bus station. They were asked to disperse, they failed to do so, and they were arrested.

INTERVIEWER: OK. NOW, WHEN MARTIN LUTHER KING WAS COMING TO TOWN, YOU PREPARED FOR HIM IN SOME VERY INTERESTING WAYS. TELL ME ABOUT HOW YOU PREPARED FOR KING.

Pritchett: Well, you know, we had information, after the SNCCs came into Albany, I had information from another law enforcement agency, a federal agency, who I work with quite close. And they had informed me that Dr. King's intentions were to come into Albany and join the Albany movement. Upon learning this, ***I did research. I found his method was non-violence. That his method was to fill the jails. Same as Gandhi in India. And once he filled the jails, we'd have no capacity to arrest and then we'd have to give in to his demands.*** After learning this and studying this research, I started orientation of the police department into non-violent movement: no violence, no dogs, no show of force, even took up some of the training that the SNCCs originated there, of sitting at the counter and being slapped, spit upon. I said, if they do this, you will not use force. We're going to out non-violent and this is what the police department and the other people did.

00:04:33:00

INTERVIEWER: OK NOW—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: I THINK—EXCUSE ME—

[cut]

00:04:37:00

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: JIM IT'S ALL YOURS.

INTERVIEWER: OK. LET ME JUST FOLLOW UP ON YOUR ANSWER THAT YOU SAID THAT YOU TRAINED YOUR OFFICERS IN THE NON-VIOLENT TECHNIQUE WHEN YOU KNEW KING WAS ARRIVING. DOES THAT IMPLY THAT THERE WAS SOME VIOLENCE WITHIN THE POLICE DEPARTMENT BEFORE THAT?

Pritchett: Oh, no. You know, it was strange that the, the men, I did not expect the police department personnel to, to readily accept this position. But they did. They saw the situation which we confronted. We knew that if he came in we was going to have mass media as I instructed and, and lectured to the men that the news media could either be our ally or our enemy and we wanted them as an ally. We would not have any force. That doesn't mean that we used force on the police department. It was just a method of showing them that if they were arrested and somebody—encountered with somebody, and if they were spit upon, they would not lose their cool, so to speak. That our method would be non-violence, no force, we would enforce the law, but do it in such a manner that it would bring credit upon the city and not discredit.

INTERVIEWER: WHAT DID YOU DO TO MAKE SURE THAT THEY COULDN'T OVERFLOW THE JAILS?

Pritchett: Prior to King's arrival and his mass meetings, *I had sat down and took a map and went fifteen miles. How many jails was in a fifteen mile radius? How many was in a thirty mile radius? On up to maybe fifty, sixty mile radius. And I'd contacted those authorities, they'd assured us that we could use their facilities. And we had, when the mass arrests started, we'd have marches and there'd be two hundred, three hundred at one time there. I think we had almost two thousand, but none in our jail.* They were in surrounding counties under our supervision so as nothing would happen to 'em. We were never crowded in our—never had any in our jail. They were all in surrounding counties and so when these mass marches started, we were well prepared.

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INTERVIEWER: WELL, THERE ARE SOME REPORTS OF INCIDENTS OF BEATINGS IN SOME OF THE OTHER JAILS. WHAT WAS DONE TO CURB—

Pritchett: I think the one most noted was in Camilla. Slater King's wife went down and while she was outside the fence, she was pregnant at the time, one of the deputy sheriffs of that

county did kick her. It was an unfortunate thing that happened. I went and talked to Mrs. King and her husband Slater. Explained it was out of my jurisdiction. We had nothing to do with outside of the jail. They understood this and this, to my knowledge, was the only case of any brutality happening.

INTERVIEWER: OK, NOT TO DRIVE THE POINT TOO HARD, BUT I DO HAVE TO ASK YOU, I MEAN, IF YOU WERE SENDING PEOPLE OUT TO THOSE JAILS IT DOES SEEM LIKE YOU WOULD HAVE HAD SOME RESPONSIBILITY FOR THEM.

Pritchett: The responsibility of—my responsibility was the people who were lodged in the jails. She was outside the fence on public property which I had no jurisdiction over. This happened outside of the jail. She was talking from the outside into the jail and I had no authority out there. My men had no authority. The people inside the jail were never mistreated.

00:08:28:00

INTERVIEWER: WELL, LET, LET ME GET OFF THAT SUBJECT AND GO ON. YOU DID REALLY DEVELOP A VERY PERSONAL AND CLOSE RELATIONSHIP WITH DR. KING [sic]—KING. TELL, TELL US YOUR ANNIVERSARY STORY AS AN EXAMPLE.

Pritchett: Well, you know, people looked upon us as being on two sides of the street; that we were enemies, which we never were. I respected Dr. King. Dr. King respected me. We had a mutual understanding of each other. For an example, we'd been in the civil rights movement for some time. We'd been in a lot of turmoil in Albany, a lot of tension; we were being housed in the hotels. I hadn't been home in three or four weeks. One day I was in a conference with Dr. King and Reverend Abernathy. My secretary brought a telegram in, opened it and read it, and evidently I must have showed some sign of distress. Dr. King says, what's wrong Chief Pritchett? And I said, well, I just handed him the telegram, and he said, do you mean this is your anniversary? It was from my wife wishing me a happy anniversary. I said, that's right. He says, you go home, take your wife out to dinner. Enjoy yourself. Nothing would happen in Albany, Georgia today or tonight. In the morning at eight o'clock, we'll take up where we leave off. I went home, had a nice anniversary, come back the next morning and we presumed [sic] our battles.

00:09:58:00

INTERVIEWER: THAT'S A WONDERFUL STORY. YOU, YOU HAVE TOLD ME THAT IN SOME OF YOUR WORK YOU WERE AIDED BY THE, THE USE OF INFORMERS. TELL ME ABOUT SOME OF THE INFORMERS. I BELIEVE SOME OF THESE WERE EVEN BLACK INFORMANTS?

Pritchett: Oh, yes. They'd had their mass meetings and when they would have these mass meetings there'd be—there was two churches, Shiloh and Mt. Zion. They faced each other. And there'd be two, three, four thousand people at these mass meetings. I had people to go in

with recorders, black young men, that would go in and tape the whole meetings. We also had people that would go into their homes when it was evident that I couldn't get anybody in these meetings. As a matter of fact, some of the news media would come back after these meetings and inform me what went on in those.

00:10:58:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

Pritchett: But we had—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: WE'RE JUST ABOUT TO RUN OUT.

00:11:02:00

[cut]

[slate]

[change to camera roll 545]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: FLAGS ARE UP AND—

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: LET THE TRUCK GO BY. OK. TELL ME ABOUT THE USE OF THE BLACK INFORMANTS.

Pritchett: Well, you have to realize that even some of the people in the Albany Movement, which coordinated with Dr. King's movement, were not totally satisfied. They were not sure that Dr. King being there was the right thing. They knew that once, as they stated to me, he comes in and when he leaves, he's gone, we have to live here. So some—these people cooperated with me. Some of the leaders in the Albany movement cooperated with me as far as information was concerned and during all our turmoils there. Not only—I didn't classify 'em as, as informers. They were people who I respected, who respected me and they cooperated with us in our struggle there.

00:12:09:00

INTERVIEWER: WHAT WAS YOUR ASSESSMENT OF KING AND THE SCLC BY THE TIME THEY LEFT ALBANY?

Pritchett: Well, as I stated before, Dr. King, in some of our discussions, I, I felt that he was a very sincere person who was trying to reach a, a goal. As I stated before, the only difference

was he did it in the streets and I thought it should be done in the Courts. He stated Courts were slow, streets were better, faster. I think he was a man that was devoted to his cause and the cause of the black. I respected him for that. I think he was, in my opinion, a great man.

INTERVIEWER: BUT YOU DID FEEL AS THOUGH YOU BEAT HIM PRETTY BAD DIDN'T YOU?

Pritchett: I never did look upon it as, as a win or loss. I was proud of the fact that we had accomplished what we had set out to do. I was proud of the police department. I was proud of the people in the city who cooperated, the leaders who cooperated, cause at one time there, I guess I, I had executive power, I could open, close anything at, at my wish. I never did look upon it as a win or loss. It was a friendship that had been matured between Dr. King and myself. There was a feeling of, of satisfaction and there was a feeling, for him, if you can understand what I mean. So we never did look upon it as a win or a loss. We were just proud of, of accom—of what we had accomplished, under stress.

INTERVIEWER: LET ME ASK YOU WHAT—WHY WAS THERE SO MUCH RESISTANCE TO THIS SENSE OF INTEGRATION IN THE, IN—AMONG THE WHITE PEOPLE, OF THE, IN ALBANY?

Pritchett: Well, as I've stated many times, even to then Attorney General Kennedy it was not the fact that they were totally against it. They just felt that sooner or later the public accommodation bill would be passed. There would be federal laws governing this and when there was, the people in our city and county and our area of South Georgia would abide by these laws. But until it was a law, they would not freely volunteer to do what they wanted them to do.

00:14:47:00

INTERVIEWER: WHY NOT?

Pritchett: Well this is a good question. It wasn't that the city officials of Albany were segregationists. We had a Catholic mayor. We had a Jewish judge, recorder judge. We were a metropolitan city, so to speak. But it was a fact that *we didn't*—when I say “we”—myself and the city council and the Mayor—did not *want to be forced into doing something* by force, intimidation. *And this is, in one sense, is what it was. We were intimidated, we were threatened.*

00:15:34:00

INTERVIEWER: WAS—WHY DID YOU GO OVER TO BIRMINGHAM?

Pritchett: I was invited to go over there after our, our trouble stopped. The Chief of Police in Birmingham had come over to Albany and stayed two or three weeks observing our methods. He went back and wanted to implement these same strategies. I was invited over there by the Director of Public Safety, Bull Connors [sic]. I went I gave him advice. He didn't take it.

INTERVIEWER: WHAT WAS THE ADVICE?

Pritchett: I wanted him to—I told him that he had to guard Dr. King. That the Klan was nearby, he was staying in a motel. I said, he's vulnerable. If he's ever killed, the cities in this country are gonna burn. He said, I don't wanna. I'm not gonna guard him. If they want to kill him, that's up to them. I'm not going to put my men guarding him. That night, as you well know, that motel was blown [sic] up and the room that, luckily, he was not killed, but the next day they had violence. All the cars or half of the cars in Birming-police cars in Birmingham were destroyed the next day. I left. He didn't take my advice. I didn't like his methods. Frankly, I didn't like the man. Our philosophy did not—we couldn't get along.

00:17:05:00

INTERVIEWER: TELL ME ABOUT THE FIRST TIME YOU MET HIM.

Pritchett: The first time I met him, I was ushered into his office. He was on the telephone, had his back to me. And I—it was a great big chair. And I was expecting a great big man. When he turned around there was a small man with a deep voice. He told me that he was talking to the Recreation Department, that the blacks wanted to play golf on the municipal golf courses. He was gonna let them, but he was going to put concrete in all the holes. They would never get a golf ball in any of the holes. And my opinion of him at that time was, you know, I, I seen then that his philosophy and my philosophy; we were too different and we never did agree on anything.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: STANDBY FOR JUST A MOMENT GENTLEMEN.

[cut]

00:18:01:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: AND MARK.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: OK, JIM. IT'S ALL YOURS.

INTERVIEWER: ANYTIME ANYBODY TALKS ABOUT ALBANY, EVERYBODY TALKS ABOUT THE MUSIC AND THE SPIRITUALITY. WHAT DO YOU REMEMBER OF THE MUSIC?

Pritchett: You know, it was some of the prettiest music. I used to go down and listen to it. The freedom songs and we had a young lady, I, I can't recall her name, she was one of the leader's down—child [sic]. And she was, she had a beautiful voice and, you know, they used to sing “We ain't gonna let Chief Pritchett turn us around”, you know. And then they would get into the other freedom songs and they were beautiful. As a matter of fact, they were

recorded, somebody recorded ‘em and I was given an album of ‘em. I still have ‘em. But it was beautiful music.

INTERVIEWER: YOU WERE MENTIONED IN ONE OF THE SONGS?

Pritchett: Oh, yes, they, “We ain't gonna let Chief Pritchett turn us around.” They used to sing that all the time.

INTERVIEWER: HOW DID THAT GO? HOW DID THAT GO?

Pritchett: I can't remember it, but it was “we're not gonna be turned around,” that they would be arrested this is the logic of it, but—

INTERVIEWER: BUT WHAT WAS THE SONG? DO YOU, DO YOU REMEMBER THE MUSIC, CAN YOU SING ANY OF IT?

Pritchett: No. It was, it was, the name of it wa-“We ain't gonna let Chief Pritchett turn us around, turn us around, turn us around.”

INTERVIEWER: [laughs] HOW DID THAT MAKE YOU FEEL?

Pritchett: Well, it was just one of those things, you know. I, I was amused at it to start with, but it sort of got old after a while. After two or three years.

00:19:42:00

INTERVIEWER: ONE OF THE LAST TIMES YOU ARRESTED DR. KING. HE WAS RELEASED UNDER VERY UNUSUAL CIRCUMSTANCES, WHAT HAPPENED THERE?

Pritchett: He was in our jail and had said he was going to stay. You know, the prior time, he'd come out and sort of disillusioned the black movement because he came out of jail when he said he would stay in. This time he vowed to stay in and one morning one of my men come in and said, Chief, they just got Dr. King out. I said, who? And he said, I don't know. He said, he was a well dressed black man. I'd never seen the man. There have been many stories told about it. Some say that he was paid out by attorneys, some of the attorneys in Albany. It might be—I, I know what happened. But I—frankly, you know, it was a matter of strategy. *I knew that if he stayed in jail, we'd continue to have problems. So I talked to some people. I said, we've got to get him out, and once we do, I think he'll leave here. And arrangements was made. Frankly, I don't know who the man was that paid the bond.*

INTERVIEWER: ***BUT IT WAS DONE AT YOUR REQUEST?***

Pritchett: *Yes, it was done at my request. And it sort of surprised Dr. King. This was one time that I, only time I've ever seen him, when he seemed where he didn't know which way to go, 'cause see, when we went back and got him, he thought he was being transferred to a*



better jail in Americus, Georgia. And when I said, no, you're leaving. He didn't want to go. He said, I can't go, Chief Pritchett. He said, I'll lose face if I go. I said, well, you've got to go, Dr. King. And later on, after it was all over, we discussed this and he told me, he said, this is one time, not only did you out violent [sic] me, but this is one time you outsmarted me. You know, and it was a shrewd move, but it accomplished—

00:21:53:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

Pritchett: —what we wanted to do.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: AND JUST RUN OUT.

00:21:58:00

[cut]

[slate]

[change camera roll to 546]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: OK AND MARK IT.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: ONCE JOHN SETTLES HERE I'M—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: I WOULD SAY THAT I'M SETTLED.

INTERVIEWER: OK, AND, AND SPEAK TO ME ABOUT THE INFLUENCE OF THE NAZI PARTY OR THE KKK AT THAT TIME.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: JUST KEEP IT WITH THE KKK.

INTERVIEWER: ALL RIGHT, KKK?

Pritchett: Well, as some people have asked, you know, and during all this, we enforced the law against mass demonstration on the—by the blacks, also the Ku Klux Klan, KKK. They came in, was gonna have a big meeting in the city limits. We would not let them in the city limits. I talked to Shelton, who was a leader and, and told him: you cannot come in this town. Now you can stay outside the city limits; I have no jurisdiction. But you cannot bring your people in this city. And he cooperated. He met some four or five hundred yards out of the city limits. We did not enforce the law one-sided. We enforced it, we tried to equally keep

the whites and the—and so-to-speak, the rednecks, down, enforce it against the, the demonstrators, for violation of the law. So, it was a two way street.

00:23:17:00

INTERVIEWER: WAS LAURIE PRITCHETT IN 1960 DIFFERENT THAN LAURIE PRITCHETT OF 1962, AFTER DR. KING LEFT? DID DR. KING CHANGE YOU IN ANY WAY?

Pritchett: Well, in some respect. I had more understanding of his cause than I had prior to his arrival and I had more of a friendship with the man. One thing that I regret about all of this is Dr. King was killed in Memphis. He did not fulfill or see the fulfillment of his dream. That's one thing that I, I, I really feel sorry for. I just sometime wonder what would have happened if he had lived. Where he would have ended up. In what position he would have ended up—

INTERVIEWER: LET ME JUST INTERRUPT YOU THOUGH. YOU TALK, KINDA TALKED ABOUT HOW YOU FELT ABOUT DR. KING. DID THE EXPERIENCE WITH DR. KING CHANGE YOUR ATTITUDES ABOUT BLACK PEOPLE IN GENERAL OR ABOUT THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT?

Pritchett: Well, you know, I, I never had any trouble with my understanding of blacks. I was raised used to have blacks that I played with. This is one thing that I think helped me in this trouble in Albany. I had a mutual understanding. I, I knew what they'd gone through. I knew what they were attempting to do. But to directly answer your question, I think I was changed some with my knowledge of Dr. King, my association with Dr. King, and many discussions that I had with him. I could see what they were trying to do and I, frankly, I was hoping that they would accomplish what they were doing, but after they left Albany.

INTERVIEWER: YOU—I PROMISED YOU THAT YOU COULD SAY SOMETHING ABOUT DR. KING. DID YOU SAY IT? WAS THAT THE COMMENT ABOUT THE—

Pritchett: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: OK, WE'LL STOP NOW. THANK YOU VERY MUCH.

[cut]

[end interview]

00:25:16:00

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