

Interview with **Frank 'Big Black' Smith**

Date: December 9, 1988

Interviewer: Sam Pollard

Camera Rolls: 2084-2087

Sound Rolls: 238-239

Team: B

Interview gathered as part of *Eyes on the Prize II: America at the Racial Crossroads, 1965-mid 1980s*. Produced by Blackside, Inc. Housed at the Washington University Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.

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Note: These transcripts contain material that did not appear in the final program. Only text appearing in *bold italics* was used in the final version of *Eyes on the Prize II*.

[camera roll #2084]

[sound roll #238]

00:00:13:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:00:14:00

Interviewer:

OK. First question here. Black, what were conditions like in Attica before the rebellion?

00:00:22:00

Frank 'Big Black' Smith:

The conditions in Attica before the rebellion? I guess, Sam, you know, in some kind of way, you know, I gotta—

00:00:29:00

Interviewer:

—just, just say—don't say "Sam."

Frank 'Big Black' Smith:

OK, I guess, brother or, or whatever, that—

Interviewer:

Start, start from the beginning.

00:00:36:00

Frank 'Big Black' Smith:

OK. I don't have to say it? OK.

00:00:39:00

Interviewer:

What were the conditions like in Attica before the rebellion when you were there?

00:00:43:00

Frank 'Big Black' Smith:

Conditions in Attica before the rebellion, it's somewhat the same as 1988, today, the present time, but only it's—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

00:00:52:00

Camera crew member #1:

Stop down.

[cut]

[slate]

00:00:59:00

Interviewer:

You ready? What were conditions like, Black, in Attica before the rebellion in '71?

00:01:06:00

Frank 'Big Black' Smith:

Conditions in 1971 before the rebellion S. . . was bad, you know. Bad food, bad educational programs, very, very low, low wages. We were called slave wages. You know, myself, I was working in the laundry and I was making, like, 30 cent a day being the warden's laundry boy. And that was the title that you had with my job—warden's boy—and I'm far from a boy. So, the conditions in Attica was very, very bad, just to name some.

00:01:40:00

Interviewer:

Keep going, tell me some more about the conditions, I mean, the toilet paper or the showers, the experience.

00:01:44:00

Frank 'Big Black' Smith:

You get one shower a week. You know, a shower, you know, to us in Attica State Prison is a bucket of water, you know. And if you lucky and you get the right person outside of your cell that would bring you a second bucket then you can wash half of your body with one bucket. What we would do is wash the top of our body with one bucket and if we get a second bucket then we will wash the bottom part of our body. And you get one shower a week, you know. And, and, and the books in the library was outdated. They didn't have any kind of positive recreation for us. If there was any recreation, it was minimal, it would only be on the weekends. And Attica is four prisons in one, you got A Yard, B Yard, C Yard, and D Yard and two mess hall. What is that? Our dining rooms. And the only time you would see a person that's in A Block if you in D Block, like I were, is when you would go to the mess hall. And that would be sometime. Sometime you might run into 'em. Dehumanizing is what the word would be for the conditions in Attica in 1971.

00:02:50:00

Interviewer:

That's great.

Camera crew member #1:

Cut?

Interviewer:

That's good.

Camera crew member #1:

Stop down.

Frank 'Big Black' Smith:

[coughs]

Interviewer:

Yeah, that's good.

[cut]

[slate]

00:03:00:00

Interviewer:

So, tell me what it was like in terms of getting a shower and having to just use toilet paper, get a roll of toilet paper.

00:03:08:00

Frank 'Big Black' Smith:

It, there's nothing too much that you could do no more than just wait, or, or hope you get lucky, or some way to get on some kind of recreational list on the weekend in order to get more than one shower. You know, a shower, getting more than one shower's a problem, you know. As far as the police are, as far as the facility is concerned, the institution is concerned, it's no problem as far as the water or the availability of a shower. It's there. But it just wasn't, it just wasn't a thing that they would give you more than one shower per week, you know. And as far as the toilet paper, you get one, one roll of toilet paper and that lasts until it give out or until the police, or until you can get someone, you know, to swag, that mean another fellow inmate that can get access to a roll of toilet paper. Possibly to get a roll out the police's toilet, or they bathroom, because they got three, four rolls in there. So, if you one of the people, you know, that moves around the facility, you might could get someone to get you a roll of toilet paper or you could swag one from your job. And then if you get busted, it's like

a 1751. And in the statute, in the law that's like possession of drugs. That's contraband. A roll of toilet paper, now. And I don't know what they think you supposed to use. I guess you supposed to tear your sheet up, you know, and use it. Which, you know, really a man in prison, you know, it's dehumanizing, very dehumanizing, very barbaric, the way they treat you. You know, you're not a human being anymore, you know, you're a third class citizen once you go to prison and that's the way you be treated. That's what brought the rebellion on, dehumanized conditions.

00:04:49:00

Interviewer:

Cut. That's good.

Camera crew member #1:

Cut.

[cut]

[slate]

00:04:55:00

Interviewer:

OK Black, how did the, the new sort of Black consciousness that was happening out in the streets, how did it impact on the brothers inside? The Panthers, the Young Lords, [inaudible].

00:05:06:00

Frank 'Big Black' Smith:

Well, we, some, some of us, I'd say, you know, always had access to the outside world and was concerned and, and had that link, you know, that chain that reach outside. You know, we was watchin' the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, and we was watchin' Malcolm, you know, in a lotta sense and Amiri Baraka, you know, he was doing a lotta poetry, and Eldridge Cleave [sic], you know, *Soul on Ice*, you know. We had communication around Black history, around Black development, or the elevating that Blacks needed and eventually would see. So, we had the educational vehicle, you know. We had a lotta literature that we, we, and a lot of it, we had to swag it in order to get it into the facility because the facility wouldn't let it in, you know. So, we had to swag it. That mean we had to have somebody in the package room, you know, to, to let a box come through, even if it was a cop. If we subscribed to get Black literature in through the facility, it would get screened, and would get rejected, you know, in a lotta sense. But we had, you know, a vehicle. We did have Black literature and, and, the *Muhammad Speak* would get in, the newspaper, we would read that, a lot of us. And we

would pass it on. It might be two, three weeks, you know, before you get it, you know what I mean? But we did, you know, come about it.

00:06:36:00

Interviewer:

Great.

Frank 'Big Black' Smith:

Mm-hmm.

00:06:37:00

Interviewer:

OK, let's go on to the next question then. George Jackson had died as well. What happened exactly the day of his death? Describe that, that morning.

Frank 'Big Black' Smith:

That was one of the most—

Interviewer:

Definitely include "The day—"

00:06:49:00

Frank 'Big Black' Smith:

Yeah, the George Jackson death—

00:06:51:00

Interviewer:

Why don't you just pick it up again, man?

00:06:53:00

Frank 'Big Black' Smith:

OK, the George Jackson's death, you know, the day of his death, or the day afterwards, you know, really, was one of the most, I guess, it was gloomy just like the 13th, you know, you

could see death, you could feel it, you know, everybody was in a very, very down syndrome, you know, and that self-esteem was very low. You know, and it was a broad thing to see, you know. And really when it, *when it really hit me is goin' to breakfast that morning, and everybody was quiet, and nobody wasn't pickin' up no silverware, you know. When you go in the dinin' room, in the mess hall, you had to pick up a knife, spoon, and fork, and when you come out, you had to have that. Nobody was pickin' up, nobody was talkin'*, and I was tryin' to figure out, you know, what was happening. You know what I mean? I kept asking some of the fellows, you know, I was hangin' out with, you know, what was going on. And, and they started explaining to me, you know, Brother George, you know, a Soledad Brother, and doo doo doo, this happened in California. But it was a, it was a thing to see, you know, and it remind me, and I seen it again, you know, in the yard, you know, in Attica. How unity and, and how people could really come together around the same common goals, you know. And it, it was a very, very broad thing to see and a good feeling to have, you know, around George Jackson's death. It's bad, you know, that it had to be behind his death, you know, but it brought some form of unity all the way to New York State. We felt it.

00:08:22:00

Interviewer:

That's great. Let's cut.

Camera crew member #1:

OK.

Camera crew member #2:

Stop down?

Camera crew member #1:

Yes.

[cut]

[slate]

00:08:29:00

Camera crew member #1:

Ready.

00:08:29:00

Interviewer:

A few days later, Russ Oswald left a tape recorded message for the inmates. What was your reaction to his, his statement? Include, you know, that Commissioner Oswald left that message.

00:08:40:00

Frank 'Big Black' Smith:

Well, after Oswald left the message, you know, the taped message, you know, to the brothers in Attica, you know, Oh, he high jiving, you know, he thinks somebody's head is screwed on. Here go that same rhetoric, you know. This ex-commissioner of pa—parole, you know, he's shooting us a lot of, you know, Whitewash again, you know. He's not gonna do anything and, and, and he's overly reacting, you know, the situation that we're talking about or any manifesto that was given to him, you know, he's not gonna adhere to it. You know, he's not gonna go with any of the demands or the suggestions, you know, that he call it, you know, he's not gonna go with any of it. We thought he was gonna take it as a laughing matter. You know, the conditions in Attica, you know, he knew, you know, it wasn't the first time, you know, that it was thrown out there. You know, long before 1971. You know, there's been a lot of letters, you know. Even from our families, talkin' about the conditions in Attica, you know, and it had to change. The overcrowdedness, you know, and, and, and the slave wages, and not bein' able to get any kind of productive, you know, programs in Attica, you know. The system knew, you know. We would've been talkin' about it. We talk about it, we talk about it. But, you know, a lotta levels, you know, that's why I see that rebellin' and conditions can bring it on a lotta different levels, you know. And I see it and I feel it, you know, that a lot of different things can happen, you know, behind dehumanized conditions.

00:10:09:00

Interviewer:

Great. Let's cut.

Camera crew member #1:

Stoppin' down.

[cut]

00:10:12:00

Camera crew member #2:

Second sticks.

[slate]

Camera crew member #1:

Thank you.

00:10:15:00

Interviewer:

Describe again, Black, the reaction from any of the other brothers to Oswald's tape recorded message.

00:10:21:00

Frank 'Big Black' Smith:

The Oswald tape-recorded, recorded message was a bunch of hogwash. We never took it serious because we knew he didn't take it serious. It was another dupe situation. Period.

00:10:34:00

Interviewer:

OK.

[cut]

[camera roll #2085]

00:10:38:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

Interviewer:

OK, Black—

Camera crew member #1:

Can you sit up again? OK, thank you.

00:10:46:00

Interviewer:

Describe the day in terms of where you were the day of the rebellion and what happened with you.

00:10:51:00

Frank 'Big Black' Smith:

The day of the rebellion, I guess 7:30, quarter to eight in the morning, I was in the laundry, that was my job assignment. And myself and four, five more of my friends, we were sittin' at the window—

00:11:09:00

Camera crew member #2:

Can we cut a second?

Camera crew member #1:

Yeah. Cut.

[cut]

[slate]

00:11:15:00

Camera crew member #1:

OK.

00:11:16:00

Interviewer:

OK, Black. Let's, let's pick this up again. Describe the day of the rebellion in terms of where you were and what happened to you.

00:11:23:00

Frank 'Big Black' Smith:

The day of the rebellion, I was in the laundry, quarter to s—quarter to eight, eight o'clock in the morning, that's my job assignment. Myself and three, four, five friends was sittin' next to the hallway. Other than that, they got a table adjacent to the hallway outside. Inside, you're locked in, you can't get out. And we seen a, and heard a lotta commotion in the hallway, a lotta inmates was runnin' up and down the hallway. And I start smellin' gas, you know, and I start asking questions, you know, What was happenin'? And, and, and we were gettin' feedback, The shit is on, a lotta things is happenin'. Let us in, they're gassin' us, they're gassin' us. So, the police that had the laundry, he came to us, and said, Well, what are y'all gonna do? Said, What are we gonna do about what? You know, and lookin' back now, I assume he was talkin' 'bout whether we were gonna apprehend him or take the keys off him and open up the door. But we didn't have a chance to do that. Before we know anythin', the whole wall gave in. That's how many inmates was in the ya, in the hallway and to show you the condition that the building was in, or the foundation were in. And now, here we are in the laundry and the people in the hallways in the laundry with us. So, the police opened up the back door and they got this chemical in a 50-gallon drum. Next thing I know, that's on fire. And over our shop, the laundry, is the mattress shop, and over that is the barber shop, so this whole complex now is goin' up in smoke. So, we go through the back door, the side door, but one of the inmates, a person that I knew from playin' football, told me, Hey, man, say, You know, a lot of shit is on, you know, everybody just goin' every which a way, you know. Some stuff happened last night, you know, over in A Block, and somethin' happened in Times Square this mornin', and, yeah, I seen him with your friend, which was a cop, And he's in the yard and he look like he's in bad shape. So, I say to two, three of my buddies, you know, Let's go and see what's goin' on. So, we goes down the hallway, instead of goin' around the side of the buildin' and goin' the other way, we went this way. And then we, instead of goin' left back normally we supposed to go, we went right and wind up in the yard, you know. But on our way to the yard, we seen a whole lotta things, you know, a lot of fights, a lotta fires, in, in, you know, inmates and cops runnin' loose, and people gettin' beat, you know, and whooped, inmates and cops, really. And I went right to the circle, you know, there, by that time there's a circle in the yard now, and all the, you know, the Department of Correction cops is in the circle. And I walked up to this cop, you know, a buddy of mine, and I asked him what was happenin'. And he told me that he felt like his arm was broke or something, you know, was wrong with him. And I said, Well, man, just, you know, cool out. Let me see what's goin' on out here and I'll get back to you.

00:14:16:00

Interviewer:

OK, that's good.

Frank 'Big Black' Smith:

Mm-hmm.

Camera crew member #1:

Stoppin' down.

[cut]

[slate]

00:14:29:00

Interviewer:

Tell me again, Black, about that day, the day of the rebellion and where you were and what was happenin'.

00:14:35:00

Frank 'Big Black' Smith:

Well, the day of the rebellion I was in the laundry and me and some friends of mine was hangin' out by the door and we heard a lot of commotion in the hallway, a lot of people in the hallway, hollerin' to, Open the door and let us in! The next thing I know, the wall is down and everybody's inside the laundry and the cop opened up the back door and we go out the back door tryin' to figure out which way we really were gonna go. 'Cause there was two ways to go and we wind up in the yard, you know, I guess to see what was really goin' on. And I wind up to the circle, you know, where the hostages were, and I seen a friend of mine, a buddy of mine that was in the circle, a cop, and I asked him what was happenin'. And he told me that his arm or his ribs or something was broke and I told him I'd get back to him. And here I am in the yard with thirteen hundred to twelve hundred inmates.

00:15:27:00

Interviewer:

OK. Let's cut.

Camera crew member #1:

OK.

[cut]

00:15:30:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

Interviewer:

OK. Well, tell me, Black. What was it like, those first minutes in the yard with twelve-hundred other brothers?

Camera crew member #1:

Can you sit up again, brother?

00:15:46:00

Interviewer:

What was it like in that yard when you first got in the yard?

00:15:50:00

Frank 'Big Black' Smith:

To be in that yard and my feelings after I entered the yard was out—it would, it would take a lifetime, really for me to explain it to you. A feeling of, and, and, and a view of unity and, and seein' everybody, regardless to the color or hue, bein' under the same condition or the same situation, and everybody bein' out there together. And, and, and the first time in seven years of seeing that many people bein' around each other and bein' in some form of unity and some form of collective ideas and, and, and projection, I guess, is what I would call it. The harmony that I seen and some kind of, I, the words, you know, it's hard to describe and the feeling is hard to describe but it's a feelin' of, like, being born again, where you didn't have to worry about who you were or what color you were or where you were at, you know, even bein' in prison, you know. I didn't feel it then. I didn't even feel like I was in Attica State Prison, just to view what was happenin' in that yard, you know, it was like freedom. And it was a form of freedom. You know, I didn't have, you know, that keeper up on top of me and, and I felt like whatever I was feelin', whatever I was thinkin' was runnin' together. My emotions was into my thoughts and my feelings, you know, and I had all of that together and I, and I used that emotion when I was in the yard to bring, to solidify, my thoughts and my feelings. And then I was thinkin' what I was feelin'. And everybody else was in that kind of vehicle, the way I felt. I felt, *I felt good, you know, I felt relieved. I felt, I guess, liberated, you know. That I didn't have to worry about the bar in the front of me. Even though I knew that I was, I felt and knew that I was in prison, now that's the reality. But that visible thing wasn't there no more. You know, the walls was there but that bar wasn't really in the front of me, that visible bar. It was more invisible then.* It was a good feelin', you know. *And especially after we start dealin' and start organizin' and start talkin' about the conditions and start talkin' about why were out there and start talkin' about the grievances and start talkin' about why we were rebellin' and why a rebellion was necessary. The feelin' became more and more and more into me and I start feelin' a part of it more* and it

brought me more aware of really who I were, where I were, and what I had to deal with, and what was being dealt with in a unified, collective fashion.

00:18:38:00

Interviewer:

Great. That was great.

Camera crew member #2:

Stop down?

Camera crew member #1:

Yes.

Interviewer:

That was good.

[cut]

[slate]

00:18:47:00

Camera crew member #1:

OK.

Interviewer:

Ready?

Camera crew member #1:

Yeah.

00:18:48:00

Interviewer:

OK, Black. Describe the, the chaos that was, that you initially, that initially happened in the yard and how things sort of just turned around and got more organized and how you felt.

00:18:59:00

Frank 'Big Black' Smith:

Well, after I, you know, arrived in the yard, you know, it, it was a chaotic situation. It, you gotta see that, you know. It, it's got to be that way. Because now, here's someone that's been, or folks that's been locked up in a cell, you know, majority of the day. You figured sixteen to seventeen hours you're locked in your cell and all of a sudden you're not in your cell no more, you know. It's like, a, a level of freedom, you know, you got room now, you got space, you know, you can run around. There was food in the yard, you know, and, and, and, and medication in the yard. And you could see your buddy that was over in another block and now everybody's in one spot, you know. So, everybody was runnin' amok, you know what I mean? But eventually, after everything begin to get organized, you know, as to why we really were in the yard and what that meant to be in the yard, then it became more moderate. It started to level off a little bit, you know. Then we start settin' up, you know, the observers, in—inmates. We start settin' up the, the protective force, you know, the peaceful force, you know. And I got, you know, an assignment as to make sure that when people come in the yard that they be able to leave the yard on their own free will and nothin' happened to them. To make sure nothing happen to nobody in the yard. To make sure we act and stay as human beings, you know, and start dealin' with the grievances and not our personal, you know, views.

00:20:32:00

Interviewer:

How'd you feel as this all started slowly organizing?

00:20:35:00

Frank 'Big Black' Smith:

I felt all right, you know, after it start being organized, you know, I felt all right, you know, before, but I felt more. And the more organized it became, the more I felt a part, and seen that as bein' a part of me. Because prior, you know, to goin' into the yard, I was coachin' football teams, so I had a lot of, you know, relationship with peoples in Attica State Prison, the, the cops and inmates. You know, I was known in the facility, you know, peoples knew me and I was, like, up on top of it from jump street, you know, in organizing. I organized a football team, I organized a basketball team, and if you get into that, organizin' inmates in prisons, then, you know, you, you, you know how to organize. You know, it's a different way now and a different thing that had to be organized now. Because now you got all type of peoples. You got White, Black, red, brown, whatever, that had to be organized. Which, prior to 1971, on the 9th, you know, it, it, it's, it was a big separation, you know. You would think that you was in Mississippi somewhere, you know. The White over there, the Black over there, you know, and, and—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Frank 'Big Black' Smith:

—the Puerto Rican over there, and the Native American over there. But on the ninth, we all came together.

00:21:52:00

Interviewer:

Great.

Camera crew member #1:

Stop down?

Interviewer:

Yeah.

[cut]

[camera roll #2086]

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it, please.

[slate]

Interviewer:

OK, Black—

Camera crew member #1:

Sit up straight.

00:22:04:00

Interviewer:

Someone asked you about amnesty and it was the main, main demands, and why was it important to you and the other brothers in the yard?

00:22:14:00

Frank 'Big Black' Smith:

The amnesty was important, you know, for a lotta reasons. Not a lot, but one or two, I'd say was very, very important. Because we knew the system. We knew the prison system, you know. And bein' in the yard and there was a lotta violence, a lotta assaults on both ends, you know. And there would be reprisals. And we knew that once we go back to the cells, if that would happen, and get around the condition or the demands that we had laid out. Say we had said, OK, we'll go back. We knew they was gonna vamp on us. So, we had to have an amnesty there. And they knew that we, they were gonna try and give us charges. They was gonna try and bring that up and make us the criminals and the victims or the victims or the criminals. And then we had word that something was happening overly about an assault act. Meaning that someone had got hurt fatally, you know. They didn't name it or they didn't say that Quinn, I found this out later, had died or had got killed. But we know that he died behind negligence. Because if they had moved faster, regardless to who did it, or who brought the assault on Quinn, if they had moved more speedy in gettin' him some medical care, I don't believe he would have died. You know, so it wasn't he was killed, he died behind the State not bringin' the right medical care or medical assistance, just like they didn't do with us. They knew that they was gonna vamp Attica State Prison, but they didn't bring the right medical care. They didn't bring the spasm. They didn't bring anything there to deal with the assault that they was gonna put down. 'Cause they knew how they was comin' in there. They had the two refugee doctors, Steinberg and Williams, but they had a problem anyway with us. So, if they'd a brought the right medical equipment or they had the right medical facilities hooked up, Quinn wouldn't have, and I'm quite sure, some of those forty-three people or forty-two other than Quinn wouldn't have died.

00:24:16:00

Interviewer:

OK, let's cut a second.

Camera crew member #2:

Stopping down?

Interviewer:

Yes.

[cut]

[slate]

00:24:24:00

Interviewer:

OK, Black. Tell me why the amnesty issue was one of the most important issues among you and the other inmates.

00:24:30:00

Frank 'Big Black' Smith:

Well, we, I say two reasons the amnesty was very important to us. The main reason's that we had got word that something had happened beyond an assault. That meaning that some cop or somebody had died or had got killed. And number two, we tried to avoid or tried to put up some kind of defense on some reprisal. Other than that, bringin' some indictment around some assault or some kind of arson or some kind of robbery or some kind of prison contraband or whatever. So, if the amnesty was accepted then we wouldn't have to worry about that if we had went back to our cells.

00:25:13:00

Interviewer:

All right.

Camera crew member #1:

Cut?

Interviewer:

Yeah. That was good.

[cut]

00:25:16:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:25:19:00

Interviewer:

OK, Black. This is the day that you took, we took the yard that mornin'. Tell me what, what was happenin' then.

00:25:26:00

Frank 'Big Black' Smith:

The mornin' that, that they came in on the assault, I say the morning of the 13th when they came in to retake the prison or to come in and do the assault. We, a lot of us, when I say we, I just say myself, really, really, really, it surprised me the way that they vamped, the way that they came in that yard. They thought that we was gonna be the violent one. They thought that we was gonna really be the one that do all the assault, meaning we were gonna cut up some polices, we was gonna kill somebody. So, they came in there with excess, overly excess force, retakin' the yard. That's why seventy—or forty-three people got killed on the retaking. And I say forty-three. They say thirty-nine but I say forty-three, you know, that's our count. We knew that once Oswald went outside after talkin' to us and say that we wanted everything and they wasn't gonna give us the thirty-three demand and, and, and, and everything we were talkin' about except twenty-nine demands, the, that he could see it. See, they didn't knew that we had a television set up in the yard and everything that we would say to him and he would go in the front of the media, we would see it from the yard. That's why they cut off all the electricity and that's why we demanded they cut it back on, so we can continue to see what was being said to the public or saying to, to our families and the community about what we were, [clears throat] excuse me, talkin' about in the yard. But *we knew that they were gonna come in but we never knew that they were gonna come in there that way. That was really a big surprise, the way that they came in the yard. We thought they were gonna come in there and knock some heads and bust some heads open in, in that kind of way. And once we start seeing the helicopters and they start shootin' the gas pellets* and we start thinkin' the best way to protect ourself against that, we start openin' up cans of milk, you know, because we got word that if you put milk on you that the gas wouldn't stick to you. And that's what we started doing. And then when they start shootin' in the yard, and then when they start vampin' in the yard, I mean, their physical beings in the yard, *and I start seeing people getting opened up with shotguns, you know, then I knew that they were really comin' in there in a violent, violent way* and it was very barbaric, man. It was very dehumanizing, you know. And it was a sad, sad, bad, bad thing to see how people could really, really, knowing that we didn't have any weapons. Yeah, he mighta had a shank here, I mean, a butter knife or a pair of scissors that's broke. But we didn't have no weapons, no guns. Why did they have to come in there like that? Why did they have to shoot from the helicopter? Why did they have to shoot from the roofs? Why did they have to shoot when they come over the wall and be right up on a person? Why did they have to shoot him with a shotgun or the 270s?

00:28:31:00

Interviewer:

That's good.

Frank 'Big Black' Smith:

You want more than that?

Camera crew member #1:

Cut.

[cut]

00:28:35:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:28:39:00

Interviewer:

OK, Black. I want you to describe again the day of the takeover, the retaking, and how you felt, everything happening around you.

00:28:48:00

Frank 'Big Black' Smith:

Well, the day, the ninth, the day of the retaking of the yard, my feelings were, Well, here go, you know, a butt whoopin', a ass whoopin'. You know, they gonna come in here, they gonna beat us up. And I seen the helicopters circling the yard, you know, Put your hands on your head and, and then lay down and then you won't be hurt, and then the next thing I know, gas is in the yard. And the next thing I know, shootin' is in the yard and peoples just gettin' shot. And the next thing I know, the polices is comin' over the wall, down in the yard.

00:29:21:00

Interviewer:

What'd they do after they, they took the yard? What'd they make all you guys do?

00:29:24:00

Frank 'Big Black' Smith:

They made us strip.

00:29:25:00

Interviewer:

What did, say the, the—

00:29:27:00

Frank 'Big Black' Smith:

The polices made us strip, you know, the guards or the State Troopers or whoever, you know, some law enforcement person, made us strip, pull all our clothes off, made us crawl on the ground, you know, as if we were animals. You know, beatin' us, you know, myself, you know, they took me, you know, up off the ground and laid me on a table, you know, and burned me with cigarettes and dropped hot shells on me and spit on me, you know. Sayin' that I was one of the person that had castrated a police, you know, and buried one alive and cut his, and cut his throat, which none of this happened was proven later, that none of this really took place. And they tortured a lot of us—

[rollout on sound]

[cut]

[sound roll #239]

00:30:10:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:30:15:00

Interviewer:

OK, Black. What happened after they came in there and took over the yard? What'd they make y'all do? You know, what'd they do to you and then what did they do to you, specifically?

00:30:26:00

Frank 'Big Black' Smith:

After they, when they did come in the yard, you know, they, you know, *you got let me explain it this way, you know. It was very, very barbaric, you know. Very, very cruel, you know, and I, you know, and I really feel it, you know, what they really did, you know, they ripped our clothes off, they made us crawl on the ground like we were animals, you know, and they snatched me and they, they laid me on a table, you know, and they beat me in my testicles. And they burned me with cigarettes and they dropped hot shells on me and then put a football up under my throat and they kept tellin' me that if it dropped they was gonna kill me. And I really felt, you know, after seein' so many people shot for no apparent reason, that they really were gonna do this.* They set up a gauntlet in the hallway and they broke glass up in the middle of the hallway and they made people run through the gauntlet. And they had sixty [pause], thirty, forty polices on each side, you know, with clubs they called nigger sticks, [pause] and they was beatin' people. And it, and it just hurt, you know, the way, you, you just see, you know, another human bein' treating a human being this way, you know, and it really hurt me, you know, even sittin' here now, you know, describin' it to you. You know, I never thought it would happen, you know. I never thought so many people would be treated like animals, you know, as the way we were treated like animals. And the way they treated me like animals, the way they beat me. And after they took me off the table and ran me through the gauntlet and the way they broke my wrists, opened my head up, took me to the hospital and dumped me on the floor and, and played with me with shotguns, pointin' it in my face and puttin' the shot—the, the barrel of the shotgun over my eyes, and talkin' 'bout, Nigger, we gonna kill you. You know, and I went through this all that afternoon and then took me up to the cell and played Russian roulette with me, you know, and left me in the cell nude, nothin' to wrap up in and I'm tryin' to get up under a pillow to keep myself warm. You know, it was a hell of a experience, you know. And I think about it today and it really, really, it, emotionally, you know, it really grabs me. But this soon, too, shall pass, you know. But they really treated us bad. They treated us like a bunch of animals, you know, really.

00:32:54:00

Interviewer:

That's good.

[cut]

[camera roll #2087]

00:33:03:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it, please.

[slate]

00:33:07:00

Interviewer:

OK, Black. Here with this whole experience, how'd you come out feeling about yourself? How did this whole thing transform you, to experience that?

00:33:17:00

Frank 'Big Black' Smith:

Well, the change now, I think, you know, and, and my views now and how it changed me.

00:33:22:00

Interviewer:

With, with, the, the experience—

Camera crew member #1:

Sit up, please.

Frank 'Big Black' Smith:

Yeah.

00:33:25:00

Interviewer:

—the experience of Attica made you feel.

00:33:28:00

Frank 'Big Black' Smith:

Yeah. You know, my experiences now and of being in Attica and, and the change that I see in myself after Attica, 1971. My manipulation, my bad manipulation, I feel is, is good. My, my, my views is different now. My values is different now. My unified thoughts and, and being is different. And, and not now, you know, after Attica and during Attica that change I seen in myself. My needs is different. I, I just see a complete different in myself now. You

know, my politics is different now. My collective strugglin' is different now and, and I think the most broad thing that I see in myself now, the unified way of lookin' at life, after lookin' at the yard and lookin' at people of all makes and hues and color bein' in that yard, why the world outside, from the hierarchy all the way down to our low grass-root community person can't be on a unified level as was in that yard, I would like to see that. And I work in that direction now, how we all can pull together and work together and be with each other in a unified way. And that's how I view it today and that's how I view it and, and seein' the change in me up until the present time, and hopefully the future, that I could work in that fashion.

00:35:14:00

Interviewer:

OK, cut.

Frank 'Big Black' Smith:

Is that all right?

Interviewer:

I'm gonna ask you again.

[cut]

00:35:19:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it, please.

[slate]

00:35:22:00

Interviewer:

OK, Black, tell me, tell me how you felt after this experience you had in the yard.

00:35:30:00

Frank 'Big Black' Smith:

How I felt and how I feel, you know, after Attica. [laughs] That feeling, I guess, you know, I'm, I, you know, it's, it's really hard to explain, you know, But I feel different. I feel good

about myself. You know, after experiencing it and seein' myself now, I feel good. I feel more cleaner about myself. I feel more real about myself, you know, since Attica. You know, I feel my head, my body, everything feel different. It feels better. I'll put it that way.

00:36:03:00

Interviewer:

Why? Why does it feel better? What happened in that yard that made you feel better?

00:36:06:00

Frank 'Big Black' Smith:

Attica changed a lot of my views. Attica changed me. Attica made me feel more human. Attica made my values more positive. Attica changed my behavior pattern, you know. Attica changed my unified way of looking at things, you know. I feel more positive about myself. Attica changed that. You know, believe me. I went in as a hustler and I came out as a struggler, you know, a more unified struggler, a more people's person. I was a my person, you know. I was a loner. You know, I was mingling, you know what I mean? But I was for Frank, you know. I was for Black, you know. Me. You know, that's who I, you know, I was very selfishless. I'm selfish [sic] because I understand that me, I can reach out to others, so I'm not a selfless [sic] person now. You know, I'm a more unified person. OK?

00:37:01:00

Interviewer:

Good. Good, good.

[cut]

00:37:06:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

Interviewer:

Are we good?

Camera crew member #1:

OK, take it any time.

00:37:12:00

Interviewer:

OK, Black. Tell me again about what was it like the day after George Jackson's death in the, in Attica, that morning in the mess hall?

00:37:20:00

Frank 'Big Black' Smith:

The morning after George Jackson's death, you know, entering the mess hall was like, you know, I, I relate it, you know, to a old song, you know, Billie Holiday, Gloomy Sunday. You know, it was a gloomy morning but *it was a good feeling, you know*, to see a bunch of people, you know, inmates preferable, even the cops. Everybody was quiet, you know. Didn't nobody have to be told, you know, you not supposed to eat. It was a feeling that you get, you know, once you walk in the door of the mess hall and you see everybody settin' down, nobody got no tray in the front of them, no silverware, nothing. Everybody was just as quiet. It was a unified morning. It was a good feeling that morning, you know, after George Jackson's death.

00:38:09:00

Interviewer:

Good. That was good. Do it.

Camera crew member #1:

OK?

[cut]

00:38:13:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:38:17:00

Interviewer:

OK, one more time. Tell me again about where you were and what was happening at the day of the rebellion.

00:38:25:00

Frank 'Big Black' Smith:

The day of the rebellion I was in the laundry, you know, quarter to eight, eight o'clock in the morning, doing our usual, you know, sitting in the laundry. And all of a sudden a big commotion outside and gas. We could smell it. And people runnin' all up and down the hallway, askin' us to let them in the laundry. But we didn't have a chance because the wall just fell right in, just caved right in. And everybody was in the hallway, just about, was in the laundry. And the next thing I know, this chemical, I don't know exactly what it were, was aflame, you know, and the whole laundry was on fire. And the police opened up the back door and we all were out in the back yard, tryin' to, tryin' to figure which way we were goin', whether we was goin' to the left or goin' to the right, and we wind up in D Block yard.

00:39:13:00

Interviewer:

OK, cut. Good.

[cut]

[camera roll #2087]

00:39:16:00

[slate]

Interviewer:

OK, Black. You ready?

00:39:23:00

Camera crew member #1:

Yes.

Interviewer:

Give us again—

Camera crew member #2:

Just hold it, hold it. OK.

Camera crew member #1:

OK.

00:39:27:00

Interviewer:

Can you give us again the day of the rebellion, what was happening that day and how you felt.

00:39:32:00

Frank 'Big Black' Smith:

Well, the day of the rebellion, you know, I was in the laundry setting at the window adjacent to the hallway and, and we smelled some gas and then we seen a bunch of inmates runnin' up and down the hallway hollering, Let us in! Let us in! And the next thing I know, the wall cave in and they were in. And, and, and smelling that gas, you know, I'm thinkin' now, What are we gonna do? How I'm gonna get out of here? And the police opened up the back door. And we out the back door and I wind up in D Block yard, myself and some more friends of mine.

00:40:07:00

Interviewer:

What was happenin'? What'd you hear? What was happenin'? What'd you see when you?

00:40:10:00

Frank 'Big Black' Smith:

This shit is on, you know, something is happenin', you know. And a, and everybody runnin' amuck, you know, The polices and, a lotta fights over here, the police and inmates, and a lotta buildings was on fire, and people runnin' out of the commissary, and runnin' up and down the hallway, and talkin' about the shit is on, you know. Everybody's in D yard and the shit is in D yard.

00:40:31:00

Interviewer:

What was in your head when you seen everybody kept saying D Yard? Where'd you wanna go?

00:40:35:00

Frank 'Big Black' Smith:

Whoa! What's happening? You know, I wanna get out of there, you know. I wanna try and figure a way that I can get out of there, you know, whatever is happenin', you know. I wanna get where I can see myself bein' safe, you know. That's what was happenin' with me. But then I wind up in D yard, being nosey and tryin' to figure out what's goin' on and be involved or, or to look at what's goin' on, if not involved, you know. Because at that time I wanted to just see what was goin' on, you know. Not to be involved with what's goin' on. Because a lot of violence and a lot of things was happenin'. And a lot of gas and then I start seeing polices on the roof with guns, polices in the hallway with guns, and polices gettin' beat, inmates gettin' beat, and I wanted to try and get myself in a safe position. That's what I wanted to do, really. But I wind up in the yard. And after I got in the yard, then I see myself a prisoner in the yard. Because once you got in the yard, you couldn't come out the yard. Because all exits started closin' up.

00:41:34:00

Interviewer:

Good, cut.

Camera crew member #3:

Fantastic.

[cut]

[slate]

00:41:43:00

Interviewer:

Tell me again about the conditions for you when you, when you got in there in terms of the showers and the toilet paper and the way that the medical people treated you.

00:41:50:00

Frank 'Big Black' Smith:

The conditions in Attica State Prison, you know, really, you know, if, when you say it, you know, people, it's hard for people to believe it. You know, you get one shower a week, you know, and if you get more than that, then you got to get a bucket of water when you get in your cell. And if you fortunate enough, you can get two. That mean you can wash the top of your body and you can wash the bottom of your body. You get one roll of toilet paper until that's given out, give out, or until the police want to give you another one or unlessin' you can get one of the inmates, your fellow inmate, to swag you one. That means going in the police's bathroom, which they keep two or three rolls in there, and get one of those and bring 'em to you, you know. Now, the medical care, I mean, what we call it was two refugee doctors. If you got a toothache and you go to the doctor, they give you an aspirin or else they pull it. Wasn't no such thing as filling it. And if you tell a doctor you wanted to get it filled or you wanted to get it checked, then he'll tell you, Well, you not a doctor. How do you know what's wrong with you? You know. And all they do is push aspirins, push aspirins. No medical care at all. You know, no examination as to really what's wrong with you, you know. And those same two doctors is the ones that they had on the day of the retakin' of the facility.

00:43:10:00

Interviewer:

OK.

[cut]

00:43:13:00

Camera crew member #1:

One six. Mark it.

[slate]

00:43:18:00

Interviewer:

OK, Black. Talk about the, the refugee doctors, as you call them, how they treated the inmates, how'd they treat you?

00:43:25:00

Frank 'Big Black' Smith:

We say refugee doctors, you know, really, you know, and the reason we say refugee doctors, you know, it's, it's, it's, it's the mannerism. Maybe it wasn't even a doctor, really, Steinberg and Williams, from the way they treat you, you know. They would be on one side of the

window, you know, and you would be on the other side of the window. It's worse than going in a bank. You know, was no hand touching, no feel, you know, if you say you got a knot in your stomach, they'd say, Here's a aspirin, maybe it'll go down, go back to your cell. If you say you got a gumball in your mouth, Here's an aspirin. You know, you might have to open your mouth up or pull your shirt up. You on—they on one side of the window and you on the other. Other than that, there's no physical touch, no examination, none whatsoever. And I'm serious about this. If you get serious enough, if they think, and you complain enough to the right police or the right, you know, a, a P.K.—principal keeper, that's the assistant warden—maybe they might send you to an outside hospital. But there wasn't no examination from them doctors in Attica State Prison, you know, none whatsoever.

00:44:27:00

Interviewer:

Good. Tell me a little bit about what were the, what the guards like? Who were the guards? What were they goin' through? I mean, comin' in there every day with you inmates, the other inmates? How, how, what was their attitude?

00:44:37:00

Frank 'Big Black' Smith:

The attitude of the guards, you know, and what they were goin' through, in some, you know, situations, some extent was just as bad as ours. Because they was the, you know, prison themselves, you know. They were being housed, they were being locked up, you know. You take a person that's comin' from outside, they might have a little personal problem with his or her or just his, really, because there wasn't no female guards there. And only White, no Blacks, you know, at the time that we were there. They might have their little personal problems. They gotta bring it in there and they gotta see themselves comin' in that door and that key is turnin' on them and now they gotta come in there and they gotta mingle with us. And if anything do happen, they can't get out. So they being kept themselves, they being locked up themselves. And they bicker among themselves, too. I know a lot of polices in there had problems with each other. Why you think so many of 'em got killed? I know for a fact, you know, and I could see, you know, a police lookin' down that barrel and pullin' that trigger on someone that they really had a problem with or someone that was putting washing powder in their lunch pail or were hidin' their lunch pail or was tryin' to, Hey, motherfucker, get on up on that tier and stop hangin' out down here. You know, the way they talked to each other.

00:45:51:00

Interviewer:

What was the, what was the attitude, I mean, they come, they bring their problems into, into Attica. What was the attitude toward the inmates? How'd they treat you?

00:45:59:00

Frank 'Big Black' Smith:

They would treat you bad, you know, that's the only way they could ventilate. You know, they had to let their frustration out on you. You know, they couldn't take it home. You know, for the possibility that their wife or their girlfriend or whatever wouldn't put up with it. So the only way they could do it is on the third class person, on the inmate, they let it off. But we would let it back off on them. So, some kind of way, we both would ventilate. Because you couldn't find too many inmates would put up with the police's hogwash, even though, you know, you were open to get beat up and put in segregation or put into the box. That was one of their main way of lettin' off their frustration is coming in there and droppin' their attitude on the inmate.

00:46:44:00

Interviewer:

That's a cut.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:46:48:00

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