Interview with **Joseph Azbell**
October 31, 1985
Montgomery, Alabama
Production Team: A
Camera Rolls: 132-136
Sound Rolls: 1113-1114

Interview gathered as part of ***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.

Preferred Citation

Interview with Joseph Azbell, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on October 31, 1985, for *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*. 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.*

00:00:02:00

[camera roll 132]

[sound roll 1113]

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: BRAND NEW INTERVIEW. SPEED.

INTERVIEWER: LET ME START BY ASKING YOU TO PAINT US A WORD PICTURE OF MONTGOMERY IN 1955, ESPECIALLY IN TERMS OF RACE RELATIONS?

Azbell: Well, ***Montgomery in 1955,*** in terms of race relations ***was a typical southern city*** but much more so segregated than most southern cities because ***we are called the Cradle of the Confederacy. And there is a tradition in Montgomery of having the, carrying out the old confederate south type of things, the, Stars and Bars, flags,*** and there was a great deal of talk of states' rights, and the White Citizens' Council which calls itself the Citizens' Council, and dropped the white but it was still the same, it was in existence. There was a, one black on the baseball team, and that was very proud, but no black held public office, no black was on any committees whatsoever. The government, state government, city government, county government, or what have you, ***it was a totally segregated community. Department stores had white water fountains, and colored water fountains.*** They had white toilets, men and women, and colored, men and women. It was a good deal for plumbers [laughs]. I mean you got, with every service station, you got four, four seats, because you had the, white males, the white female, the black male and the black female, and then there was a water fountain, you

had two water fountains, one for the whites and one for the, blacks. The only integration in transportation in Montgomery at that time was the vertical integration. Vertical integration being that you rode on the elevator squeezed up next to all the blacks, but you could not ride on a bus or in a taxi. ***We had separate taxis, you had black taxis and you had white taxis,*** and the poor guy that called a, a, a, looked in the phone book and called a, the black taxi, he was told by the black taxi driver, "I'm sorry I can't take you, you have to call a white taxi," and he'd tell him, and one of the names for one of the white taxis was Black and White, [laughs] but it didn't carry anybody but, but whites. But it was a, it was a very sweet, easygoing, easy flowing southern town, immune to riots, immune to trouble and what have you, and anybody that tried to start any trouble, well, they were just troublemakers. It was, it was a, a, great big, beautiful city. We had, we had two thousand five hundred, Jewish people here, who had come from the Island of Rhodes. They were mostly Sephardic, or Spanish Jews, and, we had a, Orthodox synagogue, and we had a reform synagogue. So we had all three branches of Judaism, and they were totally integrated into the community, well accepted. It, it, would, take a long time to tell you all about Montgomery, but it was a Southern town.

00:04:23:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, IN TERMS OF—OOPS SORRY.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: EXCUSE ME–I WANT TO CHANGE, I WANT TO CHANGE, I WANT TO MAKE ONE LITTLE ADJUSTMENT.

[cut]

[sync tone]

00:04:29:00

INTERVIEWER: HERE'S A LITTLE SHORT PICKUP QUESTION. WHY, WHY WAS MONTGOMERY CALLED THE CRADLE OF THE CONFEDERACY?

Azbell: A lot of people don't know why Montgomery was called the "Cradle of the Confederacy." The reason is very simple. It was from, a building downtown, across the street from the Montgomery Fair, where, Rosa Parks worked, that the message was sent to fire on Fort Sumter. And this was the gathering place of the original states that wanted to secede, and this was the capitol of the Confederate States of America in the first part of the war between the states. In Montgomery you do not say Civil War, you say war between the states, even to this hour. In the newspaper which, I was the city editor, if it was written in copy "Civil War," we changed it to "war between the states."

00:05:36:00

INTERVIEWER: I WONDER, PICKING UP ON THIS IDEA OF SEGREGATION. WE'RE GONNA OF COURSE GET INTO THE ROSA PARKS STORY, BUT BEFORE

WE DO THAT COULD YOU TELL US HOW THE SEGREGATED BUSES WORKS, WORK. THE MECHANICS OF A SEGREGATED BUS?

Azbell: I rode the bus, for years, because I was a morning worker—

[cut]

[wild audio]

INTERVIEWER: I'M SORRY, STOP PLEASE.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: WE JUST RAN OUT

Azbell: I'm sorry.

INTERVIEWER: YOU JUST REMEMBER.

[cut]

00:06:01:00

[slate]

[change to camera roll 133]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: CAMERA IS ROLLING AND MARKER. OK.

00:06:06:00

INTERVIEWER: YOU WERE SAYING, YOU RODE THE BUSES.

Azbell: For several years I rode the buses myself to work, and, because most of everything that I covered was downtown. The, downtown was where the news was, the police station was downtown and so forth. But what you did is you got on the bus, if you were white, and you put your coin in the little meter, and you took a bus, a seat in the front part of the bus. If you were, and in those days they referred to them as negroes, and bus drivers sometimes used other words, but, if you were black and you got on the bus, you put your, money in the meter, in the little thing there, and you went past a line that was there and it was marked, that, that was for blacks in the back of the bus, and you rode in the back of the bus. It was usually at the, where the back door started, and it was the back end of the bus. Most of the blacks went all the way to the back of the bus because it was more comfortable back there. And, the, whites were all in front, and the whites would take seats, they were allowed to take the seats of blacks. But the blacks were not allowed to take the seats of the whites. That was one of the big objections of the black community. And then there was a mistreatment of the, black people by some of the bus drivers and they would say—there was a court case on it, and a, a, it broke everybody in the courtroom up in howls. The, bus driver was asked by Fred Gray,

said, “What did you say to these people, when you wanted them to move back to the back of the bus.” And he said I would say “Would you neee-groooes please move to the rear of the bus.” [laughs] And everybody in the back in the courtroom broke out in absolute laughter because of the fact that everybody knew that he would, he had said to them, “Will you niggers please get to the back of the bus.” And he had a pistol. The bus drivers carried a pistol, right beside them, on all the buses. They were all white bus drivers, there were no black bus drivers.

INTERVIEWER: STOP FOR A MOMENT PLEASE.

[cut]

[sync tone]

00:09:15:00

INTERVIEWER: TOLD US, HOW YOU FIRST HEARD ABOUT THE BOYCOTT, HOW E.D. NIXON FED YOU THE STORY.

Azbell: Yes.

00:09:22:00

INTERVIEWER: I WONDER IF YOU WOULD TELL US ABOUT THAT TELEPHONE CALL?

Azbell: I was at work, doing what you do as a city editor, and I received this phone call, and people are always asking me, “How in the world did you know about the boycott. How did you get on to it, and, how did you get the first piece of information?” Two years before the boycott began, I was given an award by Selma University. I was at the time a twenty-five-year-old guy, and they awarded me an honorary, doctorate of literature, an LITTD, and I was this young, twenty-five-year-old guy, receiving a, an award from an all black college for doing so very much for black communities in Alabama, and for being objective, and for helping the polio epidemic blacks. I went in and got black children with polio and carried them in my arms to St. Jude hospital, and, and I had done a lot of things like that. But I had known E.D. Nixon, and he had helped me, to have a Christmas party for poor black children, this was on my own and with him and so forth, and I went and got the things. And E.D. called me, he was a Pullman car porter, and was a, I knew him very well, and I knew that he was a very close friend of A. Phillip Randolph, who was President of the Sweeping Car Porters Union. And, he said, “I’ve got a big story for you and I want you to meet me.” Now E.D. doesn’t talk long sentences. He’s very short, and brusque, and what have you in what he has to say. He said “Can you meet me?” I said [laughs], “Yeah, I can meet you.” So we met down at the Union Station, and he showed me one of these leaflets these, and what have you that was mimeographed. And, he said, “I want to tell you what we’re gonna do, we’re gonna boycott these buses. We’re tired of them fooling with our, our women, and they done it for the last time.” So I said, “Ok.” He said, “You gonna put this on the front page?” And I said,

"Yeah, I'm gonna try to." So I went back to the paper and I called the publisher of the paper, Mr. R.F. Hudson, Jr., and I said, "I've got this story about them [sic] bus, the, you know, they're gonna, boycott the buses, what should I do with it?" He said, "What do you think you should do with it?" I said, "It's news, and I think it should be published." He said, "Well if you think it's news and it should be published, then publish it. On the front page if you think that's where it belongs." And I said, "Well, I think that's where it belongs." So I wrote the story, I put my name on it, and I said they were gonna boycott the, buses and it went out.

00:12:47:00

INTERVIEWER: NOW YOU, YOU GAVE US A DESCRIPTION THERE OF, OF E.D. NIXON AND I'M GONNA ASK YOU TO DO THAT JUST, JUST BY ITSELF, A LITTLE SHORT PORTRAIT OF HIM AND THEN MAYBE I'LL ASK YOU A COUPLE OF OTHER PEOPLE, BUT JUST A SENTENCE OR TWO. WHO, WHO WAS E.D. NIXON AT THIS TIME?

Azbell: E.D. Nixon is the, he's a buddy of mine first, a very dear fr—

00:13:09:00

INTERVIEWER: I HAVE TO KEEP YOU IN THE PAST. I HAVE TO KEEP YOU— WHO WAS HE AT THIS TIME?

Azbell: OK, all right, now I'll start it over. E.D. Nixon was to the black community at that time what Martin Luther King later became to the black community. He was the hero. He was the man who had stood up for Gertrude Perkins, in her attempt to get the policemen to line up so she could pick out whom she said raped her. And he had led that, that, that whole campaign which went on for a year. He was so, he was a great big giant of a man at the time and muscular and, he had hands that were so strong, huge hands. I've never seen anybody with bigger hands, tall, and slim and, beloved in the community. He and Rufus Lewis were the leaders of the black community at that time. And Rufus Lewis was very much for getting voter registration. And E.D. was for getting voter registration. E.D. once said that he came from such poverty, right up there on the hill, that, that poverty that he came from, he could never forget, and that he was gonna get his freedom. And he ran that pullman porter job that he had took him from Montgomery to New York and back again, and to New Orleans and back again, and—he was the head of the NAACP. He was all the things that you could be in a black—I guess you could say that if, that, that since the blacks at that time didn't recognize the white mayor, that E.D. Nixon was probably as close as you could get to a black mayor of the black underbelly of Montgomery. They referred to it as the underbelly of Montgomery because they never knew what was going on down there. It was just like you were going into a different world and it was like you were coming out of this lit up world, and you went into that dark world and you didn't understand anything that was happening there.

00:15:41:00

INTERVIEWER: LET ME, LET ME ASK YOU FOR A SLIGHTLY SHORTER ONE—

Azbell: OK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: I—SORRY, I NEED TO CHANGE MY BATTERY.

[cut]

00:15:46:00

Azbell: Rufus Lewis—

INTERVIEWER: I'M SORRY. HE WASN'T QUITE SETTLED.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: WASN'T QUITE SETTLED. OK.

Azbell: Rufus Lewis was called the "Coach." Everybody called him Coach. He was everything—he was very, very smiling man that always was smiling, but he worked to get the people registered. They had high respect for him as a businessman. They had high respect for him at Alabama State College. He was probably the most respected single black in, in Montgomery at that time. He was knowledgeable of everything. People came to him for advice. He, he was, he was the coach, not just in sports terms, but in racial terms.

00:16:46:00

INTERVIEWER: HOW ABOUT THE MAYOR? MAYOR GAYLE AT THIS TIME. HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE HIM?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: I THINK YOU MAY RUN OUT BEFORE YOU GET THAT ANSWER IN.

INTERVIEWER: I'M GONNA RUN OUT.

[cut]

[slate]

[change camera roll to 134]

00:16:52:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #1: SPEED.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #2: OK

00:16:57:00

INTERVIEWER: LET ME GET A SENSE OF WHAT THE CITY GOVERNMENT WAS, WHO, WHO WERE THE PEOPLE IN THE CITY GOVERNMENT AT THIS TIME?

Azbell: Montgomery was governed by three men in a commission form of government and it was a mayor and two commissioners. The mayor was W. A. "Tacky" Gayle. He was a veteran, a general from World War II. He had been Colonel Gayle and then he advanced to General Gayle. Military type. Very sweet-natured man who was very kind to people, but he had been in politics in Montgomery all of his life almost. He had once been the, the public works commissioner. Then the other one was Clyde Sellers who was a very hard law and order segregationist. And then there was the third one who was named Frank Parks who was a Mason and a Shriner and a joiner and, the, forever joining things. He would join [laughs] anything that thought he would give him a vote. And that was our form of government, very simple system of government. We were in growing pains and they had the job of finding the money to take care of, of growing Montgomery. But there were no blacks involved in city government except for the black—we didn't even have a black elevator operator at the jail in that—those days.

00:18:44:00

INTERVIEWER: YOU GAVE US A LOVELY, LONG DESCRIPTION OF THAT FIRST MASS MEETING AT HOLT STREET AND I WONDER IF WE COULD GET THAT FROM YOU AGAIN. A LITTLE SHORTER, BUT PUT WHAT YOU NEED TO AND I PARTICULARLY REMEMBER, I'LL TELL YOU WHAT I PARTICULARLY REMEMBER, IS YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT HOW FIRED UP PEOPLE GOT.

Azbell: OK. The Holt Street Baptist Church was probably in my lifetime, so far, the most fired up, enthusiastic, gathering of human beings that I've ever seen. I, I came down the street and I couldn't believe there was that many cars. I parked many blocks from the church just to get a place for my car, and I went on up at the church and went in and they made a way for me because I was the first white person there, and they made a way, all the way down through there for me and they, ***the preachers were preaching as I came in -- I was about two minutes late coming in. And they were preaching and that audience was so on fire, that they, they, the preacher'd get up and say, "Do you want your freedom?" And they'd say, "Yeah, I want my freedom." "Are you for what we're doing?" "Yeah, go ahead, go ahead."*** And in, in the Baptist churches down here and in the churches around down here, they have a word they say, "Go ahead, uh-huh, go ahead," which means, "Amen" and so forth. And they got so excited and they were singing with such—I've never heard singing like that. I've never heard—there was no one taking a tape of it, and there was a singing going on that they were on fire, for Jesus. They were on fire for freedom. They were on fire, that at last this was going to be lifted off of them, and I recognized that. There was a spirit there that no one could ever capture again in a movie or anything else because it was so powerful. And then King stood up, and they, they didn't even—most of them didn't even know who he was, and yet he was the master speaker. That—it's been said that, that, that—if, if, if one of those people there that night, if he had said "Go in, tear up the town," they

would have gone and torn up the town, but they were peaceful, they were. Even at that early first meeting, they were passive and they called for law and order. They said don't y'all do anything illegal now. Y'all stay right, and they—and then they got to singing again and the voices would come back, "Yes, go ahead, Amen, tell Jesus, tell Jesus!" And Jesus was there. It was a Jesus meeting. It was Jesus was gonna lift this guilt off their shoulders. And I went back and I wrote, on the editorial page the next day, in a special column, I wrote that this was the beginning of a flame that would go across America. And I don't know why or what have you, maybe its prophecy or so forth, but I described what was gonna happen out of that meeting in that article.

00:22:22:00

INTERVIEWER: WHAT AN ANSWER. WHAT AN ANSWER! WHEN WE, WHEN WE SPOKE YOU GAVE US A VERY, YOU GAVE, YOUR TONE—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: EXCUSE ME. WE'RE STILL ROLLING. IF YOU COULD JUST SORT OF WIPE OFF THE CORNERS OF YOUR MOUTH JUST A LITTLE BIT. THERE YOU GO. PERFECT. WE'RE STILL ROLLING.

INTERVIEWER: YOU GAVE US A, AN ANALYSIS OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MARTIN LUTHER KING—EXCUSE ME

[cut]
[sync tone]

[change to sound roll 1114]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: GOOD.

00:22:49:00

INTERVIEWER: I WAS SAYING, YOU GAVE US AN ANALYSIS OF THE TEAM WORK BETWEEN MARTIN LUTHER KING AND RALPH ABERNATHY, HOW THEY COMPLIMENTED EACH OTHER, AND I WONDER IF YOU COULD DESCRIBE THAT AGAIN FOR US.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: PUSH YOUR GLASSES UP ON YOUR NOSE.

Azbell: OK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: THANK YOU, SIR.

Azbell: [pause] Martin Luther King was educated in a northern environment. He had lived in a, as we, as, as they referred to it down here in a sugar hill environment. His family was well-to-do. They had never really lived in a rented house. His father was famous, his grandfather was famous. He had associated with the very finest. And when he came to Montgomery, and

this movement was made up of just ordinary black people some of whom made as little as five dollars a week but they would give one dollar of that to helping to support the boycott, and they liked him. But the man that was black, and he was black of skin, King was ginger of skin. He had a white tone to his skin, and had an Irish background, I believe, and an Indian background, somewhere in his background, but Abernathy was black, and they knew Abernathy and they trusted Abernathy. And he was the pastor of the First Baptist Church which had took in Newtown, which was the poorest section, it also had some wealthier members or more prosperous members from other sections and they worked together as a team. The, the—those poor, poor blacks would never have gathered toward in that original beginning toward King like they did without Abernathy being there. Abernathy was a power in this community, among the blacks, among the black preachers. The black preachers trusted him, and they believed in him and he was a brilliant man. Some people today are saying that he was not so smart, and he was this or that, but he was smart. To these people, he was smart. To these people, he was a leader and they made a team like in the original days of, of, of the partnerships, you know, that really built businesses, and that, that when they went down the street together, they followed them. It was a—you had to be there to see the cohesion that went in and, and I loved to hear Abernathy preach in those days. He was a great preacher, and then when he would get through, then would come on this and I think that he's one of the three or four finest speakers that in our times ever, there was King, and King crowned it off. And he had them talking to him. Someone once said that, he had them say amen to a quotation from Plato. Whatever it was, he was fantastic. And he knew how to be courteous and to mood the people. If, if, I don't want to compare Jesus or to say John and Jesus from the Bible to any human being, but it was very much like that. If Abernathy did the spade work of what was there and then King came on. And that's the way they looked at him. Is the preparation, and then the finale.

00:26:57:00

INTERVIEWER: PERFECT. NOW, WHEN IT BECAME APPARENT THAT THIS BOYCOTT WAS GOING TO CONTINUE THAT THE BLACK PEOPLE WERE NOT GOING TO STOP, WHAT DID THE CITY DO TO DISCOURAGE IT AND—OOPS. OK?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: WE GOT ABOUT FIFTY FEET.

INTERVIEWER: ABOUT A MINUTE WE GOT HERE.

Azbell: OK. When it was aware, that the boycott was not going to end anytime soon, the city became rather panicked and there were three, they got these black ministers to come on and say to the community, and they gave a news release that the boycott was ending and that, that, they had decided to end it and what have you in the hopes that blacks would go back on the bus and stay on the bus. Well, the preachers were exposed [roll out] and it was a hoax.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: OK CUT.

[cut]

00:28:00:00

[slate]

[change to camera roll 135]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: SPEED AND—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: SECOND STICK.

Azbell: The—

INTERVIEWER: HOLD ON A MINUTE WHILE HE GETS HIMSELF FRAMED UP. IT TAKES A MINUTE.

Azbell: OK.

00:28:18:00

INTERVIEWER: OK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: OK.

Azbell: Panic ensured [sic], it just came over the commissioners that they had to end this thing; that it didn't look like it was going to end. So the first thing they did was there was some phony ministers that was supposed get people to say the boycott was over you can ride the buses again, with the thought in mind that they would ride the buses and keep on riding them. Well, they were exposed, and nobody went back on the buses. Just didn't work. Then there was investigations. There were undercover people at the meetings and then there were arrests and and all types of things and then of course, not just what the city government itself was doing, but there were bombs thrown, and there were rifles fired into the buses and so forth. But each of these things did just the opposite of what they intended to do. They were intended to stop the boycott, they—but instead of that, it hardened up the community to say we're not gonna to stop the boycott. That it's not just gonna happen and it made them stronger to want to go on with it.

00:29:39:00

INTERVIEWER: JUST ONE SHORT LITTLE QUESTION. WERE THERE ACTUALLY NEGRO GOON SQUADS THE WAY THE CITY CLAIMED?

Azbell: Nobody can control everybody in a situation. There was a claim that there were goon squads at the first three or four days of the boycott and then later on they said that there were goon squads going door to door and all this. That's the normal type of thing for anyone to say about the opposition. You didn't have to hit blacks over the head to boycott buses, when people were giving them rides, and when the white women said "Where is my cook? Where

is my laundress? Where is my babysitter?" And they came out there in nice, warm cars and picked them up and took them to their houses and you didn't need a goon squad to say don't get in your boss lady's car and ride. It didn't—if it happened, it was some overanxious people, but I never saw it, and I never heard anyone tell me that it happened.

00:30:58:00

CAMER CREW MEMBER: PUSH YOUR GLASSES UP.

Azbell: I'm sorry.

INTERVIEWER: IT'S ALL RIGHT. IT'S THE HOT LIGHTS.

Azbell: Well, yeah.

00:31:04:00

INTERVIEWER: CAN YOU TELL ME ABOUT—NOW THAT'S ECONOMIC IMPACT, THE NEGRO MAIDS NOT COMING TO WORK. HOW ABOUT THE DOWNTOWN MERCHANTS, HOW WERE THEY AFFECTED?

Azbell: When you talk about how the impact of economics, that was an impact, let me start over—

00:31:25:00

INTERVIEWER: SURE.

Azbell: When you talk about downtown merchants, you're talking about two groups. And you must remember that Montgomery was—downtown Dexter Avenue was heavily chained store. J.C. Penney, Sears Roebuck, Montgomery Fair, Verners, Mangles, Belks, Bushes, H.L. Green Company, Kresses, Woolworth, there wasn't any Woolworth, but these kinds of stores were there. Then you had the independent owners. Well, those chain stores had quotas to make, and [laughs] they didn't want to lose their job. Those managers were very concerned and they didn't know what to do, but they kept their white soda fountains, and their black soda fountains and their white restaurants, and so forth. But they went around, they say to King—to the police commissioner and the mayor, and the public works commissioner, and said, "Isn't there any way you can stop this? You got to stop this. You've got to get these buses back. We're, we're, we're hurting." Because, and Monroe street were the independent owners and they, their survival depended on their cash flow and it was hurting them. And, it, it, it, it was a bad, bad thing and the whole, if you talk about economic impact, it was so strong, that you could see, you could get a parking space downtown for the first time. I mean, it was, we had a parking problem downtown. Well, during the boycott, the parking problem disappeared. That was one of the offshoots of it.

00:33:11:00

INTERVIEWER: YOU ATTENDED AT SOME OF THE NEGOTIATIONS BETWEEN THE CITY'S REPRESENTATIVES AND THE BUS COMPANY AND THE MIA. COULD YOU GIVE US A FEEL FOR THE ATMOSPHERE OF THOSE MEETINGS? AND WHY THEY DIDN'T GO ANY FURTHER THAN THEY WENT?

Azbell: Well the reason they didn't go any further, these, these meetings of the bus company and the, the mayor and the committees and all that is because, the boycott was, was a little match. It was a little tiny match, and it was becoming a flame. And they were talking to these preachers. And that's who they were talking to, preachers, and Nixon, and Rufus Lewis and some of the others, but they were talking to them.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: KEEPING UP THAT NOISE.

00:34:12:00

Azbell: I'm sorry. They were talking to them in such a way that, that these were trouble-making preachers, trouble-making niggers. They never showed them the respect of being leaders of the community. In the beginning it was just a matter of, of where the seating was gonna be. It wasn't integration or anything like that, but they wouldn't even budge over the, over the seating line. I talked to King for over an hour and a half about the, the change and what it was all about, you know, and he said, "Joe, I, I can tell you this: that we will do anything reasonable. We don't want to be unreasonable. We would end the boycott tomorrow if we could get some type of give, but we're not getting any give. We're, we're being treated like we're down there to cause trouble. And they're just not giving us," and he said "This thing is, is not local anymore. America, the world, is looking at us." And we went on talking in his offices in the bottom of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, which is now the King Memorial Baptist Church. But we had long conversation about it and he said they just wouldn't give. Tacky, the mayor, that's what they called him, T-A-C-K-Y, and that was his name, he was of a very high type family background, very wonderful man, and a good man, but he had a problem. His problem was that he thought Montgomery wanted, totally segregated buses, and that line not moved. And that it would be his political defeat if it was moved.

00:36:20

INTERVIEWER: I THINK, IN FACT, I CAN PICK UP ON THAT, 'CAUSE YOU SAID THAT THE PROBLEM FOR THE, FOR THE MERCHANTS WAS THAT THEY WERE STUCK, THEIR BUSINESS WAS BEING HURT.

Azbell: That's right.

INTERVIEWER: BUT THEY WERE ALL SEGREGATIONSITS, TOO. THEY DIDN'T WANT TO CHANGE.

Azbell: Yes, I told you that.

00:36:32:00

INTERVIEWER: I WONDER IF YOU COULD DESCRIBE THAT FOR US, I'M KIND OF…

Azbell: Merchants were so confused, they were, they had a split personality over this thing. Their business were hurting and they wanted the blacks back on the bus, but they didn't want integration, or any form of integration, so they would go down and say, "Y'all got to do something y'all got to get these [laughs] niggers back on the bus so we can do business, because our businesses is hurting." And it was this constant thing. Well, you couldn't, with King had said, that I'm going to do anything that's fair then he changed, King changed too! He went forward with integration, and a suit was filed calling for integration and a whole change came in this whole thing, a boycott, and it became a national and an international movement. We had the station-wagons, we had Nixon, Lewis, Mrs. Parks, all of them, go out all across America and speak, raise money and things were happening, and it was out of control. The negotiation was, was really just a thing that they went through. It was, you know, going through the procedures.

INTERVIEWER: STOP FOR A MOMENT.

[cut]

[sync tone]

00:38:05:00

Azbell: eleven.

INTERVIEWER: YOU'RE A TOUGH ONE. NOW IT'D BE INTERESTED IF YOU COULD JUST RUN THROUGH FOR US THE KIND OF THE REACTIONS OF THE WHITE COMMUNITY WHEN THE SUPREME COURT RULED THAT THE BUSES HAD TO BE SEGREGATED. WHAT THE MAYOR THOUGHT, WHAT THE BUSINESS PEOPLE THOUGHT, WHAT THE BUS COMPANY THOUGHT.

Azbell: When the Supreme Court ruled that there was an end to the bus, bus segregation, or transportation segregation, horizontal segregation, because you must remember, that they still had that vertical integration all the time. It came as no big shock that really and truly to—they, they said it was gonna happen, they could foresee that it was gonna to happen, and the whites [roll out] just said, we'll boycott the buses. So the whites boycotted the buses, and the blacks went back on and it was an all black bus and—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: CAMERA JUST WENT OUT. OK. WE MADE IT UP THROUGH—

[cut]

[slate]

[change to camera roll 136]

00:39:13:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: ROLL SOUND. SPEED.

INTERVIEWER: TELL ME, WHAT WAS IT THAT THE WHITE PEOPLE THOUGHT THEY WERE LOSING WHEN THEY WERE LOSING THIS SEGREGATION?

Azbell: Would you believe that when the white people actually were aware—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: SORRY I'M GOING TO HAVE YOU START THAT AGAIN AND NOT LOOK QUITE SO HIGH UP AT THE CEILING, BECAUSE WE GET A LITTLE REFLECTION IN YOUR GLASSES.

Azbell: OK, All right.

00:39:39:00

INTERVIEWER: ONCE AGAIN.

Azbell: OK. When the white people learned of the court decision by television, and that was, television, by the way, played a very important part in the boycott. Without television there wouldn't have been a very successful boycott because it won the national public, it won attention all over the North. You saw things happening. But the white people didn't jump up and down and holler and scream like you would think. There wasn't any panic in the street, or what have you. They just said "We won't ride the buses if the, the"—and this is a quote, "if the niggers are going to be on there we're not going to be on there." So, in a sense, the white people boycotted the buses and even to this hour in Montgomery today, white people don't ride the buses. The blacks ride the buses. The buses are for the blacks. And you can go almost on any bus in any part of town, you find one or two whites on there and the rest are blacks, and it can be filled up. It didn't really cause, the thing of the waiting room, in the bus depots and train depots was of concern and the thing of interstate transportation where they had to go and ride Greyhound or Trailways, that had some concern, but, but as far as these, it, it, it, it really didn't. It was like an anti-climatic thing. There was the White Citizens' Council that screamed, but they were a thousand or two thousand people and then they dwindled down to nothing. And the Ku Kluxers, [sic] of course, screamed and shouted about the federal courts, but there wasn't any great commotion with the average, the white women with their cooks and their maids and babysitters were glad they didn't have to go out there to the black community to get them and take them home every day.

00:41:50:00

INTERVIEWER: MONTGOMERY WAS REALLY THE FIRST MASS MOVEMENT OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT, YOU KNOW, AND I'M WONDERING WHAT YOU THINK WAS THE, WAS THE LEGACY OF THAT FOR THE WHOLE COUNTRY, FOR THE MOVEMENT?

Azbell: Well, the legacy of the boycott period, this first mass movement—

INTERVIEWER: YOU HAVE TO LOOK AT ME, OK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: YOU HAVE TO. I'M SORRY.

Azbell: OK, I'm sorry.

00:42:11:00

INTERVIEWER: YOU NEED TO LOOK AT ME ANYWAY.

Azbell: The legacy of the boycott movement, this first mass movement of blacks organized together, was probably the whole civil rights movement as we know it today. It was the spark that lit the flame that became the torch of freedom for blacks all over America. You would never, without the bus boycott, you would never have had that great crowd in Washington, the March on Washington. You would have never had the reaction to the whole thing of what was being done here. It gave Tallahassee blacks a, a, a thing about it, you know, something, let's do something. It just went out across America as a, like a burning field of fire, and it just engulfed everything that was black in this whole country. And I think that this thing here brought the black out of the Aunt Jemima, Uncle Tom, Rastas [sic], Buckwheat era into a more dignified era. I think that was the main legacy of the boycott that the black was becoming a citizen.

INTERVIEWER: COULD WE STOP FOR JUST A MOMENT WHILE I THINK ABOUT THAT—

[cut]

[sync tone]

00:43:45:00

INTERVIEWER: AS SOON AS HE GETS HIMSELF SETTLED.

Azbell: When—

INTERVIEWER: WAIT—HANG ON. LET HIM GET HIMSELF SETTLED AND YOU'RE GONNA LOOK AT ME.

Azbell: OK.

00:43:55:00

INTERVIEWER: OK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: OK.

Azbell: When Martin Luther King's house was bombed, I was sitting at my desk at the _*Advertiser*_ and I got a call from the guy that ran the service station up at the corner, a half a block from a black man and he told me King's home was just bombed. And I jumped in my car and I ran there and I was there in just a few minutes, because it's only a matter of blocks from the _*Advertiser*_ to King's home, the mats of the Dexter Avenue Church. And when I got there, there were blacks gathered on the lawn, and they were mean, they were mad. And that—they didn't know if King was hurt, they didn't know if Mrs. King was hurt, or if the child was hurt or if Mrs. Roscoe Williams, they said was in there, if she was hurt, and they started gathering around me, and they were—I forgot I was white—I was so used to covering these things and being at these things that I forgot that my skin was white. They were looking at me as a white object and, so they started gathering around me and the policemen arrived and what have you, but there was a gathering, angry mob of people. And it could have just ignited a riot in a matter of seconds and I was right in the middle of these guys and they were gathered around me. And he went, King arrived, he had been at the First Baptist Church speaking, and he arrived, and when he arrived he went up on the porch, and he told them and he said, "put down your knives, put down your guns, put down your chains. We must be passive. We must be like Jesus. We must be passive and we must not violate the law. We must not do any of this violence." And so, they, I felt that easier feeling with him speaking. So when I was called as the witness in the King trial and I was the only white witness in the King trial there that spoke for him, I was called by the state, but they never asked me what I was going to say, and so, they asked me about this, and they asked me if he advocated violence. And I told them this story, and I told them other stories that where he advocated non-violence, just the opposite, and it was that, that got him off and I went downstairs and Mrs. King came over and she shook my hand, and he came over and hugged me and he thanked me and he says, "There is one thing I know about you and is that you are a truthful man, you told the truth as the only person there." But I was afraid that night. On another occasion, my wife and I went, when, when King's house was bombed, my wife and I were going out on a date and I said, "I've got to go to the King bombing," she says "Well, I'm not going on a date, I'm going with you" and we walked down the middle of thousands of blacks lined up on Clinton street to King's house, and [laughs] she went with me. And it was to fulfill that date that we were gonna have and so we still kid today about having a date at a bombing of E.D. Nixon's house.

INTERVIEWER: STOP PLEASE.

[cut]

[sync tone]

00:47:23:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: SIGN IN THE CHAIR.

INTERVIEWER: AND YOU WANT TO LOOK AT ME.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: AND MARK. THANK YOU.

INTERVIEWER: JUST AS SOON AS HE GETS HIMSELF SETTLED. WE HAVE ABOUT A MINUTE LEFT HERE.

Azbell: OK.

00:47:34:00

INTERVIEWER: OK.

Azbell: They were marching for Jesus. They were walking for Jesus. They were not walking for Martin Luther King; they weren't walking for this or that. They were walking with Jesus and they were walking with Jesus and they were walking for freedom. They were the freedom walkers. You've heard of freedom marches, and what have you, they were walking. And when they said what they said, they said it with a belief that Jesus would take care of them. They would have gone up against the whole police department. They would have gone up against judges. They would have gone to jail. They would have done anything because Jesus was telling them to do this. Jesus was with them. It was a Jesus movement from the beginning to the end. It still is today. If, if, if you—you have to have Jesus to get these people to move the way they moved. And they believed that Jesus would give them freedom.

00:48:32:00

INTERVIEWER: AND DID THE OTHER SIDE THINK THAT THEY HAD JESUS ON THEIR SIDE TOO?

Azbell: No, the other side did not meet in the churches. You see, and, and they met in different churches each time. They did not meet in the same church. They went from church, to church, to church with a mass meeting.

00:48:47:00

INTERVIEWER: I'M TRYING TO GET A SENSE OF WHAT IT WAS THAT KEPT—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: YOU HAVE TO PUSH THE GLASSES UP.

INTERVIEWER: YEAH.

Azbell: OK. I'm sorry.

00:48:51:00

INTERVIEWER: I'M TRYING TO GET A SENSE OF WHAT IT WAS THAT KEPT THE OTHER SIDE GOING TOO. JESUS KEPT THE BLACKS GOING, WHAT KEPT THE WHITES?

Azbell: If, if Jesus kept the blacks going, ***the thing that kept the whites going was segregation, was the old way—don't break the old way, don't break this fabric, don't break down segregation; don't, don't take this away, this old South; don't take back the things that we've always known, and that—we fought a war over these things, and that, our forefathers would have us do this*** and you hear all about what the war between the states was and you saw the Stars and Bars, and the guys that got up to speak they always talked about the one thing. But the thing that you must remember is that hatred is a thing that will seal people together and it will seal them together very strongly. Well, there was a greater hatred on the black side, and they hated their enslavement. They simply hated that enslavement that they thought they had when they didn't—couldn't vote, they couldn't register to vote like they thought they should. When they couldn't go into the bathrooms, [roll out] couldn't go into the restrooms, couldn't go into the hotels, but the bus thing was one of the things that they could get back at now, and they were taking it step by step and Jesus was with them all the way.

00:50:17:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: AND ROLLOUT.

INTERVIEWER: WE'RE JUST OUT.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: THAT WAS GOOD TIMING.

INTERVIEWER: THAT WAS PERFECT.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:50:24:00