



Interview with **George Clements**

Date: October 19, 1988

Interviewer: Terry Rockefeller

Camera Rolls: 3024-3026

Sound Roll: 312

Team: C

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 #3024]

[sound roll #312]

00:00:11:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

And mark.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Marker.

[slate]

00:00:16:00

Interviewer:

I know you were very outspoken in the late 60s about some of the issues that were going on in the Black community dealing with the police. What, what made you choose to be so outspoken, what made you?

00:00:28:00

George Clements:

Well, those were very turbulent times and I really felt that the police were extremely important, if for no other reason than that they were the only organized group of Black men in our community who could legitimately carry guns. And I felt that I would much prefer to have them on my side rather than to have them as enemies. And it was a truism that in the White community, the motto here in Chicago was "To Protect and Serve" and everyone just kind of accepted that in the White community so that there was a feeling of security that came over a White person when they saw a police car cruising in their neighborhood. You had just the opposite in the Black community. In the Black community, we interpreted that "Protect and Serve" to mean to protect White people and to see to it that Black people were kept in their place. So, I, I just felt like there had to be some Black police who, out there, who would be more concerned with the Black community than they would be with trying to preserve the instru—the interests of the White establishment and we went out and found them.

00:01:45:00

Interviewer:

You, you worked with some young Black officers—

George Clements:

Correct.

Interviewer:

—who, who were also experiencing a lot of pressure and a lot of hardship on the job. What were some, some of the things they shared with you, their concerns?

00:01:55:00

George Clements:

Well, first of all, they knew that they were doomed to remain in a very low position in the police department because there were very, very few promotions that were ever given out to Blacks and the few Blacks who did get the few that there were out there were Blacks who were subservient, Uncle Toms. Those were the ones that, that got to, to be maybe a sergeant or—and, and it was just a, a bad situation. If a, a Black policeman were to speak out on behalf of somebody who was being brutalized by the police, then he would be immediately suspended or fired. And there was just, their ranks were demoralized. They just felt like they were no more than an occupation army in, in the middle of this city of Chicago.

00:02:45:00

Interviewer:

Now, and, right in the midst of all this, the Black Panthers become very outspoken also about the police—

George Clements:

Correct.

Interviewer:

—though in a very different way. How did you respond to what they were saying and also to their, their rhetoric and their style and what—

00:02:59:00

George Clements:

Well, the thing that I really loved about the Black Panthers is that they refused to be ignored. It was very easy to ignore Black people back then because everybody figured, well, it's just a lot of talk and they're not gonna do anything. They'll just go on and on and on, moaning and groaning about how terrible everything is, and they of course, at the best, they just might get involved in some acts of non-violence but that's about it. And they just kind of, you know, business as usual. You couldn't have business as usual with the Black Panthers. The Black Panthers were definitely going to be heard. And they had these things they would say like, By any means necessary. And, you know, that shook people up. People said, oh, aah, these are some serious Black folks. And so, I, that appealed to me very, very much because I've always said, you know, love Clements or hate Clements but just don't ignore me. Just don't treat me like I'm a non-entity, as though I don't exist. And that, for all practical purposes, was what was happening with the Black community. Certainly politically, we were considered to be in the back pocket of Mayor Daley. We were ineffectual, we were, nobody had to really respond to anything we were gonna say because Boss Daley had us very much in check. And so, I, yeah, the Black Panthers appealed to me. They, they were young too and that meant that they were gonna be around for a while.

00:04:35:00

Interviewer:

What about the response that they got in the White community, how did you see how different that was? What kinds of things did that leave you struggling with in the community?

00:04:42:00

George Clements:

Well, see, once again, many White people have really been trained very effectively how to use euphemistic terminology and actually say nothing. So, White people, many White people just looked upon the Black community as, again, a continuation of slavery. They may, they may have chains off their bodies but they, they have chains on their minds and so we don't really have to worry about them. Here come these vociferous group of young volatile Blacks and they ain't got no chains on anything and they were prepared to actually fight. So, I was delighted when I saw that the White community was upset about the Black Panthers. And, of course, they carried their anxiety over to anybody who was concerned with the Black Panthers. So, I was called the Black Panther priest and the group of police that we formed, the Afro-American Patrolman's League, they were Black Panther police. And, you know, they, they, they figured they used these kind of scare tactics and then they would, they would get over. And the, the thing too, to bear in mind, is that there were large numbers of Black people who were only too happy to denounce me and the Panthers and all of these groups because they felt that, you know, we were upsetting equilibrium, we were rocking the boat.

00:06:18:00

Interviewer:

And what was it? What, what, what, what was the boat you were rocking? What—

00:06:22:00

George Clements:

Well, what we were doing is we were challenging the establishment. We were saying that the system itself had to be destroyed, that there was something wrong with the system. We were saying that you can't just put band-aids on and cosmetics and, and appease people, that you have to get out here and really change this whole setup that these Caucasians have constructed in this nation to keep one-tenth of the population at bay. And so, we said for example, all right, they put us in these segregated areas in—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

George Clements:

—these large cities. At least, we are going to run our own areas. You cannot come into a Black community and have a Black—I'm sorry, have a White police chief, a White fire chief, a White principal of the school, a White everything. Anybody who's in authority is White and the people who are subjects are Black.

00:07:19:00

Interviewer:

OK, I need you to just—we, we need to put new film in the camera and I'm just gonna ask you to backtrack a tiny bit to—

[cut]

[camera roll #3025]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark.

00:07:26:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Marker.

[slate]

00:07:29:00

Interviewer:

What was that challenge that was so vital to the Black community, for the Black community in this period?

00:07:35:00

George Clements:

It was extremely important that the Black community learn the, how to really take control of our own communities. We had learned to accept the fact that we lived in segregated areas but what we were saying and what the Panthers and the Afro-American Patrolmen's League and other groups, what they were saying is at least, let us control ourselves. And of course, that was not taking place because we had, everywhere you looked, anybody who had any position of authority was White. The, the principal of the school, the post—local postmaster, the fire chiefs, the police chief, everybody who had any kind of authority. And we said that had to be changed. And of course, the, also, the, the important thing about that era is that it exposed the hypocrisy of so-called integration because integration was specious. It was fallacious. It had absolutely really no meaning at all when you came down to Black people really taking control. Integration always meant that there were large numbers of White people, at least seventy, eighty, eight-five percent and then you had a number of Blacks that were marching together with these Whites but the Whites of course, were in control. And in the '60s, when we started talking about integration wherein there was a White minority, then that was termed inundation. And that meant of course, that we just can't deal because now they in

charge. And so, if we, we, there's just no way that we can function. And of course, that gets back to a just absolute concrete fundamental fact of American life and that is that most White Americans when they are born, they are imbued with the theory that this is their nation. They are to run it. They are in charge. And that's just kind of an accepted fact. And on the other hand, most Blacks, when we come in here, we come in with the knowledge that there's always gonna be some White man somewhere who's gonna be telling us what to do.

00:09:55:00

Interviewer:

I wanna move you back to recall when Fred Hampton was murdered—

George Clements:

Yes.

Interviewer:

—and how you, how you chose to reach out to the community and try to help the community cope with the tragedy.

00:10:09:00

George Clements:

Sure. Well, first of all, Fred himself was an extremely volatile character. Fred, when he came into a room, it was electricity right away. It, it lit up. People knew that this was, this was not some ordinary person, this was somebody who was like a smoking gun. I mean, he was just, he was always on the go and getting things done and all that and you couldn't help but admire a guy like Fred Hampton. So, Fred was feared mightily by the establishment here in Chicago because they, they never knew just quite what he was going to do next. And there were very few Blacks who felt free to publicly praise Fred. I'm sure if you looked into the archives, you'll find he got very few awards or anything like that because people were, this was a little, this is a stick of dynamite. And people were, Black and White, they were afraid to really kind of deal with, with, with, with Fred. I loved him from the very beginning. I just thought he was fantastic because once again, here was a full-fledged Black man. A man, not a boy, a man. His—this was somebody that White folks really had to take another look at. You couldn't play with Fred. And when I say that, I'm talking about even my own religious establishment, because at that time, I was getting a lot of flak because they wanted to make me the pastor of, of the church I was in at that time, Saint, Saint Dorothy. And we had, people were writing letters and they were petitioning and they were making phone calls and they were going through the committees and seeing the diocesan authorities and they, they were doing everything they could think of. Fred Hampton went down there and said, Either you make him a pastor or we blow the place up. [laughs] Yeah, that changed the whole coloration. Next thing I knew, there was a big delegation out there at the parish and wanting

to know, now, what is going on, and so forth. Up at that time, we got polite yawns. Fred was quite a man, quite a man.

00:12:41:00

Interviewer:

How did, how did the community cope with the loss of Fred Hampton?

00:12:46:00

George Clements:

It was, it was interesting. *I had a mass for Fred* the day after he was murdered, that, that following morning *and I was just shattered. I was devastated.* I, I just, it felt like, Wow, now this is, this is a blow. I don't know how we're gonna deal with this. *And, in the midst of this mass, I was trying to explain to our children, because we had all the school children there, all 1,300, and I was trying to explain to them the importance of Fred. And I wasn't getting through, and—at least I felt like I wasn't getting through—and in the midst of my explanation, I just burst into tears. And the next thing I knew, here was one of our eighth-grade boys, he jumped up and he said, "I am Fred Hampton." And then a girl in sixth grade, she jumps up, "I am Fred Hampton." Another kid in first grade, "I'm Fred Hampton." And before you knew it, the whole church kids were all shouting, "I am Fred Hampton," and wow. I just felt so wonderful. I felt like, Gee whiz, this, this death was not in vain at all because these kids are saying that they are willing to get up here and speak out for liberation, for first-class citizenship.*

00:14:11:00

Interviewer:

Do you have other recollections of that service? What were the things you did with the children? What, what were you trying to bring them?

00:14:18:00

George Clements:

Well, what I was really trying to bring them to was a realization that you cannot really get through in this nation unless you use creativity, ingenuity, unless you refuse to be ignored. I was trying to let them see that you, you cannot use the ordinary conventional methods in our nation and really make an impact. And I, I remember comparing Fred with Dr. King. And, and I said, now, Dr. King had his way and it was an effective way because it struck at the guilt of White people and, and, and it just kind of hit them in that corner of their hearts where they just felt, Well I really should stop oppressing these people because here they are espousing the Christian meth—message of non-violence and I, I'm supposed to be a

Christian and maybe I oughtta really see if I can change some of my, my ways. So, it was, he was effective. But I said to those youngsters, that you're gonna need all kinds. You're gonna need the Fred Hamptons also who, while you've got Dr. Kings preaching non-violence, you got somebody like Fred Hampton who was saying, OK, since the non-violence isn't working, I'm ready to kick butt. And, and, and we need all of that. And I was, those were some of the things I was trying to get, get across to the children.

00:15:46:00

Interviewer:

Now, right at that time, I gather you also became concerned for Bobby Rush's well-being.

00:15:52:00

George Clements:

Oh, yes, because once Hanrahan, who was the state's attorney, once he had murdered, he and his men had murdered Fred, well then the next thing to do was to try to wipe out all those people that were connected with Fred, and Bobby was one of the top leaders of the Black Panther movement in Chicago at that time. And so, they were out after—and then of course, in my own little way I was getting my heat too, because they were trying to get the Cardinal to suspend me, to, to fire me, excommunicate me, whatever. They were, they were having all these phone calls that were coming over. You nigger priest, we're gonna do XYZ. And I was getting all these hate letters and threats. And, The next time you put your foot on the accelerator, your car is gonna blow up, all that old crazy stuff. And so, I, I took, I took all these things very, very seriously, very seriously. And every time I would get a letter or whatever, I would always turn it in to some of the people who I found out later, were just as adamant against us as, as the establishment. That is the FBI. You know, we, we thought going to Hoover was gonna help and Hoover was one of them. But I—

00:17:08:00

Interviewer:

What did you do for Bobby, what hap—

00:17:09:00

George Clements:

For Bobby, what I did is I told Bobby that there has always been, for centuries, a thing called right of sanctuary and that people are still kind of reluctant to go in and invade a church. So, I told him to come here and that I would put him up here and that I felt he would be safe here, at least for a while because I don't think they would have the guts to come here and actually invade this, this, this church and drag him out and kill him.

00:17:43:00

Interviewer:

Now you also told me about the incredible irony of what the police force did to Howard Saffold in the, after the murder of Fred.

00:17:50:00

George Clements:

Oh, yes, because Howard was a member of the Afro-American Patrolman's League and a very prominent member. And the police were insidious in their way of trying to strike out at anybody who they felt was upsetting the system and especially, a traitor within their own ranks. [laughs] And that's what they viewed Howard as, as somebody that was just, you know—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

George Clements:

—oh, he was the worst 'cause, 'cause they had trained him and everything. So, yes, what they—

00:18:22:00

Interviewer:

We, we need to switch film, just one more time. I'm sorry. It's just this last last bit more.

[cut]

[camera roll #3026]

00:18:29:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Marker.

[slate]

00:18:31:00

Interviewer:

What, what treatment did Howard Saffold face in those days after the, after the murder?

George Clements:

Well, since he was such a prominent member of the Afro-American Patrolman's League and since he was viewed as a traitor by the police department, they decided that they would get involved in the height of irony by actually assigning him to—

Interviewer:

You know what, I need you to say, to mention his name someplace.

George Clements:

OK.

Interviewer:

Could you start that again?

George Clements:

Sure.

Interviewer:

OK. Anytime.

00:19:00:00

George Clements:

Well, since Howard Saffold was a member of the Afro-American Patrolmen's League and since he of course, was viewed as a traitor by the police department, they decided that, with the height of irony, to assign him to actually be one of the guards at the apartment building where Fred was murdered. And I recall going over there one afternoon because we were all, like there was pilgrimages being made over to this apartment, we would see all the bullet holes and so forth. And here's Howard Saffold standing on the porch guarding this place. [laughs] And I, I just felt like, Wow, they, they don't miss a trick.

00:19:48:00

Interviewer:

I was so moved by the story of, of the, the mass that you had with the children. I would just love, so that I know I can share with our audience, for you to tell the story one more time, of the service that you held here and what you were trying to impress the children about Fred Hampton and how they responded.

George Clements:

Oh, you want me to go over the same thing I did before?

Interviewer:

If you can you just tell it one more time?

George Clements:

The day after the funeral, the day after the murder.

Interviewer:

You can just start again—

00:20:16:00

George Clements:

The, the day after the murder of Fred Hampton, I was distraught and I decided that we were going to have a mass here at our church and we had all thirteen hundred schoolchildren in there at this mass, at which we were going to memorialize Fred. And, in the middle of the mass, I was trying to get through my message to the youngsters and I just felt like I wasn't getting through. It just seemed as though they weren't understanding. [plane flies over] And in the midst of all my frustration—

00:20:51:00

Interviewer:

Oh, my God. I'm sorry.

[cut]

[wild sound]

Interviewer:

There's, there's an airplane going overhead and—

[cut]

00:20:56:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Marker.

[slate]

00:20:59:00

Interviewer:

One more time. [pause] OK. What were you trying to share with the children after Fred had died?

00:21:14:00

George Clements:

The morning after the murder of Fred, I decided that we would have a mass here at Holy Angels in which we would memorialize Fred and it would give us the opportunity to really impress upon the children the real impact of his life and what it should mean to them. And, in the middle of the mass, I was attempting to do this and I was feeling very frustrated. I was feeling as though I really wasn't getting through and I was just so extremely upset at this inability to articulate my feelings to these children so that they could understand. And, in the midst of all this, I just burst into tears. And the first thing I noticed was that there was an eighth-grade boy who jumped up and he said, "I am Fred Hampton." And then there was a sixth-grade girl, she said, "I am Fred Hampton." And then ano—and then before I knew it, a kid in first grade and, and the children were all started shouting, "I am Fred Hampton." And it made me realize, well, I, I, we did get through because they do understand the need to perpetuate Fred. That you can kill the dreamer but you might not kill the dream. And I could see the dream being realized in their own lives. And so, I, I, I really felt that the mass had a lot of meaning and I think it's something that those youngsters will never forget for the rest of their lives.

00:22:40:00

Interviewer:

Thank you, thank you. [laughs] All right! That's wonderful!

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:22:48:00

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