

Interviewer with **Dr. B.J. Simms**

1979

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Interview gathered as part of *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*

Produced by Blackside, Inc.

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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*.

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[camera roll 10]

[wild audio]

B. J. Simms: My name—I'm Doctor B. J. Simms. S-I-M-M-S. B as in Benjamin. J as in James.

[cut]

00:00:16:00

[sync tone]

**INTERVIEWER: TELL ME, HOW MANY PEOPLE DID YOU TRANSPORT EACH DAY ACCORDING TO THIS SYSTEM?**

Simms: Well, roughly—it, it was in the thousands. Maybe, possibly, thirty, thirty-five thousand people that we transported every day.

**INTERVIEWER: AND HOW DID YOU DO THAT? WHAT WAS THE SYSTEM LIKE?**

Simms: Well, when I became Director of Transportation we had a lot of, what we call, stations that was all over town. A network of stations. Now each—at each of these stations we had a person there, usually, a young woman student and the station wagons were assigned maybe sometime two to a station. You had a number of private automobiles that were

assigned to pick up there. They start picking up about five o' clock in the morning and then because when—well, Montgomery is so situated, that is, the residential sections made it easier for us to have a downtown station. A parking lot where we would bring people to the parking—to the—to that station and we had a man there who would then assign them to cars that were going out—it was just like Grand Central Station in New York. A central place where these cars would come in from the different feeder routes, unload their passengers, go back and get others while these others were being shuffled into another automobile or automobiles that would be going to another section of town. So I said it was just somewhat like Grand Central Station in New York where commuter trains come in there and you get from—and you, you get off and you go over to the BRT or you get off the BRT and go to the IRT to go. And we had these feeder routes. Now, I had an assistant as Director of Transportation. I had an assistant, a lady, her job was to visit as many stations as possible and keep in touch with our transportation office to find out if there was an overload at any particular station. Maybe across town they say, we, we got an influx of passengers and we need some more cars. Well, she would call the transportation office and they would get in touch with other stations and if—to tell them to send a particular station wagon or a few more cars to a station across town that was un—overloaded. And in that way we never had a jam.

00:03:30:00

INTERVIEWER: DIDN'T YOU HAVE TWO WAY RADIOS? HOW'D YOU KEEP IN TOUCH WITH ONE ANOTHER?

Simms: By telephone. We did not have two way radios then. It would have been perfect if we had had them then.

INTERVIEWER: AND HOW MANY CARS, ABOUT, WERE RUNNING DURING THAT TIME?

Simms: Oh, you—regular—we had cars that worked all day. Maybe forty or fifty cars, you see. But in the evenings like this you have more, because some drivers drove their own cars to a—

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[cut]

[wild audio]

Simms: —different—say you were working at a place where a dozen or so people were working—

INTERVIEWER: THAT'S WONDERFUL. JUST ONE SECOND, WE'RE GONNA CHANGE.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: YOU WERE TALKING ABOUT, NOW DURING THE EVENING RUSH, THAT YOU HAD A LOT MORE PEOPLE TO DISPATCH? HOW DID THAT WORK?

Simms: Yes, [coughs] in the evening rush we were very busy. For the most part I would be down at the transportation office. We had our own separate—

INTERVIEWER: SORRY—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: OK, OK THAT WAS MAGAZINE JAM. THIS IS ANOTHER MAG. IT'S STILL TEN.

00:04:35:00

[cut]

[slate]

[change to camera roll 11]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: SLATE IT TEN.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: TELL ME, AGAIN, ABOUT THE EVENING RUSH. HOW DID YOU HANDLE THAT?

Simms: Well, on the evening rush it was interesting to see how that went. We had the, we had more cars because people be gettin' [sic] off work using their car. But every person were hauling people, generally, we had their names. They were—we did the assignment to the particular stations because we knew where the rush would be. Now, for instance, out in the Normandale shopping center there were a lot of people out in that side of town. We had a kind of drop off station out there where we had station wagons who would pick people up and drop 'em off there and then they would be picked up by other cars and station wagons and brought downtown to the main terminal, so we call it. And they would get out and there would be a man a, a Reverend Cherry, who has since passed may God rest his soul. He would call out the cars and they would line up and says, this car is goin' to such and such and such in the town. And they would load up. If anymore? Then he'd call another car and then they'd load up that car and be gone. Then another one. And they would be going everywhere. And meanwhile cars and station wagons would be feeding his station and everybody got home much better than they could've gotten home on the transit buses which we had put out of business. Now this city and Richmond, Virginia still argue about who has the first electric railway. Richmond, Virginia claims it, but Montgomery seems to have the more authentic facts and we handled the crowd better than they handled it with the bus and the street

railways. And, you see, this assisted them all right. Every person who manned a station, we call 'em, had an access to a phone, maybe across the street, and they would phone in if they needed an extra bus. Now we had some station wagons that were assigned to do swing duty, that is, they went where the crowds were. Where they need 'em. Now that was their job. And so, we handled everybody. Nobody—everybody got home. And even at night until one o' clock for char-worker—charwomen and janitors who worked in the downtown area or whatever. They would come out and there would be a station wagon or a car or another car to take them home. So there just wasn't any time to say, we don't have transportation. They got home and that was that.

00:07:40:00

INTERVIEWER: AND DID YOU FIND THAT PEOPLE WERE VERY WILLING TO GIVE THEIR CARS AND THEIR TIME TO DOING THIS?

Simms: The people were, were willing to give of their cars and time. So, that people would get off from work and start hauling people till, maybe, ten o' clock at night. Now they just work, principally, say, maybe, from five-thirty till about ten, ten-thirty and then we—cause they were working on the regular job. But then, during the day, our station wagons and our c—cars that were listed with us took up the slack. So in the evening we had additional help. Nobody was stranded. Even—we knew where domestic servants out in the outlying neighbors on the outskirts of town, who worked at night, we picked them up from their place of work. We had a—we did have a case, probably two or three cases, where the car would park in the driveway or in front of it, home where they were working. And there was a one man who objected—his neighbor objected. Threatened to call the police and did call the police. But the man, whom—whose, whose house the car parked in front of came and out and said, look, this is a public street. You don't bother this car when it comes here because it's picking my cook up. And that settled that.

00:09:21:00

INTERVIEWER: WHAT OTHER KINDS OF PROBLEMS DID YOU HAVE WITH DISPATCHING AND ORGANIZING STUFF?

Simms: Well, in the beginning, some of the problems I—we had was with certain dissident members of the executive committee. I suggested that we get young, some young women from Alabama State University, pay them fifteen dollars a week for the few hours they would work in the morning and then the afternoon. I had a hard time gettin' [sic] 'em to see that. And it was the help of Doctor King. Mike [sic] I called him. He called me Brother B.J. and I called him Mike. To get them to agree to that. Finally, they agreed to pay 'em twelve dollars. They settled for that, but we couldn't—they couldn't understand what was going on. But other than that—I had a committee, I was chairman of transportation committee, but we never met. They were just in name only. I, I didn't have time to fool with 'em and they didn't know what was going on either. And that's why everything worked smoothly.

00:10:36:00

INTERVIEWER: THAT'S A LOT OF MONEY TO, TO THIS KEEP GOING.

Simms: Oh yes. Thousands of dollars a month. You see you had the—you see every driver had an allotment of gasoline in terms of his route and in terms of the many of the actual miles that he would make each day. We then calculated the amount of gasoline that would be allotted to him each day. This was given to the fillin' [sic] station man and he was told that such and such a car number could get fifteen gallons, twenty gallons a day. Now if you give—now previously, when we first started out they were just gettin' gasoline indiscriminately. Because there was nobody, really, over the transportation system. They didn't have a system. And we wasted a lot of money like that. But when I became transportation director, which was at a crisis time just after we had gotten into it, I weeded out all of those persons who were gettin' gas and we found some gettin' that gas and joy riding it. We found some gettin' gas and making people pay. Now that was, that was a cardinal of sin. You get in a car you don't pay anything. There were no fee. So I weeded all those out and they hooped and hollered. Well, the same way when you take a, take the tit out of a baby pig's mouth. He'll holler and squeal. They squealed, but nevertheless they happened to have got a man whom they, they—the improvement association felt could make a decision and stick to it. So I gave the different fillin' stations that we dealt with a list of the names, the amount of gas—I said, now these people can get this amount of gas a day. Now if he was runnin' out of gas then he would come by the office, transportation office, and a dispatcher, and we had three, would give him an additional five or six gallons of gas and punch a hole in a card where it says five gallon, sign my name to it, and give—sign his initials and give it to the driver. He would take that to the fillin' station, they would give him that amount of gasoline. So that—the same is true if he needed the tire he had to see me. He would drive in, in the morning and says, I need a tire. Since I had automobile repair experience I'd walk out there and see, yes you do need one. I'd give him the order to go get a tire. It would be put in a ledger book that he got a particular tire on a given date and that kept them from coming back, two days later, and saying, I want a tire. He had been—they had been doing that for the first month of the boycott which meant that we, we, we threw away a lot of money. Thousands of dollars on phony repairs. I remember, once, I had to send a car to the garage, a Chevrolet, I, I remember, to have a universal joint put in. When the bill came back it was for fifty dollars. I immediately got in my car and drove over and confronted the brother with the bill. I said, now it doesn't cost this much to put in a universal joint on this Chevrolet. And, of course, he didn't know anything about it and he called his assistant and went in there and came back out. Said, well he didn't know—he thought that we had done more than that. So we paid him what he was supposed to get, I think about twenty bucks, and I didn't have any more trouble with that kind of thing. Such as getting you a battery and then two days later you come back complaining that you're battery was gone. You'd have an old one. You would have sold the other one. I stopped all that—

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[cut]

[wild audio]

Simms: —so we saved a lot of money.

INTERVIEWR: OK. CUT. CUT.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:14:43:00

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