

Interview with **Don Evans**

1979

Birmingham, Alabama

Camera Rolls: 2-3

Sound Rolls: 2

Interview gathered as part of *America, They Loved You Madly*, a precursor to *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*. 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*.

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[camera roll 2]

[sound roll 2]

[hand slate]

Evans: OK. My name is Don Evans. And I was born in Birmingham, Alabama. I'm thirty years old. I'm an automobile salesman for Adamson Ford here in Birmingham.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: SHE'S JUST LOOKING HENRY DOWN. DON'T MOVE.

Evans: OK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: OK.

INTERVIEWER: SO I JUST WANT TO KNOW THAT YOU WERE FIFTEEN—I WAS FIFTEEN IN 1963 AND THEN JUST TELL ME ABOUT HOW YOU GOT INVOLVED IN THE DEMONSTRATIONS AND WHAT IT WAS LIKE.

Evans: Well, in 1963, I was fifteen years old and I got involved with the situations that were happening in Birmingham at that time simply because, I guess, every black in Birmingham was participating at that time. You had your, your leaders from SCLC, you know, and followers and members that were going around to different high schools in Birmingham and some were just taking classrooms, disrupting classrooms and makin' everybody go out in the streets and march. And I got involved that way. And I didn't—I grew up, I guess, twelve,

thirteen blocks from downtown Birmingham and that's where most of the, the riots occurred. So I was just involved. It was the thing to do at that time.

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INTERVIEWER: HOW DID YOU FEEL ON THOSE DAYS WHEN THEY HAD THE DOGS AND THE, AND THE HOSES OUT THERE? WHAT WAS THAT LIKE?

Evans: I felt bad. You know, because it was an awesome sight, you know, something to behold, you know, see human beings turnin' dogs and, and hoses, high powered water hoses on other people, you know, simply because they were doin' somethin that they felt was right. You know, and gee whiz, you know, we all a part of this country, you know. And I figured we had a right to do what we were doin' and I guess they felt they had a right to do what they were doin'. So it was terrible, you know. I wouldn't want to go through it again, I would hate to see it happen again.

INTERVIEWER: DO YOU THINK IT HAD ANY EFFECT ON YOU?

Evans: Yeah, a tremendous effect. Because, you know, have—having lived through something, participating in it—

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INTERVIEWER: OK.

[hand slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: OK.

INTERVIEWER: DO YOU THTNK IT HAD ANY EFFECT ON YOU BEING INVOLVED IN THOSE DEMONSTRATIONS?

Evans: Yeah. It did, because participating in something, being there, is totally different than, than reading about it, you know. You can get a unique experience from reading about a tragic story, you know, or some strange occurrence. But, but actually bein' there, you know, seein' these things bein' done and knowing all the time that you, you don't like it, you know, but there's really nothing you can do about it, but get out there and march and let the dogs bite you and get the water on you and, you know, get the billy-clubs upside your head and even get killed, you know. So, yeah, it had a tremendous effect, really. You know, but I've seen in my lifetime here in Birmingham—I was born raised and reared right here in Birmingham. And except for the school and the Army, you know, I spent most of my time right here in Birmingham. And I've seen it go through—I, I know two, two dra—dramatic changes, you know, in the '63 period. The riots, you know, that was one tremendous change that Birmingham went through, because, you know, it's basically a quiet town. It's, it's a workin'

man's town, church-goin' people, you know, very religious town. So, so to think that that your leaders, right here in Birmingham, your, your political leaders, your, your religious leaders could, you know, let something like this happen, you know. It was just a tremendous thing, you know, to see that period go, go by. And, and after Dr. King was assassinated, you know, Birmingham went through another change, you know. And, and instead of progressing as, as black people, we started shifting backwards. You know, and we're still, still doin' it right now. But that's because we don't really have a, a leader, that has the charisma to lead a mass group of people right now. You know, we got Reverend Jesse Jackson, Abernathy, you know, but they, they just don't possess the charisma that Dr. King had, you know. So, if we don't get a grip on ourselves, I think that Birmingham will be, not exactly like it was in '63, but, I think, it might come to, to, to some more, you know, fights in the street here in Birmingham. I, I hope it don't, you know, but things' not gettin' any better. You know, it's getting worse. But we're hurtin' our own selves. You know, black people doin' black-on-black crime or, you know, I gotta [sic] go out there and rape your sister. You gotta rape my sister, you know, that type thing. But, if we ever, you know, can ever put it all back together and learn that we gotta unite, stick together, do the things that it take to see one another progress, then I think we'll be OK. But as of right now, it, it has to change.

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INTERVIEWER: WHAT KIND OF THINGS DID YOU SEE IN THOSE DAYS? WHAT, WHAT KIND, WHAT, WHAT KIND OF THINGS DID YOU SEE THAT MADE YOU FEEL—THAT, THAT HAD THE EFFECT ON YOU? I MEAN, WERE YOU THERE—

Evans: You mean physical things?

INTERVIEWER: DID YOU GET WATERED?

Evans: Did I get watered? Yeah. I got watered.

INTERVIEWER: OK.

Evans: I didn't go to jail. I got lucky.

INTERVIEWER: OK, TELL ME THAT. I NEVER WENT TO JAIL, BUT I DID GET, I DID GET HOSED OR, OR—

Evans: OK. Well, you know, at, at that time you, you had, oh I guess, forty fifty thousand people in the street. You know, and, and you startin' from one point and you're locked arm in arm, you know, singin' "We Shall Overcome" and you're just marchin' down the street. And, and there you got your front line, you know, which is the, the, the—defenseless, you know. And you got guns and dogs and billy-clubs and hoses right in front of you, you know. And you knowin' all this is comin' at you as soon as you, you reach a point, you know. But it, it got so that, you know, you forgot about it. It's kind of like, like bein' in the Army, when I was in the Army at war time. You stop thinking about dying. You know, it get past the fear of, of leavin', leavin' here, you know. Leavin' everything that's around you. And you reach a

point where you realize that ma—material things are about nothing. You know, it's, it's about how you feel inside and, I guess, like, like I said before I wouldn't want to go through it again, but if I had to I would. You know, if I thought that it would have the effect now that it had then, you know. Yeah. But it was a frightening experience too. Very frightening, but I've been in tougher situations before. Really.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: HEY BOSS?

INTERVIEWER: YEAH, STOP FOR A MOMENT.

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[hand slate]

Evans: Well, I think—

INTERVIEWER: JUST LET ME GET—OK, I'M, I'M SET.

Evans: A lot of people le—left town for the same reason that they left town fifty, sixty, years ago. You know, job opportunities, you know. You, you go, go to school four years you know, four years in college. Gee whiz, when I finish, I'll be makin' a lot of money. You know, I can have me a fifty, sixty thousand dollar home and a Cadillac. You know, whatever you want. And then you find that after you put forth all this effort and you go out there and you bam on the doors and you know the jobs are there, you know, and they tell you, can't use you, you know. So, so you have to, you have to go other places. You know, to, to find the type of jobs that will pay you the type of money that you feel you're qualified for. You know, you got a lot of people workin' in job slots now that, that, that could possibly be workin' in job slots that would pay much more, now, you know, than, than what they have. You know, so you have to take what you can until you can get what you want. You know, so a lot of people don't wanna [sic] sacrifice the time and effort to stay stagnated in one place, you know. So they figure my opportunities might be better over here so they go over there, you know. But I, I don't think it's because Birmingham is a dreadful place to live, you know. I think it's simply because of job opportunities.

INTERVIEWER: SOMETHING THAT ONE PERSON SAID TO ME WAS THAT THEY THOUGHT THAT SOME OF THE PEOPLE WHO HAD BEEN INVOLVED IN A DEMONSTRATION AND WHO HAD BEEN ARRESTED AND WHO HAD GONE, HAD TO GO TO JAIL—

[sound roll out]

[cut]

[end of interview]

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