



Interview with **Robert Finley**

Date: November 15, 1988

Interviewer: Judy Richardson

Camera Rolls: 2047-2048

Sound Rolls: 222

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.

Preferred Citation

Interview with Robert Finley, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on November 15, 1988 for *Eyes on the Prize II: America at the Racial Crossroads, 1965-mid 1980s*. 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 II*.

[camera roll #2047]

[sound roll #222]

00:00:12:00

Camera crew member #1:

Slate. Marker!

00:00:13:00

Camera crew member #2:

Mark one.

[slate]

00:00:16:00

Interviewer:

Can you tell me the story about guarding your place on the first day of the riot, and just give me a sense that it was a neighborhood bar, and how long you had your place.

00:00:25:00

Robert Finley:

Well, being in the bar business quite a while, incidents that happen throughout this neighborhood and city come to your attention through customers speaking to each other, and also to you. On this particular day, I had heard through various people—

00:00:50:00

Interviewer:

Just a second, I'm sorry, can you cut a second? If you could start out with "On the first day of the..."

00:00:52:00

[cut]

00:00:55:00

Camera crew member #1:

Marker.

00:00:56:00

Camera crew member #2:

Mark two.

[slate]

00:00:58:00

Interviewer:

OK, tell me about the first day of the riot, what did you do in the bar?

00:01:03:00

Robert Finley:

On the first day of the riot, I was lo—at my place, business, bar located at 1101 Clay, corner of Cameron, when the—through listening to the conversation of customers that were coming through, had been all moving around the town. Came and they said, We've got quite a situation going, there're riots in process here. I said, Yes? And then I became alert, and decided that this is kind of a crisis, so perhaps I'd better take some measures to prevent any harm to come to the place or myself. So, as a result, we did business as usual during the day,

and about dark, as it became dark, I turned the lights on around the place. And I have a cement stoop in, at the front door, and I took my 16 gauge shotgun, and put a chair out on the stoop and set there on there, and observed things that were happening. On—[pause] Did this till the very wee hours of morning, and then I went into the bar and, still and—doing business as usual, but going to the door every once in a while and observing what's happening outside. And I saw some of the people who I was surprised to see, in the act of breaking in the— There was a liquor store across the street from the bar, breaking into that, and coming out with cases of liquor. None of the businessmen on the street attended to—came and opened their places, none just showed on the scene at all. I think I was the only one there. I was, I was the only one there. We had other proprietors who did not come down, and I—as I said to myself there, well, if they fail to come down and protect their property, I certainly not gonna take any part of it, just pass me by. [laughs] And I watched cars come by and people'd observe, observe me with my gun, and they'd continue on their way, riding about, blowing horns, just making a holiday of it, seemingly. This continued throughout the day until just, they just about emptied the whiskey store of all of its beer, whiskey and wine. Across the st—

00:03:54:00

Interviewer:

I'm sorry, cut.

00:03:55:00

Camera crew member #1:

Cut.

00:03:55:00

[cut]

00:03:55:00

Interviewer:

Yeah.

00:03:56:00

Camera crew member #1:

Marker.

00:03:57:00

Camera crew member #2:

Mark three.

[slate]

00:03:58:00

Interviewer:

OK, if you can talk again about being in the bar, and just give a sense that you know it's a neighborhood bar, and you've had it for—since 1948, so people knew you.

00:04:07:00

Robert Finley:

I have been the operator of this bar for—since 1948. And during that time, I've met many, many people, both good, bad, and ugly. [laughs] And they have—I can say the fact that I've been there 40 years, and at that time I'd been there over 20 years. As a result of my knowing as many people, and I've just, just became a part of the community, and many people knew me, and as a result of this, I didn't have a single incident with any person during the entire period. I saw many [laughs] of my, my favorite, my regular customers doing things that I was quite shocked at. But I found this, this generally happens, seems like. We have a particular incident happen, people just seem to disregard all rules of society, and, I'm going out and do this thing, and they did it. [laughs]

00:05:15:00

Interviewer:

OK, now can you go back just one more time and give me a sense of the bar and being there, with the, with the shotgun also.

00:05:22:00

Robert Finley:

All right.

00:05:22:00

Interviewer:

And also that, you know, maybe that wasn't altogether needed, that you—

00:05:25:00

Robert Finley:

All right.

00:05:26:00

Interviewer:

—you know, that people knew you. OK. You can start.

00:05:31:00

Robert Finley:

As a result of many people knowing me, and my sitting on the stoop with this 16 gauge shotgun, I, I felt, at, at the, at the moment that I began this act, that I was doing the correct thing, I'm defending my property, local neighborhood. But as—actually, as the time went on, I saw the way the reception, saw the way the activity here was, that actually I was not in danger, not at all, not, not one bit. And this, this is quite surprising, when you see people acting up and cap—and I know the capabilities in my neighborhood. They can, as I say, good, bad and ugly. And they sure certainly showed me that, Well, Bob, you're part of this neighborhood, and you're gonna be here. And that clearly showed me that I guess I'm in business here. And really this, I think, and any businessman appreciates the fact that customers say, Hey, this is, this is where I like to come. I have people look in again and say, Bob, you know I, I don't go anywhere but here to have a drink. I have customers come from Ann Arbor, Ypsilanti, and I had the feeling that they were living on the north end, or, or somewhere in the city limits. And people have been, they said, You know, I drive 25, 30 miles to come here and have a drink.

00:06:54:00

Interviewer:

OK. Now can you also talk about what the difference was in being a Black businessman. Did that make any difference?

00:07:00:00

Robert Finley:

Well, I felt that that was a part of it.

00:07:03:00

Interviewer:

I'm sorry, if you could say, "Being a Black businessman."

00:07:05:00

Robert Finley:

All right. Being a Black businessman, doing business in a Black community, you feel—
sometime you feel that, you're really not—

00:07:17:00

Interviewer:

I'm sorry, if you can cut a second. I'll tell you what I'm looking for, being a Black
businessman during the riot.

00:07:22:00

[cut]

[camera roll 2048]

00:07:22:00

Camera crew member #1:

And marking.

00:07:23:00

Camera crew member #2:

Mark four.

00:07:27:00

[slate]

Interviewer:

OK, paint a picture for me, because they're not gonna see any footage or anything, of what it
was like being in your neighborhood bar with a shotgun. What was that like?

00:07:36:00

Robert Finley:

Well, you can imagine, I'm a, ex-serviceman, and here I am, have my own little business going and operating. And my thought was that when I began to say, Well, I guess this is time to defend your personal property and safety. So, the shotgun's there and I said, Well, looks like I can realize now what the pioneer thinks of when he, when he, says, you know, your home is your castle. And here I've just left for war, I was very impersonal about the war. [laughs] Duty calls, and I answered, but this certainly is a crisis in my life. And here I am on my home ground with my shotgun, defending property, and, and, and many thoughts like that go through your mind, and say, and this was my, very apprehensive at the beginning. But as I said, as I, as I go along and the time passed, and I saw there was things as far as my place was concerned were not in danger, which was a great—with great relief, I might add, that this, this is it, and—

00:08:48:00

Interviewer:

Why did you think they left you alone?

00:08:51:00

Robert Finley:

I feel the reason that I was bypassed is, first, being a Black businessman doing business in a Black area. Secondly, I have operated the bar along the lines of you're not just a patron, a customer, you're a friend of mine, and as a result of you being a friend of mine, we have no problem, and as a result of this, we, we're gonna make it and we'll make it together. And I felt that that has been a strong thing in my favor. I might add that I have never been robbed, stuck up, over my 40 years there, and that's no accident, because I've had people come in, and I had a little way of handling strangers at that time that I don't have now.

00:09:40:00

Interviewer:

OK, you can cut, please. That is perfect! Yes, that is perfect!

00:09:45:00

Robert Finley:

Good!

00:09:45:00

Interviewer:

[laughs]

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:09:47:00

Copyright 2021 Washington University Libraries