

Interview with **William Bradford Huie**

Interview conducted in August 30, 1979.

Production Team: D

Camera Rolls: 20-24

Sound Rolls: 11-13

Interview gathered as part of *America, They Loved You Madly*, a precursor to *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.

Preferred Citation

Interview with William Bradford Huie, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on August 30, 1979, for *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*. 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*.

00:00:02:00

[camera roll 20]

[sound roll 11]

[extended wild audio]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #1: OK, THIS IS 30 AUGUST '79. WE'RE CONTINUING WITH CAPITAL CITIES. I'M STILL ON SOUND ROLL ELEVEN AND CAMERA ROLL TWENTY. WE'RE IN ALABAMA AND IT'S AN INTERVIEW WITH MR. HUIE.

[cut]

00:00:19:00

Huie: For instance, take the, the Liuzzo case. Whenever you put twelve white men on a jury to try a white man who's killed a black or some nigger lover like Liuzzo, Mrs. Liuzzo, at the end of the Selma March, they don't, they want to find the white man not guilty. But if you're the defense lawyer, they don't want you to rub it in their face. They want to, they want you to plead 'em not guilty and then they want you to leave them so that they can go out and say, well, I would have found him guilty, but I just don't think the state proved it was him. See?

00:01:19:00

INTERVIEWER: CAN WE START ROLLING ON THIS?

Huie: Oh, sure. [coughs] And that, so that's, that's what would have been done had James Earl Ray gone to trial with Arthur Hanes. Arthur Hanes in Birmingham is a lawyer who represented Ray first, after Ray had tried to get a man from Boston to represent him and he had refused.

00:01:50:00

INTERVIEWER: WHO WAS THAT?

Huie: Well, what's that well-known lawyer from Boston, the famous lawyer from—

INTERVIEWER: OH, BAILEY.

Huie: Bailey. Lee, Lee—F. Lee Bailey, yeah. Ray, when he was arrested in London, he thought every important white lawyer in America would want to represent him. And he, so he was sitting waiting for somebody to call, contact him. The only person that contacted him was J.B. Stoner in Georgia, who wanted to represent him. And so, after about twenty-four hours Ray had his British lawyer call Mr. Bailey and give him the great good news that James Earl Ray in London wanted him to represent him in the United States. So Mr., [laughs] Mr. Bailey told him to go to hell. And that, what made him think, well, why did he think he would want to represent him. And that, when the British lawyer who told me about it, and Ray did too, told Ray, Ray just couldn't believe it. He couldn't believe that Lee Bailey would turn down the opportunity to represent the man who killed Martin Luther King. And that, so it was after that that Ray then, who had been in Alabama, and who, at the time that, and who knew of Arthur Hanes having represented the Ku Klux who killed Mrs. Liuzzo, then, he had his British lawyer get in touch with Hanes. And Hanes got in touch with me, 'cause he'd never been to London and he didn't have the money. And, and I gave Hanes \$10,000 and helped him go to London and made a deal with Ray, then, and Hanes for Ray to tell me the truth about why or not he killed Dr. King. And that's how I came to write a book called, *He Slew the Dreamer*, which cost me an enormous amount of money. And we've never been able to make a film until now we're gonna make one.

00:03:49:00

INTERVIEWER: DO YOU THINK IT'S GONNA HAPPEN OR DO YOU THINK IT FITS IN THIS OTHER CATEGORY OF GREAT IDEAS THAT DIDN'T—

Huie: I think it might happen now. I, I read a *New York Times* piece a week ago or something like that about all these new things that were gonna happen in television drama, including what's, the sort of the thing that you have here. And I have an idea. I've always believed in television drama. I've always, Lord, I've just looked at it and I've seen the opportunities, what could be done with it. Haven't been able to get it done, but I'm perfectly willing to hope again that it can be done now.

00:04:26:00

INTERVIEWER: IT, IT IS BEGINNING TO, TO OPEN. YOU KNOW, HOW LONG THE WINDOW'S GOING TO BE OPEN, WHO KNOWS, BUT FOR A WHILE I THOUGHT PUBLIC TELEVISION WAS A REAL ALTER—ALTERNATIVE, BUT—

Huie: Right, right.

INTERVIEWER: OF COURSE NOW, IT MIGHT—IT WILL PROBABLY FOLLOW THE COMMERCIAL WORLD INTO INNOVATION.

Huie: Right.

INTERVIEWER: DO YOU WANT US TO RUN TAPE, CHARLIE, OR—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #1: I'M RUNNING.

INTERVIEWER: YEAH, I MEAN, BUT YOU'RE GETTING PRETTY CLOSE RIGHT?

[cut]

00:04:50:00

Huie: All right, but your, your white jury, if Hanes had represented James Earl Ray in Memphis, because about 40% of the people are black in Shelby County, Tennessee, anticipated that about, at least, three of the twelve people on the jury would have to be black if they tried Ray. And then, but Hanes still wanted to plead him not guilty, which he did in the arraignment and wanted to go to trial with him, because he thought he would have a chance to get a hung jury. He thought he could put one or two white men on the jury who would say, well, I'd vote with you, but I just don't believe this case has been proved, you see? I don't believe this man's guilty of killing Dr. King beyond a reasonable doubt. So Hanes thought that he had a chance to get a hung jury. He may very well, he, it, it might have happened that way. But your, today this, this is, this has happened as far as your urban juries are concerned. The white jury, well, even in the old, the, the most, the worst crime that was committed after Black Monday in Alabama was the ritual castration of a man named Edward Aaron. And I wrote about it. The Klan seized him. They didn't even know who he was. They just went out to find a black and castrate him. And they just happened to find a man named Edward Aaron, who was thirty-three years old, had been in the war in the Philippines, and he didn't even know what the movement was about. He didn't, he wasn't anti-anything, but he just happened to be walking down the road on a Saturday night and they took him, and in a ritual they castrated him in a Klan lair outside Birmingham. There were six Klansmen present. Unfortunately, for them, two of the young Klansmen got sick during the castration and threw up. And two of them went home and told their wives about it and their wives marched them down to the police the next day. Aaron was also let out and he had, then they came back and looking for him and he had to hide in the creek and he was almost bled to death. But he was taken to the VA hospital and he was gonna die for about a week, but he recovered. He's living now because... We later got him a, a pension, a man, a Senator of New York who's in, who's no longer there, a Republican senator, helped me and a black preacher

in Birmingham get a pension for him. And then later when I wrote about his story, a beautiful story...He's living now in Dayton, Ohio, right now. Although I never revealed where he was living at the time. And as a result of the story I wrote in True, I gave him the \$3,000 that True paid me for the story, and about \$24,000 was contributed to him. So I set up a fund for him, about a \$30,000 fund. And so, he's lived, he's been a semi-invalid because of the injuries he, he sustained and so forth, but God, he's sad. His story will just make your hair stand. Anytime you want to, the senseless story. Utterly. And one of, and then I was able to help those—Now, the point I'm gonna make is that all four of those men were tried in Birmingham, all before all-white juries. And they were charged with what's called mutilation in Alabama law. And all four white juries gave each one of those Ku Klux the maximum sentences, twenty years in prison. No doubt, whatever, all white. And this was in 1958. And then later they, they, they were expecting George Wallace to become Governor and they expected Wallace to pardon them, which he later did, and—

00:09:29:00

INTERVIEWER: HE DID PARDON THEM?

Huie: But I was able to keep 'em in jail, because they were gonna let 'em out after they had been in there about two years. They were gonna let 'em out. And I, and there was a hearing before the pardon—

[cut]

00:09:43:00

Huie: [laughs]

INTERVIEWER: THAT WOULDN'T MAKE YOU TOO POPULAR, DOES IT?

Huie: Well, now, one of them has been born again like Jimmy Carter. And I'll tell you, he's written me a long letter, forgiving me, [laughs] forgiving me for keeping him in prison an extra two years.

00:09:57:00

INTERVIEWER: HE'S THE ONE YOU BETTER WATCH OUT FOR. [laughs]

Huie: [laughs] Now, if you ever want a, a man who was with me on that and who helped me in the photographs and the photo is a man named Chris McNair, who has been in politics in Alabama. He's a photographer, and he is the father of one of the four girls killed in the church bombing. And so, McNair and his wife have been close friends of mine for years. I wrote a beautiful story for Look about their daughter. I've always been able, I've always wanted to write about one person. Not about four girls who were killed. I wanna find one. And then McNair's daughter, he was a photographer, and his child was beautiful. And, of course, he'd made a mountain of pictures of her. So what I found, I went through all those

pictures and we found one of the most impressive pictures of a three, four, four-year-old girl or a five-year-old girl playing, everything. You never saw such a picture in your life. We ran it half-page in Look. And I wrote the story of her. My bombing story was the story of her death, which is always, the death of one person is always more dramatic than the death of a thousand, you know, or the death of ten or anything else.

00:11:11:00

INTERVIEWER: WE ALL SET THEN?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #1: YES. OK, ONE SECOND. OK, THAT'S CAMERA ROLL TWO—EXCUSE ME, SOUND ROLL TWELVE. IT'S IN PROGRESS. CAMERA ROLL TWENTY. THIS WILL BE FIRST SYNC, MR. HUIE. SPEED.

00:11:27:00

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: SO HOW DID YOU GET INVOLVED IN THE, IN THE TILL CASE?

Huie: I was in, I wasn't in Alabama when the trial was held. I came back. I was in California working on a film. I came back to my home here in Hartselle, oh, three or four months after the trial. And I picked up Life magazine one night and I looked at the letters written in and somebody had taken this fact—it had been discovered by then—and that young Till's father had been killed during the Second World War and was a soldier. And so some white boy out of Harvard—a black man would never have done this—some white boy out of Harvard had written a poem about the irony of young Emmett Till being killed in Mississippi while his father gave his life for the proposition that “all men are created equal,” etc. etc. Well, I looked at it and I said, nonsense. It doesn't happen that way. I was in the Second World War and most black men were stevedores. They were not where they would give their lives for the proposition that “all men are created equal.” So I had one of the strangest experiences in my life, one of the great coincidences in my life. [plane] When I had done the story of “The Execution of Private Slovik,” three—

INTERVIEWER: WE'RE GONNA BREAK 'CAUSE WE GOT THE TIME. [laughs]

[cut]

00:13:19:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #1: SPEED.

Huie: When I did, when I wrote the, when I was doing the research for “The Execution of Private Slovik,” I was in the Pentagon. Ninety-six Americans were executed during the Second World War. Ninety-five of them for murder and/or rape, and Slovik, who was executed for desertion. And all ninety-six of those men are buried in a secret plot, near or

adjoining an American cemetery in Northern France. And I had to, the Army, when they finally cooperated with me on the Slovik story, I wanted to photograph Slovik's grave. And so I had to get permission. I had to get from them to tell me the row number and the number of Slovik's grave in this plot of ninety-six. And the Colonel had had it for me and they took it out of the vault, because they never expect—It was top secret everything. On his desk he had a key, as to the numbers of the graves. There are no names on any of these graves, just numbers. But there's, on this key, there's a, there's a name and an address, who that man was. And the Colonel had to go away somewhere, and I should have been court-martialed for this, because the moment I saw it, I knew that there was a story on, in each of those numbers. So I whirled it around here, and I'm copying it down just as fast as I can. He goes away twice and I get most of the names down and I have that now. I really shouldn't say this on the air, because the Army may court-martial me for this now. But at any rate, I'm the only man outside of somewhere in the depths of the Pentagon that's got that key. And after I read this piece in *Life*, I whirled around, picked up that key, and I looked just three graves from Eddie Slovik, and I saw "Private Louis Till." And this only means that the man has been executed for rape and/or murder. And I said, oh no, this can't be the same man. The next morning I got up and I called the Judge Advocate General of the United States Army, whom I knew. Now this man came from Georgia, he had typical Georgian racial attitudes.

INTERVIEWER: CAN I STOP CAMERA AND KEEP SOUND ROLLING?

00:15:56:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

Huie: And so, I called him and I said, now, this is the story in Mississippi, the boy who was killed over there. I said, I have just found this and I want you to check it for me and tell me who it is. He was interested. About two hours later he called me and he was just overjoyed. And he says, Goddamn Huie, that's the same damn nigger. I said, that's that boy nigger's father. He said, I've got the case in front of me. He says, the most fool case of killing two Italian women during a air raid we ever had. We hanged him in Langert. And so, he said—I said, well, send me the case. And then I said, now listen General, let's just wait a minute. I said, now this boy in Mississippi never knew his father. I said, this hasn't got anything to do with this case over there and then, then it doesn't excuse anybody from murder or anything of this sort. So I don't think any of this should be, I said, I don't know whether I'm going to write the story or not, because I said, I don't think this ought to be revealed. So [coughs] we sit down down on it. Well, at any rate, later the story crept out—

00:17:22:00

[sync tone]

[picture resumes]

Huie: —because he gives it out. It's too good. He has to tell Senator Eastland and so forth and they call a press conference and so forth. But, meanwhile, I went to Mississippi, and I have always proceeded on, in a long reportorial life as a reporter in the South and around the world, whenever two men take a third man out at night, midnight, and kill him, there are no innocent bystanders to tell you what happened. The victim is dead. The only people who can tell you how and why that murder was committed are murderers. They're the only ones who can tell you; nobody else can tell you what happened out there. Therefore, I myself, never waste any time. I don't go to talk to cops and I don't get statements from public officials or anything like that. I go to the murderers and try to make a deal, try to find some reason to tell, why'd you kill this man, and if you did or not, and so what. And if he's already been tried and found not guilty, it doesn't make any difference to me. I want to know the truth. See, I'm not in the law enforcement business. I'm just in the business of establishing truth wherever possible. And I have to believe that the truth is good. There are people who'll argue with you, that it's not good. A very brilliant black woman, whom I admire a lot, argued that way with me on the Till case after I had written it. But in any case, I went to Mississippi. I didn't go to see the murderers. I went directly to the, all the attorneys in that area, in, in that little town, had defended, volunteered to defend them at their trial. I went to the one that looked the most prosperous and who represented the establishment and whom I knew was on the loan committee at the bank and who the big equipment companies, farm equipment companies hired as their lawyer, and so forth. I went there, one, early one morning, about 8:15. I almost didn't get there because I was driving from my home here, it took about four hours over there, and unfortunately I started pretty late at night. And they didn't have motels like we have now. They just had a bunch of tourist camps. And so, about midnight I tried to find a place to sleep. Terrible. Finally had to sleep in some little old fleabag of a place, and I couldn't sleep and I got up sick. And about four o' clock in the morning I thought, well, this idea never was any good anyhow. So I started back to Alabama. Then I got to feeling better and turned back around and went back to Sumner, Mississippi and got in there 8:15 in the morning. And I met [coughs] at the law firm of Breeland and Whitten. Mr. Breeland was an old man. John Whitten was thirty-six. Well-born, the Breeland family is well-known in Mississippi. And so, John Whitten came in about 8:30. Now, I have tremendous advantage in talking to John Whitten, because I belong to the Lodge and my family—

00:20:26:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

Huie: —goes back—hell, his grandmother and my grandmother may have spent time together getting away from the fever when they were up in the Tennessee Mountains in the summer or something like that. Or maybe we belonged to the same fraternity or something like that, because—And Johnny Whitten had been to Ole, to Miss, the Ole Miss law school—

INTERVIEWER: CUT.

Huie: —on too long. What we're going to have to do is cut this business.

[cut]

00:20:52:00

[slate]

[camera roll 22]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #1: SPEED.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #1: ROLLING.

Huie: I was talking about the—

INTERVIEWER: LET ME ASK YOU ABOUT—

Huie: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: —THAT MORNING WHEN YOU CAME INTO TOWN IN DECEMBER, YOU WERE TALKING TO ATTORNEY WHITTEN?

Huie: John Whitten, yes. John Whitten, as I say, was thirty-six years old. He knew who I was. I knew his cousin, Jamie Whitten, in Congress. [coughs] So we quickly established a rapport and I told him what I was for, there. I said, now this is four months after the trial. And I told him that I wanted to find the truth over there and I thought it would be better for the community, everybody, if the truth were told. All sorts of myths were being published. Forty or fifty reporters from all over the world had been down there, highly publicized trial, and because nothing had been established at the trial, everybody interviewed various people and all kinds of rumors were being published as truth and so forth about great congregations of white men who had beaten somebody in a barn or something. So I, I told John Whitten, I said, John, the truth, whatever the truth is, ought to be told. And I said, I assume these two white men that you represented, you defended. He said, well, you know that we, we all defended them. All the attorneys in town defended them. He said, you know, my clients, some of them were interested in it. They wanted me to defend them and, and in a sense told me I could charge them a little extra, you know, I'm talking about farm equipment companies and that sort of thing to defend these boys. So he said, said, I had never met them. Says, actually I've been on the other side of the docket. You know, why? We represent the city, we represent the county, and we had, we had prosecuted them a couple of times for selling, selling liquor to, to black people in their stores. So he says, I'd been on the other side of the docket with them, but said, we were, we, we did defend them. And I said, well, I assume they killed the boy, didn't they? And Whitten looked at me and he says, you know, Bill, he says, I don't know whether they did or not. He says, I never asked them. I said, you mean you defended them in court for a crime here, and you, you never, you never ques—he

says, I never questioned the men. He says, I didn't want to know. He says, because my wife kept asking me if they killed him. And I kept telling her no. And he says, I didn't want them to tell me that they did, because then I'd have to tell my wife that they did, or tell her a lie, so that, so I didn't even want to know. And I said, well, did any of them? He said, no, none of us questioned them. We don't know what they were. See, we all, all we did was defend them, which the community wanted us to do and so forth. We defended them. We didn't put 'em on the stand. Nothing. They sat back in the crowd. We never put them on the stand. We just let the state present its case and we showed, we just punched holes in it. And then we presented a hundred character witnesses. So that was the only defense that we, that we had. We didn't, we, so we never had to question the defendants.

00:23:58:00

INTERVIEWER: WHAT HAPPENED THEN?

Huie: All right. I said, well, John, I want, I, I want this. I want these two men to come in here and tell me the truth, because I think it's the best thing and they're not in jeopardy any longer, and I don't see why they shouldn't. And I said, I want to make a film of it. And so I'm willing to buy what we call portrayal rights and I'm willing to pay 'em about \$4,000 for their portrayal rights if they'll come in here and tell me the truth. Now, you tell 'em that they must tell me the truth, they must give me ways so that in the daytime I can go out and verify that they're telling me the truth. And if I find 'em telling me a lie, I won't pay 'em a damn thing. And he says, well, [coughs] Bill, he said, what are you doing next week? Says, deer season opens. He says, let's go deer hunting. I said, well, you know, and he says, I got to go to homecoming up to Ole Miss. And he says, I know it'll be a few days before we can get around to it, 'cause I'd love for you to go deer hunting with me. And I say, well I can't go deer hunting right now. Well, he said, give me a couple of weeks. Well, then I can, I just drove on home. I didn't go looking up for these men, because I knew that I, if I, that that would not be the way to do it. About two weeks later, John Whitten called me. He said, Bill, I talked to 'em. Says, they, they, they're interested in doing that. He says, they'd like for you to come in here at night, and meet me, meet 'em in the office at night so nobody in the community knows anything about it. And so, we made an appointment that the next Monday night at eight o' clock or seven o' clock, I think that time of year, I believe that seven o' clock was dark, that I'd stop my car out of town, and I'd go in there, and I did. I went in there and I met Milam and Bryant. Well, the wife was not there that night. And we had this strange situation, because we're meeting in the library of this law firm. Milam and Bryant are sitting on one side of the table, John Whitten and I sitting on the other side of the table. Now they're, they're gonna tell me the story of why and how they killed the boy. I'm not doing the questioning. Their own lawyer is doing the questioning and he's never heard their story. Not once. He defended, he didn't ask them to sit across there and tell that story to him before he defended them. He becomes more interest-, as interested in the story as I am. I just sit there and I tell them, I said, now I'm gonna make notes. And then during the day I'm gonna do two things. I'm gonna be roughing out this story, and I'm also going where you say you went and I'm going to find evidence. You say you found this gin fan that you hung around his neck in a certain place. I'm going over there and find. I look around and find where you got that gin fan. Well, OK, you'll find it right there. And I did that. And I said, now, at the end of five

days we're going to work here. I'm coming here at night to see you, during the day I'm going to be writing and going around and verifying. At the end of five days, I'm gonna have something roughed out, and you bring your wife in here, who's involved, and I want all three of you to initial every page and to tell me that that's truth and to tell Mr. Whitten that that's truth. And I'll have a lawyer here, too, by then. And then I'll pay you \$4,000. And I have the right to portray you in a film as the murderers by name with live actors as the murderers and that's what I'm paying you for. I'm not paying you for telling me this story. And so, that's how, that's how we got it. We, I then, no one knew. I didn't go there for any particular magazine.

00:27:37:00

INTERVIEWER: WHAT WERE THEY LIKE THAT NIGHT WHEN THEY, WHO TALKED?

Huie: Milam did most of the talking. Now remember he's older. Milam was about thirty-five or six then. Bryant is his half brother. And much younger than, than and, of course, you see, Milam was a first lieutenant in the US Army Reserve at that time. And so, Milam was a little more articulate than, than Bryant was. But now Bryant did some talking, particularly when they talked about what they were told had happened in the store. And Bryant did enough talking. But J.W. did the killing. J.W. killed, fired the shot that killed, when they took him, when they took him down on the river and killed him. Now, as I have written, they did not intend to kill him when they went and got him. And they, they killed him because he boasted of having a white girl and showed them the pictures of a white girl in Chicago. And there's not any reason to think—They had him in the car around and trying to scare him and that sort of thing for about three hours. **And** then, finally, when *young Till*—He ***never realized the danger he was in.*** He never knew. ***I'm quite sure that he never thought these two men would kill him. And, or maybe he's just in such a strange environment, he doesn't, he really just doesn't know what he's up against. And it seems to a rational mind today, it seems impossible that they could have killed him. But, J.W. Milam looked up at me and said, well, when he told me about this white girl he had. He says, my friend, that's what this war's about down here now. He says, that's what we got to fight to protect. And he says, I just looked at him and I said, boy, you ain't ever going to see the sun come up again.*** And I said, well, you just took him. He said, we went and we got the gin fan and we, we made him load the gin fan. And we, and he says, I took him down there, and said, he didn't believe I was going to kill him. But he says, just about a minute when we got down to the side of the river, he said, I pulled out my .45—God, you could hit, you could knock a lizard's head off with forty feet with that darn thing—and he said, I fi-, I told him to drop his clothes off, which he did and he said, just about then he knew I was going to kill him or he thought I might. And he said, you know, he said, the papers said he was shot over the eye, he said, I would have hit him right between the eyes, he said, he turned his head just a little bit just before I fired. Well, sitting there, me, and I—Now, here's, is perhaps the awful thing about it. With Milam sitting there, now, you say, well, did I jump up and denounce him? No, I didn't. You see because I'm not, I don't represent the law and I don't represent the morals and I don't try to lead anybody to Christ or anything of that sort. I'm a reporter when I go there. I didn't, it wasn't my position to punish him or do anything else. It was my position to

establish the truth, which I had done. Now, it is true that John Whitten and I are both representing what may be called the best in the South, meaning we'd had the best opportunities of any white people in the South. Neither one of us said one word to him when he told us that. Neither one of us said, well, you shouldn't have done that. Neither one of us said that because, first, I didn't consider that my role. Later, there was a, on Friday, whenever they came in, gosh, isn't that little woman one of the prettiest black-eyed Irish women I ever saw in my life. She had on a little dress she had made herself. When Milam brought her in, when Bryant brought her in on a Friday night to sign the papers.

00:31:47:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

Huie: I had a young lawyer from New York that _Look_ had sent down and they had prepared the papers. The finest libel lawyer in publishing was _Look_'s lawyer and he had prepared the papers. And, and he—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #1: CUT.

[cut]

00:32:06:00

[slate]

[camera roll 23]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #1: SPEED.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: LET'S GO BACK TO THE FRIDAY NIGHT OF THE, THE MEETINGS.

Huie: The Friday night, the meeting with Milam, Bryant, and Bryant's wife, Mr. Breeland, who had come in that night, an older man, Mr. Whitten, and a young lawyer from New York, thirty-two or three year old lawyer, he went to Fordham, I remember, I've forgotten his name at the moment. Anyhow, I had met him in, in Memphis and he had brought the money and brought a big sheaf of papers to be signed. And he had really never been southwest of the Hudson. And so, he was terribly frightened when he got off the plane. He was going off down to Mississippi with 4 or \$5,000 in the bag and he was going with me. He thought I was crazy, I guess. And, going down in Mississippi Delta, at this time, and so he didn't know whether he was going to get back alive or not. And so, we stopped the car. He went and we took him and I got him off to the—I myself was afraid that he would cause trouble. I had

raised this point at _Look_. He's so inexperienced, I said, now listen you are coming out here to deal with a couple of murderers.

00:33:24:00

INTERVIEWER: BRYANT'S WIFE AND MILAM WERE IN THERE?

Huie: Oh yeah, they were, they were waiting in, in Whitten's office. Now, the lawyer and I arrived from Memphis down to Sumner, Mississippi. We stopped the car outside of Sumner. And we start across the railroad, and it's dark, it's seven thirty o'clock. So the one thing that I am afraid is that somebody might have known we were coming in there and would just wanted to hold me up for \$5,000. So I said to the lawyer, I was carrying the, the satchel, and I said, now listen, if anybody accosts us for anything while we're getting over there, I said, you, you don't do a damn thing except just fall flat to the ground. And he says, what for? And so I pulled, [laughs] I pulled, I pulled out this .38, I said, so I can kill the bastards. [laughs] And so he said, I don't want to hit you. And well, that didn't make you feel any better, you see? He goes on in the, and he, I didn't know why, I didn't know how, and I had told him last night, you are not going to go down here and lecture these guys or anything of that sort. All you are going to do is have them sign all the papers properly. You and Whitney. You down, you're down here to do a lawyers job. Well, he goes in, old J.W. Milam comes in, a great big guy and he pulls off this big .45, he carries. He puts it down on there. And I don't know what this lawyer is gonna do. We go ahead, we're getting all these papers signed and everything of that sort. And finally, after about an hour, we're now gotten to celebrating and I look around here and this lawyer, who had gone to Fordham, he and J.W. Milam are out there drinking whiskey together, you see? And he had been in the army enough to know a little about ordinance and they're talking about army guns. [laughs] And I was afraid, I was afraid he wasn't gonna clear the deal.

00:35:11:00

INTERVIEWER: BUT MILAM, BRYANT, AND HIS WIFE ALL SIGNED?

Huie: All signed. All signed two documents and they initialed every page of the story as I had written it.

00:35:22:00

INTERVIEWER: AND WHILE YOU, WHILE THEY WERE GOING THROUGH IT, WAS THERE ANY REACTION EMOTIONALLY?

Huie: No, all three of them, the, the, the, the wife did not think they should have killed the black man. The wife had not told them the story. The wife had done everything she could to keep any trouble happening. The wife didn't denounce them, but both Milam and Bryant thought that they had done right when they killed young Till. And they still think it as far as I know, although, they've suffered a lot from it. But no, no, they weren't apologetic or anything of that sort. They were there—

00:36:04:00

INTERVIEWER: WHY DID THEY THINK THEY WERE RIGHT?

Huie: They were told that they had inherited a way of life. They were told that for a young black man to put his hand sexually on a white woman was something that could not be allowed. They were told that with the beginning of the Supreme Court decision, this was a war, and that we had to defend—Now, after all, remember George Wallace was [unintelligible] yelling around here about segregation forever and the Southern way of life and all that sort of thing. Mississippi they were just as bad. Ross Barnett. So, they thought that they had to make an example of a young man like Emmett Till. Now this doesn't make any sense to me. It didn't then. It didn't make any sense to John Whitten. But this is the way these men felt. They felt that they were, see, these men lived in a sea of black people. They ran little stores and lived in the back of the stores. All of their customers were black. They lived in a sea of black. It's, it's, you'd have to go to South Africa today to find anything like it. They feel now, now, they have blacks, oh, Bryant played checkers with young blacks. He fixed checker boards and other things for them to amuse themselves. He had a little playground out around his store, because they'd come in and spend their money and buy Cokes, and that sort of thing. And that's how they, playing out front had lead to the dare of the Chicago boy to go in and ask that little white woman for a date. Something like that. This, this is, it was young blacks playing out in front of the store as they, as they were supposed to do. People like this, men like this, were perhaps feel, felt much more defensive, like, like they were threatened much more by something they don't really understand, because they're not afraid of individual blacks. But they think that, that they have to act at this particular time. In any case, they felt that way at four o' clock in the morning and about dawn on the morning that they committed this murder.

00:38:24:00

INTERVIEWER: HOW DO YOU THINK MILAM REACTED, PERSONALLY, TO TILL? DID HE EVER SAY ANYTHING ABOUT THAT?

Huie: He told me about...first he was terribly surprised—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #1: Cut.

[cut]

00:38:41:00

[sync tone]

Huie: First, *Milam was startled at the belligerent attitude or the fact that young Till didn't appear to be afraid of him. Now, he'd gone and gotten him out of bed and had him in the back of a truck*, and J.W. Milam could not imagine a young black being in that position with

him and not being terribly afraid. Now, remember he had been a soldier in the Second World War. Men like him were told that blacks couldn't, wouldn't make good soldiers because at night all you had to do is throw a flare at them and they'd run. And so, he, he was, he was utterly startled when he found Emmett Till talking back to him and not, and showing absolutely no fear of him at all. Telling him he's as good as he is. Sure, he's got a white girl. So what? Here's a picture. This sort of thing.

00:39:41:00

INTERVIEWER: DID YOU EVER THINK THERE WAS A CHANCE THAT THAT JURY WOULD HAVE FOUND HIM GUILTY IN 1955?

Huie: If, if the truth had been told? Well, that's an iffy que—There's no chance that that can, that that truth can ever be told to the jury under the [unintelligible]. Now, if, if that evidence had been presented to the jury, you would have had a hung jury in my view. There would have been some men on that jury who would not have found him innocent. They could not, if they were faced with such a brutal act, they could not have, they, they would, they would have voted to convict him, just as the jury did in the castration case, I imagine. And just as they'd done in other cases. And you'll find, you see, every black lawyer in the South, at least then, particularly, would tell you that when he had a black accused of a crime, he wanted white men on the jury. He didn't want black men to sit on, on, in judgment on his black client. Because white men didn't give a damn about one nigger killing another one. Therefore, a white men would turn this black man loose for murdering somebody else. And they, therefore, the black lawyer would deliberately get, want white men on the jury. But there were white men in Mississippi, right then, that if they were faced with evidence, such as we've, such as I later published, and, of course, this is what they resented, they resented the story, they resent it to this day, because I published the story as being an approved killing. That the community itself approved it. That Milam and Bryant thought that they were approved. That the fact that every attorney turned down and defended them without any fee from them, showed that they, that they had the approval of the community. And this is what, what people in Mississippi over there in the Delta hate me for today: it's for saddling the guilt on the community. And, but think of it, this is true. And, but Milam was startled and he, as he told me, he simply thought that it was his duty, at that time, to make an example. We can't, if we don't do this right, we make an example of this one, then we can stop it from others. This is the way to stop what's, an effort to change our way of life.

00:42:15:00

INTERVIEWER: YOU KNOW, THE WHITE SOUTH IN 1955, IT'S ALMOST IMPOSSIBLE TO RECREATE TO PEOPLE WHAT THE, THE MOOD WAS AND THE INTELLECTUAL SET—

Huie: It seems like it was a hundred years ago instead of...my own family for generation had always opposed the Ku Klux Klan. My father refused to join the Klan here in 1925 when it had a terrific revival. Then when the Klan revived again after Black Monday and committed many crimes, my family had always opposed it, had always been for contributing money to

Tuskegee Institute and for a better economic life and better—

00:43:02:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

Huie: —and so my family has always been on, on the side of a better deal for black people in the South. But it is, yes, it is very difficult to go back and understand the ruthlessness—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #1: LOST MY [unintelligible]

INTERVIEWER: CAN WE DO ONE MORE MINUTE?

[cut]

00:43:20:00

[wild audio]

Huie: —of '55.

INTERVIEWER: MAYBE YOU CAN START BY JUST GIVING ME KIND OF A SHORT SUMMARY—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #1: CAMERA ROLL TWENTY-FOUR.

00:43:27:00

[slate]

[camera roll 24]

[sound roll 13]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #1: SPEED.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: —A SHORT SUMMARY OF, OF YOUR FAMILY. I JUST WANT TO GET A QUICK THIRTY SECONDS.

Huie: Well, my, my family is Scottish. My name, Huie, is a Scottish name and it comes eight, I'm eight generations out of Glasgow. And so my people have [coughs] my, [coughs] eighth great grandfather is buried over near Atlanta. [coughs] And so, my family, both, both

sides of my family lived up in the Tennessee Valley across North Georgia, ever since 1763. And so, of course, this is, was not a heavy slave area, in the old slave days, but some of my people did own slaves. It was against the law to teach your slave to read in Alabama up until 1861. My people taught their slaves to read. The few that they owned and also freed them. And also let them work as artisans, bricklayers, that sort of, carpenters and so forth.

00:44:34:00

INTERVIEWER: 1955, THOUGH, TELL—

Huie: In 1955, my father was still living. I was here, and my first involvement in the movement was with Dr. King.

00:44:49:00

INTERVIEWER: BUT WHAT ABOUT THE WHITE SOUTH? I MEAN—

Huie: Oh yes. The white South is this way: when you are talking about poor men in the South, poor white men, remember that poor white men have always got a very dirty deal in the South. In the slave days, blacks, slaves looked down on poor white men. And wealth, and well-off white men looked down on landless white men in the way that well-off people in India looked down on their poor people. So, [coughs] I have had a little sympathy for the poor white man in the South, because I've had a poor white man look up to me and he said, Mr. Huie, if I ain't better than a damned nigger, what the hell am I better of? Now, it's well enough to dismiss this, except Aristotle wrote two thousand years ago that every man yearns to be recognized for something. The purpose of living is to try to be recog-, somebody to value you for something. And so, it is human for every human being, probably, to want to be recognized for something. Well, this poor white man, I can't turn around and say, Hell, you ain't better than nothing, than a hound dog, you see? The black man, who had once looked down on him, remember as a slave or his grandfather, these people were natural antagonists. They were antagonists in poverty and actually poverty, you see, was the principal trouble between the white man and the black man. They were both hungry. And they were hungry in the Depression, and they were hungry on into 1955. So, this is where they, now, the men who became Ku Klux Klansmen were not these poverty people. They were the people who had gone one or two steps up the ladder and they saw the black man as a possible competitor. And that's, that, of course, is what's, why the Klan is being revived in, in the South today. Is because the black man is, actually threatens the poor white man on his job at the General Motors plant a few miles away from here. But you had, you had a hatred and then, then you, you had the white man who would give money to the Ku Klux Klan, but who wouldn't belong to it. The FBI in 1955, '56 had an office in Decatur, and after I became involved in stories like the Till story and the castration story and keeping Klansmen in prison, I have to be careful about my own movements. And the Klan in Decatur had informers. I mean, the FBI had informers in every Klan group. And so the FBI agent in charge of that office would stop at my house occasionally [coughs] and we would go over their informers' reports—all in Klan groups within ten miles of my home. And he would tell me which members of my neighbors, who, which ones of my neighbors belonged to the Klan and which ones I had to

look, look out for. So we, we had that, the, but the people who were, who were most, who, who, who were most cruel to black people were the whites who lived in the heavily black communities. They felt far more threatened. The people in this county, where you have only ten, twelve percent blacks never felt threatened by black people. Integration was relatively easy here. I'll give you a story. My high school where I went to school and finished in 1927 is a block and a half from here. In integration, I was, I was called a nigger-lover in the early years after Black Monday, and then after our high school was integrated, of course, their whole basketball team became black, or virtually all black, you know? They had stories where the black man home went home to see his mother after pract-, after the game, you know, and he says, well, mother, we got so far ahead tonight, some of the white boys got to play. And so, all that kinds of story. It's the same way. But at any rate, then, we had a mayor in this town who used to, wouldn't speak to me, called me a nigger-lover and so forth. But he's a great sports addict. He used to be a—Sports meant a great deal to him. So I'm in a barbershop one time, about 1963, I guess, you know, and so, I'm sitting in the barber chair, and the former mayor comes up to me and says, Billy, you better—and our, our team had just won the state championship. Have you been up to see the basketball? See the boys' basketball? So there were about dozen white men sitting there and I said, Hell, no. You don't think I give a damn about seeing a bunch of niggers play basketball, do you? And he acts offended. He said, what do you want to talk about the team that way for? [laughs] Now here's the same man who had been calling me a nigger-lover back in 1957 or '58 when I was a friend of Dr. King and writing this sort of thing, but now once it becomes athletics, this changes ev—of course in this, in this state where football and Bear Bryant and everything, it's, you have, first you started with a lot of stories you see—

00:50:52:00

INTERVIEWER: BUT, BLACK MONDAY, IT WAS A MOUNTAIN IN THE WHITE SOUTH?

Huie: Oh yes, and, of course, I suppose we're the only people who, who refer to it that way. The Supreme Court decision was in a May, on a Monday in May and so it quickly became Black Monday. There's one old jurist from Mississippi who wrote a little book called Black Monday. And so, yes, I, it would never occur to me to refer to anything else and it would never, I assume and everybody knows that Black Monday in the South means the Monday the segregation decision was handed down in 1954, May of 1954, by the Supreme Court of the United States.

00:51:26:00

INTERVIEWER: WHAT DID, WHAT DID THAT DO TO THE WHITE SOUTH?

Huie: Well, first it triggered an immediate revival of the Ku Klux Klan. It triggered ceremonial castrations. It triggered the 16th Street bombing of the, the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist church.

00:51:45:00

INTERVIEWER: HOW ABOUT AMONG THE MORE GENTLEMAN—

Huie: Beg pardon?

INTERVIEWER: HOW ABOUT AMONG THE MORE GENTLEMANLY LEVELS OF WHITE, THE WHITE SOUTH?

Huie: They, well, of course, many of them would join the White Citizens' Councils and contributed money to George Wallace. Wallace was their spokesman. Wallace was the darling of the Ku Klux Klan, and as long as you had Wallace, Wa-, Wallace could make—Wallace, Wallace thought that he could be President of the United States. He thought that the racial conflict was going to make him president. And Wallace believed what, it was the truth. He believed that there was as much anti-black political sentiment in Chicago as there was in Alabama, which is true. Dr. King, the bitterest day of Dr. King's life was when he went to Chicago, you know and—

00:52:44:00

INTERVIEWER: BUT DO YOU THINK, DO YOU THINK BLACK MONDAY, THE WHITE SOUTH FELT BETRAYED BY IT? LIKE DID THEY—

Huie: Oh yes. Yes, we felt it because they had been fighting it. They had been fighting it in the Congress for eight years. You, those of us who were in the Second World War, and when we came back from the Second World War, like me, when I came back from the Second World War I knew that segregation was nearing its end. I knew that, that that was going to happen. And I, it was very easy to foresee it in the world wide reaction against colonialism, everything. So I knew that we had all of this coming. I had, I myself tried to prevent the University of Alabama being affected by it. In 1947, the president of the University of Alabama and I met in New York. And I said to him, we know that segregation is going to end, now, let's don't let it affect the University of Alabama. Let's go find two smart young black people, one girl and one boy, and admit 'em to the University of Alabama Law School or something next year. And he says, we must. He says, I want to do that. The, the Board of Trustees at the University of Alabama is independent, it's not appointed by the Governor. And we were within, in the South, we represent, we, we, we talk about progress in terms of funerals.

00:54:23:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

Huie: We were within two funerals of old men on the Board of Trustees at the University of Alabama of actually ending segregation at the University of Alabama in 1958. The president wanted to do it; other members of the Board of Trustees saw it coming and wanted to do it.

We just had, the old timers had to die out. If two men had died two years earlier than they did, we would have, there would never have been any Autherine Luc-, Lucy case. There'd never been any George Wallace standing in the door.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:54:57:00

© Copyright Washington University Libraries 2016