



Interview with **Frank Legree**

Date: December 7, 1989

Interviewer: Madison Davis Lacy, Jr.

Camera Rolls: 1132-1133

Sound Rolls: 160-161

Team: A

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 #1132]

[sound roll #160]

00:00:11:00

[beep]

00:00:14:00

Camera crew member #1:

This is take eight. Marker.

[slate]

Camera crew member #1:

OK.

00:00:19:00

Interviewer:

Frank. Overtown in its heyday, you were a performer there. What was it like, man? Tell, make it come alive for me.

Frank Legree:

Overtown?

Interviewer:

Yeah.

00:00:28:00

Frank Legree:

Oh, during that time, man, Overtown, they had all of the different bands and shows. They had some wonderful musicians, you know. Oh, they had some of the baddest musicians. They used to jam with us like, hey. Even at the Sir John, the Mary Elizabeth, they would have a show, big dance there, you know. All you had to do was just go down 2nd Avenue any time after seven o'clock, both sides of the street all you could see was just people. Everybody was happy. You know? And they just had shows. They had, we would leave from the Mary Elizabeth, we'd go to the Sir John. Leave from the Sir John, we'd go down to the Elks, which Clyde Killens had. You know, it was always something going on, man. It was swingin'. That's all I can say. It was bad.

00:01:11:00

Interviewer:

Well, what about the business life? You, like, you said the business life was hot, too. Paint a picture for me.

00:01:15:00

Frank Legree:

Oh, well, during that time, you know, well, they had the hotels, they had the restaurants, they had clothing stores, they had, everything was right in Overtown. You didn't have to go anyplace. You didn't have to hardly go downtown, like to Flagler, or listen, well some of the big exclusive stores, you know, but far as the stores there, it was, they had everything right Overtown on 2nd Avenue, 3rd Avenue. It was there, you know. And all you had to do, leave from there, you go to Liberty City, it was the same. It was really swinging, it was really all right.

00:01:47:00

Interviewer:

Well now, what was your favorite story? You were a musician. Who did you perform with that you liked the most? Or what do you remember as a story about somebody there?

00:01:56:00

Frank Legree:

Oh! Oh, I can, well there's several I can remember, but there's one I, I, I really think about quite often, is Dinah Washington. Dinah was in town, you know, and she was supposed to perform with us at the Sir John. We had it all set up. Dinah Washington was gonna be at the 5:35. First show starts at eleven o'clock. And that's it. Everybody was glad to see Dinah, they want Dinah, they loved Dinah then. So, we had a big band. We had, the place was crowded. We was only charging two dollars during that time. That was big money, you know. Everybody was trying to get there. So, we had the place crowded. We were so happy 'cause we got a full house. Where's Dinah? Everybody waitin', no Dinah. So, someone came up and told us, Hey man, like, Dinah's over at the Palms. I said, The Palms? She's not supposed to be there. She's supposed to be here, you know, with us. No Dinah. But we had one girl that used to sing, she loved Dinah, she'd imitate Dinah like everything. So, we saw Dinah wasn't gonna be there and everybody wanted the, the show to start, so, hey, we just put this girl up and she started singing and she was wailing the same songs what Dinah sings, you know. All of a sudden, here come Dinah [laughs] inside and hear this chick, oh, she was furious, you know. But after all, you know, she came. She knew she was late, she knew she was wrong, but she really liked this girl herself. And man, that was a ball. Everybody, you know, forgot about Dinah didn't show, but then when Dinah got there she got up on the stage, she killed it, you know. [laughs] But it was real funny, you know. It was just one of those things that happened. But that was just one of the things that happened in entertaining that I never will forget, you know, never will forget it.

00:03:34:00

Interviewer:

Let's stop down now.

[cut]

[sound roll #161]

00:03:38:00

Camera crew member #2:

OK.

Camera crew member #1:

Take nine marker.

[slate]

Interviewer:

Do you mind just [unintelligible].

[background noise]

Interviewer:

There you go.

Frank Legree:

Mm-hmm.

00:03:50:00

Interviewer:

All right. All right, now let's start on your story, brother. Tell me, what possessed you to buy a house in Liberty City in 1957? Start at the beginning.

00:03:59:00

Frank Legree:

Well, well I planned this at first my mother and my stepfather, he passed, he expired. She were living in Tennessee. You know, I was in New York at the time, so when I went there and found out that she wanted to, you know, to leave. Her health wasn't that good and they suggested that, wait, why don't you go to a warmer climate? You know. And I talked it over with my mother. She said, Well, yeah, we might as well go back home, which was Miami, you know. So, we come home to Miami. So, after getting here we got into apartment, you know, and we said, well, we'll get out and start looking around and see can we find a comfortable home, not too expensive because we didn't have the bread, you know. So anyway, we started looking and finally we ran into a couple called Erikken [sic], and Zickerman, [sic] which was two lawyers that had a house and they said it was in Liberty City and it was on 55th Street, so hey. All I knew was it's 55th Street and this was the house. So they agreed to go show it to us and we went out, we looked at the house. The house looked good. Three bedrooms, one bath and it was only twelve thousand, five hundred dollars, so this was really what we were looking for. And the house wasn't bad and the neighborhood looked pretty good, so I agreed. So he told us to come in the next day, we'd fill out the papers, which we did. We went in and signed all the papers, got it all straight. I said, Well, what we'd like to do is, is, you know, get the place cleaned up first and then we'll move in. He said, No problem. So, we went on and went the next day, scrubbed, got the place lookin', my wife was happy, my mother saw it, she said, Oh, this is so nice. We were so lucky to get

in here, you know. So nobody said anything. One of the neighbors I saw, which was White. The lady came and said, Y'all gonna move in? I said, Yes, we're trying to get it straight. They were very nice people far as I'm concerned. No problem at all. So, we got in the house, and after going into the house we, I'd say *at least two weeks after moved in we were sitting out on the porch one day and the mailman came, gave us a letter. I thought about it, said, Hey, who know where we live at already? And when I opened the letter it said, "Nigger get out!" I said, Isn't this something? So, we laughed about it. It was nothing*, [laughs] you know, course we didn't pay any attention to it. So my mother, she said, Oh, this don't sound too good. I said, Oh, don't worry about it. I said, That's just somebody, you know. So, anyway, two weeks later, after we received this letter, I came home one night and they called me and said, Hey, your windows is all knocked out. I said, Windows? My pane? You know, the glass. Said, Yes. *Somebody threw a brick and knocked the windows out*, you know. So now this is beginning, now I'm gettin' a little upset [unintelligible] I said, I don't know what's goin' on, but I think I better contact the police and notify them what have happened, you know, here. So I called the police. Was, Chief Headley was the chief of police at that time, and by calling him, he said, Well, did you see who did it when it happened? I said, No, I wasn't at home. But when I come home, then, I said, I need some protection or something, you know. So, he said, Well, there's nothin' I can do. You know, he said, If we catch anybody around there, then we can do anything. I said, Oh, OK. So, I ran into a friend, which was Dr. Brown, and also a fella named Butterball, which was a DJ, DJ that I knew, I had met. So, he told me, he said, Why don't you talk with Father Gibson and Attorney Graves with the NAACP and let them know what happened? I said, What good is that gonna? He said, Well hey, talk to 'em anyway, he said, because you're new in the neighborhood, you know, and they're doing these kinda things. I think you oughta talk to 'em. So I did. I went and talked with Attorney G.E. Graves. He, he said, Oh! He said, We're glad to know this. He said, Hey, we wanna get with you. We're gonna have a meeting. I said, Meeting 'bout what? He said, About your house. I said, I don't need a meeting. This my house, [laughs] you know what I mean? He said, Oh, no, no. He said, What we're trying to do is we're trying to find someone, you know, that will stick because we are tired of the way they're doing here. We've been trying to integrate the golf clubs, the golf course. We done tried to do this. And we haven't been able to get nothin' going. This is the thing what we need right here to stand by. I said, Whatever you wanna do, because I'm not goin'. This is my home. I'm gonna stay there, you know. So this was it, this is the beginning of us going into, to this house. And I wasn't looking for no problems at all, because we weren't looking for that. We didn't know anything about what they were tryin' to call us is Black busters, blockbusters. I said, What is that? What you call it? They said, Well hey, we're tryin' to get in there and, you know, and start something. I said, Not me. This wasn't my idea. *Only thing I wanted was a home for my mother and my family to live, and this is all*. You know, whether it was White, Black, blue or green, I didn't know. We weren't lookin' for nothing like this. So, this is the way it happened.

00:08:59:00

Interviewer:

Let's stop down.

[cut]

00:09:02:00

Camera crew member #2:

Mark it.

Camera crew member #1:

Take ten marker.

[slate]

00:09:06:00

Interviewer:

All right, now you're, the NACCP has gotten somebody who's gonna stick you.

Frank Legree:

Right.

Interviewer:

Your situation.

Frank Legree:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer:

OK. They invited Dr. King down. He came down, right?

00:09:16:00

Frank Legree:

Right.

00:09:16:00

Interviewer:

What happened? Tell me.

00:09:17:00

Frank Legree:

Well, what happened, the Attorney G.E. Graves, which was the attorney for the NAACP, he invited Dr. King down, him and Father Gibson. So, they was telling him about what has started, what the problem was that I were havin' at this home. So, this is when Dr. King called me in with him and the rest of the officials with the NAACP and asked me, please, if I would stay, you know, there to the house and wouldn't leave that would back me, they would get behind me, you see. I said, Well hey, I don't want no violence either. I said, But let me tell you this. If they try to do anything there, I'm gonna use violence. Dr. King said, No. This is not the way it goes. This is not what we wanna do. He said, Then we'll be actin' just as they do. He said, But we gonna fight them till the end. If you are willing to stick, we're willing to stand behind you. In other words, I'll tell you this. We'll even pay your house note. Oh man, now, that really struck me, [laughs] you know. I'm already gonna stay there anyway, but hey, they was willing to do that. Seriously, I was glad, you know, that day because I didn't really want any trouble, I didn't wanna hurt anybody, I didn't wanna get hurt, you know, but I just wanted a home for my mother and my kids, you know, to live. So this was it. And after they told me that, this is beginning of my home.

00:10:40:00

Interviewer:

Let's stop down.

Frank Legree:

OK.

[beep]

[cut]

[camera roll #1133]

[slate]

00:10:46:00

Crewmember:

Eleven.

00:10:49:00

Interviewer:

Now, you told me that somebody threatened you with death at one point, the White Citizens' Council. Start that story, tell me.

00:10:56:00

Frank Legree:

Oh, yeah. That was what, they called it Hawthorne with the White Citizen Council. They used to have meetings about a block from the home where I was living. And they would have this White Citizen Council meeting, whatever they call it, you know. And they had been to the house trying to make a offer to me, well, you know, Hey, you wanna sell the house? I told 'em, Yeah, I'll sell it. You know, so they come to the house, when they walked up, knocked on the door, you know, they said, We wanna come and see what kinda offer you—. And I said, What you offerin' my house? You know, they said, Twenty-five thousand dollars. I said, You give me a hundred thousand dollars, I'll move tomorrow. You know, they all said, I told you he was crazy. I told you he was crazy. Everybody left, you know. But anyway, we found out that they were having these meetings, so the attorney for the NAACP, G.E. Graves, he found a informer, which was White, to start attending these, these meetings because they wanted to know what was goin' on. They had, we'd heard a lotta threats and, by mail and on the phone, but we didn't actually know what they were really doin', you know, at these meetings, so we wanted to find out. And they would pay him just to go to these meetings. So, he went to one meeting, he came back and Dr. King was here at that time. He called all us over, we went over to Reverend Graham's home and we sat down to discuss. This fella came in, the informer, which I didn't know, and I had met him for the first time. So, he said, Well, at this meeting they decided that they're going to kill you. Now, you know, kill me? So, he said, Yes. He said they had decided that they were going to shoot the lights out on 14th Avenue, which I was living between 14th and 15th Avenue on 55th Street, and they have the street lights. So, they decided that they were gonna shoot the lights out on each corner and they was gonna have this big seven-foot cross on a pickup truck, and they was gonna come and bring it to my home and put it on the lawn. And after they was supposed to have lit the cross and start burning, this is when they was gonna start the shooting. But, before this had happened, we had notified, after finding out all this, we notified Chief Headley of the police and told him, said, Hey, the, this man's life now has been threatened. They're talking about what they gonna do. And we wanna know what can you do to give him protection at his home. He, he said, Well, there's nothin' I can do. They haven't did anything, you know, to him. They're just only talkin'. There's nothing we can do. So, we decided to go to the, a meeting with the W—I think it was Channel 4, and also the *Miami Herald*, and we told them what we, the information we had and, and what they intend to do. And they were glad to hear this and they told us, No problem. We'll be there, we gonna see, you know, what was going on. So now, at the meantime, Chief Headley done told us he was not gonna be there, you know, but after he find out that we done went to the television station, they were gonna be

there, and the Miami New [sic]—Herald was gonna be there, so they decided to go ahead and send some police their self, which we had a open place in front of my house where it was a lotta trees so you could hardly see anyone. And sure enough, that night they were supposed to come between nine and ten o'clock. Sure enough, nine-thirty, we hears this gun goes off, shoots the light out there, shoots the light out on 15th Avenue. Few minutes, hear this truck come with four men, four White males with a seven-foot cross and they pull up right to my house, just as the informer told us they were gonna do. Took out the cross, put it up against a tree, and as soon as they got the cross in this tree, they was, the officer was supposed to wait until they light it, but they didn't. They rushed out, grabbed them and put them under arrest. You know? But if they had waited until they had set this afire, they could've gotten more time, but this is what they did, you know, before that, although they did catch 'em. I'm glad they caught 'em on my lawn, you know, but I wanted to do something, but they didn't want me to do what I wanted to do, you know.

00:15:09:00

Interviewer:

Well, now the stuff kept going, it kept continuing. You know, going on and on and on. How did all this make you feel? How did you bear up under all this shit?

00:15:17:00

Frank Legree:

Well, like I said, at, at, at, at this particular point, I had really gotten a-afraid for my family, you know, because it was showing that they were really gettin' to be violent, and they was threatening to do, to really kill me or my family, you know. So that, I was more concerned about my family than I was myself. So we decided to get my family out. We went and put them in a room, apartment at least, at the Sir John, so they could stay there, and I said, I will stay at the house myself, which I did, and the NAACP got some men to, you know, start staying there with me. *But they started this picketing*, you know, and, so they was walking all around with a big sign, "Nigger get out!" You's a blockbuster, we don't want you in our area. *And, so I just let them walk and walk, so I went outside, got my sprinklers, put it on my lawn, turned the water up as high [laughs] as I could, you know what I mean? And water'd go, they just started running from the water, somebody went and called the police.* *When the police come, still they got them to carry me to jail.* So I goes to jail for turning on water on people, and I said, But they was marching in front of my home. But they carried me to jail, which, I didn't make any time. The, the jury throwed it outta court, you know. And then, after then, we had what we'd call a cocktail hour. And we invited all our friends to come over, you know, so they find out, they saw all these cars and going on. Doctor Brown, Father Gibson, everybody was there. And we looked up, we inside, everybody's having a ball, come out, we had four cars with the tires flat [laughs] on the ground, you know. And it was just something that, I'm, I'm, I'm, if I had to do it all over again, I definitely would, you know. But this is something we weren't looking for. We weren't looking for any trouble, you know. And it wasn't really the neighbors that lived right next door or right in that area. It was

people that lived way off from there, in Hialeah, in Coral, Coral Gables, you know, and they were, actually, we had one of the fellows, they called him along that actually worked for Eastern Airline, you know? And it wasn't the neighbors, it was just the outsiders that was creatin' all the disinformation.

00:17:39:00

Interviewer:

Stop down now.

[beep]

[cut]

00:17:44:00

Camera crew member #1:

This is take twelve marker.

[slate]

00:17:46:00

Interviewer:

So you're dealing with your housing stuff and lo and behold, along comes the schools.

00:17:50:00

Frank Legree:

Oh, now, let me tell you this. We went through all this problem, now things are a little easin' down, you know, on the house. And we're still gettin' a few little prank calls, but we didn't pay any attention be-because things were going a little smoother. My son at the time, he was attending a school called Holmes Elementary, which was thirteen or fourteen blocks. On the other side of the school, which was Orchard Villa, that he had to pass by Orchard Villa to go to Holmes Elementary from the house where we were livin'. So, then they come and they say Well, no, Mister Legree, see, your son is not supposed to pass one school to go to another. I said, Oh. Don't even. You wanna tell me I got to go through this again? So, he said, Well, this is rule, this is the superintendent of, you know the schools. So I said, Well, what should I do? He said, Only thing we gotta do, we got to transfer him to go to Orchard Villa. I said, OK, so he gotta go to Orchard Villa. So, I go to Orchard Villa that morning, took care of my son. When I get there, first thing I see, I'm sorry, you can't bring your son here. You know. I said, What do you mean I can't bring him here? The superintendent told me. So the principal,

he got in and caught me and said, Well, why don't you wait, Mister Legree? He said, Let's try and get this thing—, I said Whatever, you know, I said, My son needs an education, too, right? I said, I didn't ask for this. I said, They told me to bring my son here to Orchard Villa. This is where he's supposed to go, I have all his papers, I'm presenting it to you, now you do what you want to, he's going to stay in school.

00:19:25:00

Interviewer:

All right. Now, you said we needed integration. Start it with—

00:19:29:00

Frank Legree:

Yeah, well, you know, we needed integration. We needed school. We needed, you know, better schools to go to, and I think if we decided we wanted to go eat here or eat there, we should, you know, go there, you know. But, in all that we had, in the Black area here in Liberty City and, and Overtown, we had so many places, we had hotels, we had restaurants, we had everything that we wanted. We were so used to of us having things that we wanted, so it was no big thing to us, you know, but we wanted to have the privilege of going where you would like to go. But, when that opened up so that we could go to those places and do those things, that just, just faded the Black businesses out, because you couldn't compete with the big De-Denny's Restaurant, and you couldn't compete with the hotels, the big hotels, the Eden Roc or the Fontainebleau, you know, or what have you. So, this just killed all of our [unintelligible] business, so all of a sudden, now they say, OK, we're gonna to make it possible so the Blacks can have this. We gonna tear this down and, and build over a little—they don't. But they tore down things, but nothing had never been built back again. So now, if you could look Overtown, if you go in Liberty City, this is all you see, the places that were torn down, but nothin' has been built, you know, for the Black people. Anytime that we have the, the Black Baptist Convention, or we have the Masonics, which have thirty thousand delegates or whatever, who gets any of the pie? We can't get it over on the side because we don't have anything to offer. We don't have no hotels, we don't have no restaurant that is, that can seat three hundred people, you know, and, so where they got to go? They have to go to Eden Roc, they have to go to the Hilton, they have to go there. They're making all the money over there, and they say, In our community, you know; what about the economics over here? We're not getting into that. We can't get it 'cause we don't have anything to offer. So they got to go in this other area—

[rollout on camera]

[wild sound]

Frank Legree:

—which is seg—integrated, and which is good, we're glad, but look what it did to us over in this area, we don't get none of the pie.

00:21:44:00

Interviewer:

I gotcha. We got rollout. That's good.

Frank Legree:

OK.

Interviewer:

I got it all.

Frank Legree:

Yeah.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:21:50:00

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