

Interview with **Bill Perry**
Date: March 21, 1989
Interviewer: Jim DeVinney
Camera Rolls: 1060
Sound Rolls: 123
Team: A

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 #1060]
[sound roll #123]

00:00:11:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it, please.

[slate]

00:00:20:00

Camera crew member #1:

OK, Jim.

00:00:21:00

Interviewer:

OK, give me your first impressions of Miami.

00:00:24:00

Bill Perry:

Well, I came to Miami in 1977 out of Baltimore. When I first got here, I was kind of excited about coming to the new area, I only came to stay six months. But one of the glaring kind of things that I noticed, particularly amongst African-Americans, is that there were no groups here caught up in the so-called civil rights struggle that were very active. No young militant groups, NAACP was somewhat inactive. In fact, I became president of the NAACP after only being here about a year and a half, which I thought was somewhat alarming, to give you some idea of what was going on in the community at the time. I expected to find more civil rights activity and I didn't find much. I was working in the school system and found the community to be somewhat depressing.

00:01:20:00

Interviewer:

What was your impression about local leadership?

00:01:25:00

Bill Perry:

From my point of view, there was a dearth of local leadership. What I found is that people in the community seemed to be more interested in their personal goals and accomplishing their, meeting their personal ambitions. I've been somewhat community-oriented and worked with people that were working on behalf of the community, so I found myself somewhat left out. I attempted to run for public office when I first got here, and people were upset about that, they viewed me as an outsider, where typically when I go places, I become very active with my people. And as an African-American I don't see myself as an outsider, no matter where I go and there are African-Americans there.

00:02:02:00

Interviewer:

All right, let's just stop down for a moment and make—

[cut]

[slate]

00:02:14:00

Interviewer:

OK, tell me about the demonstration at Miami Beach.

00:02:17:00

Bill Perry:

Shortly after I came here, as head of the NAACP, there was a South African fighter who was having a fight on Miami Beach. Since he was some—from South Africa, I called for a demonstration at the time. In fact, Jesse Jackson came down and tried to get the people stirred up for that. We met with the commissioners on the beach. We did not get any results, so we went through with the demonstration. I felt somewhat good about it and as much as we had it on Miami Beach because a lot of the little old Jewish ladies participated in the demonstration with us and I often made the comment, I'm glad it's on Miami Beach and not in Liberty City, because we did have a following. The demonstration wasn't effective, but it looked good, there was an absence of African-American participation, but we went through with it anyway.

00:03:03:00

Interviewer:

OK, I'd like to go on to what the mood was before, as the McDuffie trial was opening, perhaps the—of the policemen. What was the mood? Was there optimism? Tell, tell me your feelings and what you sensed.

00:03:15:00

Bill Perry:

I think there was general optimism in the community. We had the state attorney come out, and meet with several groups, and talk about the case, and what would happen. We'd looked for an indictment. Some of, some of us were not too optimistic. I wasn't for one, and at that time I had a series of prayer meetings every evening on the steps of the state attorney's office building. It just so happened that the evening that the decision came down of freeing the guys, my neighbor came over and called me, and crying, and I was mowing my grass, and she told me what had happened. And I became angered, and she encouraged me to go start my prayer meeting ear—, early that evening, and she proceeded to make cone, phone calls to get other people to come out. Well, up until this point I never had more than fifteen people participate in those prayer meetings we had outside. That evening, when I got around to the building, there must have been over 3500 people out there, it was frightening. I, I thought to myself, I said, Now, I've been asking for some followership and I have it now and I don't know what to do.

00:04:20:00

Interviewer:

What happened that night?

00:04:22:00

Bill Perry:

All hell broke loose that night. It just so happened that people came to the meeting that we were having. At the same time, there were people already in Liberty City had started blocking streets, barricading streets, pushing dumpsters in the streets so the traffic would slow down, and they were attacking people in the cars, White people who were driving through the area. A lot of those persons started marching to the courthouse, as we were, not the courthouse, the state attorney's office. As we were on the steps with the crowd out there, the other group came in. We didn't have a public address system, the cops wouldn't let us have one, we'd requested one. Consequently, we could not reach all of the people, so some confusion took place. The guys that came into that demonstration brought a bullhorn, and they were able to capture the crowd, and get their attention, and say they were gonna march somewhere else. Some of the people started marching. Just as that took place, some of the kids set a car on fire in front of the building, and from that point it seemed to just—fires started to light up all over the place, and people started breaking out the windows, and crashing in, into the state attorney's office building.

00:05:24:00

Interviewer:

During the course of the next several days when the riots were happening, Jesse Jackson and a young Ben Hooks, Joseph Lowery, y'all came to Miami. What did you think of their participation?

00:05:34:00

Bill Perry:

I was, I think Jesse did an excellent job, Jesse always, when he comes into this community, tends to relate to people in the community. Ben and the rest of them, they met over at the Howard Johnson in North Miami Beach, far removed from the community. Most of them did not live in the community at the time. Jesse lived with a resident of Liberty City at the time, and played basketball with the kids on the street. I actually could relate to them. The rest of them held high-powered meetings, and got a lot of press attention, and not much resulted from that. In fact, I left them and went to a radio station, and just talked on the radio, I guess, for about 27 hours, trying to tell people to cool it, to calm down, and refused to meet with those groups at the time.

00:06:17:00

Interviewer:

OK, let's stop down one more time and let's see where—

[cut]

[slate]

00:06:26:00

Camera crew member #1:

OK, Jim.

00:06:27:00

Interviewer:

OK, tell me about those young people in the streets.

00:06:29:00

Bill Perry:

I sensed an attitude amongst the youngsters in the streets immediately following the disturbance, and even during the disturbance, that I hadn't seen before that was somewhat frightening. When you see kids that stand in front of a National Guardsman with an automatic weapon, and stand there and curse them out with all kind of profanity and vulgarity, and actually dare them to do something, I hadn't seen that kind of behavior before. The kind of looting that take, took place, and the youngsters breaking into stores, and taking bicycles, and sofas, and televisions, I was somewhat alarmed at that. I expected some looting to occur, but I think this is a carryover of the attitude that we're just going to take over now, we're going to get even. Saw a lot of that and, I, it's somewhat frightening now to think that happened back in 1980 and these, the youngsters that participated then are now in high school and some have finished high school, and I just wonder if we've looked at the behavior they manifested then, and has there been any carryover today?

00:07:24:00

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm. All right, let's stop down, OK? Sorry to be so stop and start here—

[cut]

[slate]

00:07:38:00

Interviewer:

OK?

00:07:39:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mm-hmm.

00:07:40:00

Interviewer:

OK, go ahead, tell us—

00:07:40:00

Bill Perry:

OK.

00:07:41:00

Interviewer:

—just take it.

00:07:42:00

Bill Perry:

OK. [laughs] You know, we, we often look at the disturbances, and the people that were involved in the disturbances, and ask the question, you know, what benefits have we gained? I see two kinds of things happening. Those persons, the so-called Black professionals, African-American professionals, who have gained the most did the least. The people that participated in the demonstrations and the, the revolutions, as they call them, gained the least. If you look at what occurred following the demonstrations, each time there have been meetings downtown, and persons have participated in those meetings. And what we've found is those persons that have gone to those meetings, attempting to negotiate on behalf of the community, went negotiating on their personal behalf. Consequently, the total community loses. I think that what has happened is that at every time there's been an incident like this, there have been persons in this community, in particular, that have gotten promoted. New money is put into the community, and certain individuals benefit, but it's a consequence of those persons out in the street, throwing the bottles, setting the fires, rootin, looting, and carrying on those kinds of actions, that other peoples benefit, other peoples, people benefit. I

criticize those people because they don't make a contribution to the community. They don't realize that had it not been for the disturbance, they never would've gotten the promotion. Many of the people that work in social service agencies now, work in those agencies as a result of the disturbances that occurred in the street. They don't pay back anything. We have in this community what I've began to identify as hidden Negroes, those persons that work with the Fortune 500 companies, that you go to a meeting, I'll go to a corporate kind of meeting, you find them, you know, scattered in the crowd, and you say, My God, where have these people been hiding all along? I think things are coming full circle now. They've been isolated, and alienated from their own people, and they're beginning to find and discover that they're not accepted out there, either, when they move out into suburbia. So, I think what we're beginning to see is the so-called Black professional beginning to move back into the inner city, and attempting to make a contribution. I hope that we can trust them, and accept the contribution that they're willing to make, but they're not coming back at the magnitude that I would like to see them come back in this community.

00:09:56:00

Interviewer:

Very good, let's stop down, stop a minute

Camera crew member #2:

Stay cool. Watch it.

[cut]

[slate]

00:10:00:00

Bill Perry:

Where does, where does he run to? [laughter]

00:10:05:00

Interviewer:

Just out of the way.

00:10:07:00

Bill Perry:

OK.

00:10:08:00

Interviewer:

All right, tell us about the Miami Beach demonstration.

00:10:10:00

Bill Perry:

OK, my, my first involvement in direct action in, in this area, happened to have been, I think, around 1980, when Kallie Knoetze came in, a South African fighter, to participate in a fight on Miami Beach. We got the NAACP kind of revved up for that, and called for a demonstration on the beach. We didn't get much participation from persons on this side, from the Liberty City, the so-called African-American community. We did get a large participation from many of the Jews on Miami Beach, who have, who know oppression, and have experienced it firsthand, and were willing to participate. In fact, the demonstration was only supposed, was supposed to last about five hours, but I looked at the, some of the old ladies and men we had. And they were willing to go with it, but we had to shorten the demonstration because we just not, could not see carrying them out there that long. It wasn't successful, and we were not able to stop the fight, but it seemed to bring together a sense of alliance between the older Jews—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Bill Perry:

—in this community and some few of the African-Americans.

00:11:11:00

Interviewer:

All right, that's fine I heard a roll-out on that, and—

00:11:13:00

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:11:15:00

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