



Interview with **Willie Felder**

Date: September 29, 1989

Interviewer: Sam Pollard

Camera Rolls: 2162-2164

Sound Rolls: 276-277

Team: B

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Interview with Willie Felder, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on September 29, 1989 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 #2162]

[sound roll #267]

00:00:11:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

[inaudible]

Camera Crew Member #2:

Yeah.

Camera Crew Member #1:

I'm just going to give it about another four or five seconds. Mark it, please.

[slate]

00:00:23:00

Interviewer:

OK, Willie, just, let's go back to 1972, Gary, Indiana. Describe what it was like when you first got to Gary and you first went to the convention hall, and all these different people from all over the country, you know, militants, grass roots people. What was your reaction to what you were seeing?

Willie Felder:

I had a—

Interviewer:

You need to include "My reaction was--"

00:00:40:00

Willie Felder:

My reaction to, OK, OK.

00:00:42:00

Interviewer:

I'm sorry, if you could start over.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Can I just move your chair a little bit to your left?

[beep]

[cut]

00:00:52:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:00:54:00

Interviewer:

OK, we've gone back to 1972. Give me your reaction when you first got to Gary, when you first got to the convention hall. All these people from all over the country, militants, people from the South, you know, people from your delegation. What was your reaction to what you were seeing when you got to Gary?

00:01:11:00

Willie Felder:

I had a very, very good reaction. I'm sorry, we've better go back to, I'm sorry, man.

00:01:16:00

Interviewer:

"My reaction..."

Willie Felder:

Yes. You want to—

Interviewer:

Yeah, you just—

00:01:19:00

Willie Felder:

OK. My reaction to having seen so many people from so many different parts of the country, such as Jesse Jackson, Baraka, Basil Paterson, and a whole host of other Black movers and shakers in that era, was one of great happiness and joy that they had seen or felt enough about that assembly or the calling of that assembly to come on in and, and be a part of that four thousand or better Black persons from all over the country. And it was a mixture of successful and professional versus blue-collar, if I may use that term in the Black family, versus even those who were unemployed or jobless found a way to get there from their various states. To me, that was one of the most moving sights that I can recall in my career.

00:02:28:00

Interviewer:

Why do you think it was important to go to Gary and join with people who might have been considered militant and maybe too radical, being from the Michigan delegation?

Willie Felder:

Well, we had some of the same—

Interviewer:

If you could, say, "The Michigan delegation..."

00:02:44:00

Willie Felder:

The Michigan delegation, in terms of having its share of militants, had its share, as well, if you must use that term. But in the Black family in America, there was a definite need for everyone's input, whether they were considered militants or moderates or just plain good 'ol boys. There was a place and a need in that national assembly, National Black Assembly, for input from each and every one of them, regardless of what their philosophies were, because the objective was to put together a, a blueprint that would contribute to leading the Black American out of socioeconomic deprivation and claiming their rights into a society that had otherwise, in our judgment, denied us.

00:03:54:00

Interviewer:

Tell me a little bit about your com—your delegation. What did the Michigan delegation represent, I mean, and why was that constituency so important when you got to Gary?

00:04:04:00

Willie Felder:

OK. The Michigan delegation represented a multitude of, of, of persons, such as Black historians, Ed Vaughn, of Michigan, was a Black historian and still is there, national and international labor figures, such as Coleman Young, who was a state senator but who came from labor, Nelson Jack Edwards, who was vice-president of an international union, United Auto Workers, and the highest ranking, at that time, Black labor principal in this country. We had lawyers and teachers and housewives and what, you know, just persons who related from day-to-day, factory wise, or job wise in terms of, in factories, and on streets.

00:05:03:00

Interviewer:

Stop for a second. What I'm, what I'm trying to get at is, when we spoke on the phone a couple weeks ago—

[beep]

[cut]

00:05:11:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:05:13:00

Interviewer:

So my question is, what did the Michigan delegation represent in terms of the kind of input they could have at Gary, and why were you upset about how the Michigan delegation had been treated when they got to Gary?

Willie Felder:

Why we were upset over—

Interviewer:

No, "The Michigan delegation..."

00:05:28:00

Willie Felder:

The Michigan delegation, why the Michigan delegation were upset over the way it had been treated after its arrival to the Gary convention. The Michigan delegation, I believe, was upset before departing from Michigan because we were aware that there had been a total exclusion of the Michigan Black leadership in the framing of the agenda. ***You must remember that sixty-five percent or better of that delegate body from Michigan were from labor. Autoworkers, steelworkers, municipal workers, and so forth. And you had some of the most renowned labor personalities folded into that delegation who were international figures,*** and the conveners, or the facilitators of that assembly knew full well that they were, they were there, because we'd worked together—we had worked together over the years in other struggles. And we just felt that it was a very, very bad mistake for any organization to pull together a national Black assembly and exclude the expertise and the, the influence of those Black labor leaders out of Michigan who participated in negotiating economic contracts all over this country and Canada and Mexico and Puerto Rico, and yet, to come into an assembly of your own, and be denied an opportunity for input was a bit hard to swallow. And that kind of engendered the, the so-called confrontation, which, later, as you know, led to something else.

00:07:28:00

Interviewer:

Let's take it another step further now. We have Jesse doing the opening speech where he says, "We are pregnant, we are ready for change, the blood is spilled, a new Black baby is born." I mean, this was, this was a rousing speech that called for a sense of unity. It called for unity. It called for "Nation Time" as he said at the delegation, at the assembly. What was the reaction of the Michigan delegation to Jesse's speech, I mean, knowing the fact that you hadn't had any input, in terms of in the framing of the agenda?

00:07:55:00

Willie Felder:

As I recall, the unity emphasis that Jesse put into his speech really...as, as I read the, the reaction of the Michigan delegation while we enjoyed the oratory of, of Jesse, we were fully aware that we came, or the delegate body was fully aware that it came to Gary with the spirit and intent of unification, but based on inclusion, as well. And so, the appeal of Jackson didn't necessarily interject any new adrenaline because it was already there. It was just angry, pent-up adrenaline, you know, housed within about sixty-five, sixty-eight percent of that delegate body. And our appeals for, you know, the right to participate and, and be included in, in resolutions committees and, and election committees and platform committees, and et cetera, and to offer some, some recommendations that would have given credit to other organizations that has helped Blacks along in the struggle, such as the UAW and, and AFSCME and others, was denied. And that, you know, that, that was, for a delegate body that comes out of a strong industrially surrounded community, whose, whose, whose economic and job tentacles reach out throughout the country and other countries, it was just unthinkable that we would do that to one another.

00:09:48:00

Interviewer:

Let's cut.

Camera Crew Member #1:

[inaudible] pull.

Camera Crew Member #2:

[inaudible]

[beep]

[cut]

00:09:53:00

Camera Crew Member #1

Mark it, please.

[slate]

00:09:57:00

Interviewer:

Let's go back, Jesse had just made this speech, it was "Nation times", calling for nation time. Everybody is roused and excited. What was the reaction of the Michigan delegation to Jesse's speech?

00:10:09:00

Willie Felder:

Yes, Jesse's speech was rousing and exciting, but the Michigan delegation, you must remember, while they enjoyed hearing Jesse, they were not overly moved by that kind of oratory because of our having been excluded from the, the basic input to structuring or, or participating in drawing up the proposal. And the Michigan delegation felt, sixty-five percent of them or better coming from organized labor in the state of Michigan, and, and a number of them being elected officials in Michigan, and that kind of thing, felt a little bit left out, not a little bit but felt very left out, and so I don't think that Jesse or any other orator could have motivated them to a spellbinding sort of frenzy about having, hearing him call for a point of "Nation Time". Most of them felt it was nation time by virtue of the fact that they traveled from Michigan to Indiana, to Gary, to be a part of that, that historical event.

00:11:23:00

Interviewer:

Do you remember standing next to someone, listening—

Camera Crew Member #1:

We have to change rolls.

Interviewer:

OK. Do you remember standing next to somebody as the speech is coming—

[beep]

[cut]

[camera roll #2163]

00:11:32:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it, please.

[slate]

00:11:36:00

Interviewer:

OK Willie, just give me that story again about one, one of the delegates you were standing next to when you were listening to Jesse's speech, what his reaction was to Jesse's speech, and why the Michigan delegation was mad as hell.

00:11:46:00

Willie Felder:

OK. We were, well, Jesse's speech was a good speech, except that it did very little to motivate or stimulate the Michigan dele-delegation because of their feeling of having been excluded and because of, basically, they felt that their leadership had been ignored. For example, I was standing there listening and laughing and talking with a colleague of mine who had come to the convention and, and a couple of other folk, and, and this, this fellow laughed and said, You know, Jesse's doing all right, but, but these people from the Michigan delegation is mad as hell, and his message ain't gettin' through to them at all. And the reason for that, of course, was we had been trying to persuade, through negotiations with the facilitators, them to give our leadership an opportunity to address their concerns.

00:12:49:00

Interviewer:

And why—

00:12:50:00

Willie Felder:

And, and, and, and, and [coughs] why they felt that they were, they had been excluded and why they felt that they had a right to make some inclusions into the agenda. And they, they had been rebuffed, they had been denied very vehemently by some of the facilitators, particularly in the attitude of Imam Baraka, who was very, very succinct in his attitude of not wanting to include any Michigan representation into framing that agenda beyond Congressman Charlie Diggs. And I think Charlie Diggs was a little embarrassed by that because he was considered the godfather of our successes in the Black family, and Congress, and in our relationships with Africa and connections with African sisters and brothers.

00:13:48:00

Interviewer:

Excellent. Stop, stop right there. How we doing?

[beep]

Interviewer:

That was good, I'm sorry I stepped on top of you there. What I—

[cut]

00:13:53:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:13:57:00

Interviewer:

Tell me about that little situation with your colleagues when you listened to Jesse's speech.

00:14:02:00

Willie Felder:

OK. We, you know, Jesse's speech included some, some real rhythmic phrases and, and the particular one of calling the "Nation Time" piece was very good, except that I doubt very seriously whether any of the Michigan delegation, or the, the majority of them, heard or really cared about that call at that moment. For, you see, they, we had been excluded from input in the framing of the national agenda. We had been excluded from having special

privileges to include our concerns in the discussions on the assembly floor. And that delegate body consisted of some sixty-five percent or better of organized labor membership, the UAW and other international unions. And, and these, these delegates had abundance of experiences in collective bargaining and, and winning contracts for socioeconomic benefits for Black families, as well as other. And to have excluded that talent from a Black family was an insulting situation and was, was intolerable. And it led to some other situations, as you know.

00:15:29:00

Interviewer:

Let's cut. Let's move on to something new.

[beep]

Interviewer:

Yeah, OK. I'm going to come back.

[beep]

[cut]

00:15:40:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:15:44:00

Interviewer:

Baraka was a, a major force in the convention. What was your reaction to him, to Baraka, and his constituency? I mean, if, also if you can remember some story about Baraka that you might have remembered, you might remember. What was your reaction to Baraka?

00:16:01:00

Willie Felder:

Well, Baraka has...Baraka's involvement was very, very crucial and influential in that, in the assembling of that assembly. But that did not mean, necessarily, that Baraka was that well thought of, or he had that much influence over that whole assembly body there. Because he

had his own agenda, and my personal opinion, or my, my, my feelings about it was that I was not ready to follow Baraka's prescription, and I don't think eighty, ninety percent of those who were there was ready to follow a prescription of separatism. And that kind of threw fear into, or some consternations into the minds of people that were there and were it not for the Hatchers or the Diggs or the Jacksons and the Patersons and others, you might as well have adjourned the meeting because Baraka played a great role in, in, in denying...you see, when Coleman Young, for example, made his appeal for conciliatory understanding for the privilege of, of introducing some concerns from Black labor, Baraka's attitude was, No way. And he was con— he was a part of the controllers at the podium, and so how do you, how do you have an exchange with the, with the presider of a 4,200 assembly from the floor if you're not given the mic to do so?

00:17:51:00

Interviewer:

Let's cut. OK.

[beep]

Interviewer:

Let's, let's go—

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

Interviewer:

We're, at, we're on Sunday now.

Willie Felder:

All right.

Interviewer:

This was the last day of the delegation—

Willie Felder:

OK.

Interviewer:

—of, of the convention.

00:18:06:00

Willie Felder:

Mm-hmm.

00:18:08:00

Interviewer:

Coleman makes his last effort appeal to Baraka, you know, to get them, get them to listen to the Michigan delegation, people who were pro-labor. What was, what was Baraka's reaction to Coleman's statement, and what, what'd you do, how did you react to all this?

00:18:25:00

Willie Felder:

Coleman's statement was presented, I thought, in eloquent form. And I was across the hall, across the assembly hall to the Alabama delegation, who had yielded to Michigan in order for Coleman to get to present the Michigan's feelings and desires. And before I could get all the way back to the Michigan delegation, after Coleman made such an eloquent appeal, there were three persons on the platform, in the name of the Congressman Diggs and Hatcher, as I recall, and Baraka. But Baraka abruptly rebuffed any appeal or suggestion from Coleman that consideration be given, and the UAW delegation, as I indicated earlier, which is sixty-five percent or better, and most of them are very, very acquainted with the rules and procedures of running meetings and, and having had their spokesperson attempt to represent their feelings and desires and having been abruptly rebuffed, and there was no recourse except for those who felt very strongly about it to do what they had to do, and that's walk. You know, there was no, no drumbeating or anything of that sort. We—they, they just quietly got up and moved out. And of course, the whole assembly knew that Michigan was walking because that whole discussion had been going on ever since we had arrived there, and there was much effort made to avoid it, and I certainly don't think that Coleman or Jack Edwards intended to just go there with the intention of walking away from it.

00:20:16:00

Interviewer:

Give it to me again. Now, this is, you're in the heat of the moment here.

Willie Felder:

Yes.

Interviewer:

This, this must have been, this was an intense moment.

Willie Felder:

Yes.

Interviewer:

I mean, tell me exactly how you were feeling here. You're watching Coleman—

Willie Felder:

Oh, yeah [laughs]—

Interviewer:

—talking to, let me finish, talking to Baraka, trying to appeal to Baraka, he's been appealing to Baraka all weekend—

Willie Felder:

He's appealing to three facilitators. OK. Yes.

Interviewer:

Facilitators, of course.

Willie Felder:

Yes. Mm, mmm.

Interviewer:

And this, this is the last effort.

Willie Felder:

Yes.

Interviewer:

This is his last-ditch effort.

Willie Felder:

Yes.

Interviewer:

And then he's rebuffed.

00:20:38:00

Willie Felder:

Yeah.

00:20:40:00

Interviewer:

And you're standing there watching part of your delegation walk out. I mean, tell me what happens, you're watching this, your reaction.

00:20:46:00

Willie Felder:

I, I, I, I could not believe that the, the re—the rebuffing would come so abruptly. At least, I thought we were sophisticated enough to give it consideration and buy us some time for harmony and unity's sake. But that was not in the cards, and I was kind of startled at the fact that it was treated in such an abrupt manner and way. And so that, you know, it, it...although I was startled at that fact, some of us had to make some real tough decisions as to whether or not we in fact walked totally, which was sixty-five percent or better of the delegation, or for the good of the overall objective of that assembly, we stay and see it through, painfully, and some of us did that. And of course, when the bulk of the Michigan delegation walked out, then the leadership of the remaining delegation changed hands into another force that were more in kind to going along with the facilitators wishes, and that's by the agenda.

00:22:04:00

Interviewer:

Let's cut. I want to do it again.

[beep]

Interviewer:

I thought this was real—

[cut]

[wild sound]

Camera Crew Member #3:

[inaudible]

Interviewer:

Take yourself back to that moment.

Camera Crew Member #1:

We've got speed.

[slate]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Oh, wait. I did, I did, I did not—

Camera Crew Member #2:

No speed.

[cut]

[camera roll #2164]

Interviewer:

If you could start your answer with, Cole was rebuffed by the facilitators—

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

Interviewer:

—and this eloquent speech.

00:22:26:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Any time.

00:22:28:00

Interviewer:

The last day now.

Willie Felder:

OK.

Interviewer:

This is, this is it for, for the Michigan delegation, the people who were pro-labor. Well, what happened? What was your reaction when Coleman was rebuffed by the facilitators up on the dais?

Willie Felder:

My reaction--

Interviewer:

If you could give me, "When Coleman was—"

Willie Felder:

When Coleman—

Interviewer:

I'm sorry. I was still talking.

00:22:48:00

Willie Felder:

When Coleman delivered his, his speech, or his appeal, it was a very, very eloquent appeal, as he is capable of doing, and it made all the sense in the world as to why we thought we ought to be included and heard, but as he gave it, and instantly after his conclusion, the facilitators were, were looking and Baraka just abruptly rebuffed any appeal that had come from Coleman. And, of course, the Michigan delegation was highly incensed at that attitude and treatment toward one of the more outstanding leaders in the Michigan delegation. And so, for those who felt very strongly about that, had no recourse except to walk. And, frankly, I think that Coleman was, was sort of shocked [laughs] at the reaction, [car horn] too, because I, I really think that he gave it his best shot and the least it warranted was some qualitative consideration, and that didn't come about. So, and I, I, you know, I just, I couldn't believe my eyes. I just, you know, couldn't believe what I was witnessing there, but, and I don't know why, I should, I should not have expected it, we'd been trying to crack it for two days and were unable to do so.

00:24:29:00

Interviewer:

Cut.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Cut.

Interviewer:

Good—

[beep]

[cut]

00:24:35:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:24:37:00

Interviewer:

OK Willie, why did you remain with the rest of the Mili, mili—Michigan delegation and decide not to walk?

00:24:45:00

Willie Felder:

I had a very, very wracking decision to make and it wasn't easy for me to make that decision to stay. But I had reviewed the document, and most of the ingredients in the document went to issues, in my judgment, that were far more important to the Black family of this country than to just pick up my marbles and go home because somebody had kicked me in the behind and ordered me out, in essence, by denying me the open right of participation. And for example, the, you know, the, the labor movement, we were all about wages for the underprivileged, and daycare, and, and healthcare. We were all about, in the U-UAW, dismantling discriminatory practices in management, and that's what the, the National Black Assembly agenda advocated also. And so these things seemed to me were [dog barks] weighing factors in my decision and others' decision to stay. And of course, it wasn't a popular position to take, [dog barks] it was misunderstood by many, but I think, at this point in time, looking back, it was worth it.

00:26:17:00

Interviewer:

Good. Let's cut. That's good.

Camera Crew Member #3:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer:

It's nice.

[beep]

[cut]

00:26:27:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Marker.

[slate]

00:26:31:00

Interviewer:

OK, Willie, if you can give me the, your reaction. The, the story about your reaction to Jesse's speech when you were talking to your friend—

Willie Felder:

OK.

Interviewer:

—in the delegation and, you know, why you were so upset, why the Michigan delegation was so upset.

00:26:40:00

Willie Felder:

Well, I was, you know, Jesse was giving this speech, and Jesse does a very good job in delivery, and I was standing there with a couple of colleagues on the floor, and one turned to me, I remember very clearly, and he kind of laughed and he says, You know, Jesse did a, made a good speech, but he might as well have given that one in Chicago because this Michigan delegation is mad as hell and it just doesn't move them. And they had, you know, they had good reasons for it because they had, they had felt neglected and denied the right for input into the conference. And, and we had sixty-five percent or better of the delegates who came from organized labor that constituted that percentage of Michigan delegation. And they just, they were just not easily persuaded by, you know, the, the, the, the baptismable [sic] oratory. That wasn't church time, that was "Nation Time." And they just wasn't in the mood for accepting any persuasion of that sort. I doubt very seriously whether Jesse was aware that that situation was that critical, because I don't recall him being involved in any of the mediating processes of it. I think that, that talent came along afterward.

00:28:06:00

Interviewer:

Very good. Thank you.

Camera Crew Member #3:

Mm. Lovely.

Willie Felder:

[laughs] You're gonna get me in trouble, boy.

Camera Crew Member #3:

[laughs]

Interviewer:

[laughs]

[beep]

Camera Crew Member #3:

You know that we'll always [unintelligible] love is—

[cut]

00:28:17:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:28:23:00

Interviewer:

If you could just do that one again for us. Why did you remain with the Michigan delegation, in, of—when the Michigan, the Michigan delegation had decided not to walk out?

00:28:32:00

Willie Felder:

When the, when the sixty-five percent or better of the delegate body decided to walk out, you must remember that they were my constituents. They were labor, and I'm labor. It was a very, very painful decision for me to have to make, and that was to remain in the session to its conclusion. It was very difficult. I was executive director of my—

[rollout on sound roll]

[cut]

[sound roll #277]

[wild sound]

00:28:56:00

Willie Felder:

He'll use that up shooting the hair in my nose.

Camera Crew Member #3:

[laughs]

Camera Crew Member #1:

You got it.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1

Mark it.

[slate]

Interviewer:

Why did you [laughs]—

Camera Crew Member #3:

[laughs]

Interviewer:

Why did you make those [laughs]—I can't do it. Stop.

Camera Crew Member #3:

Cut. I'm sorry. [laughs] OK.

Willie Felder:

[laughs] I can't—

[beep]

[cut]

00:29:31:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

[beep]

00:29:35:00

Interviewer:

Why did you remain with those in the Michigan delegation that decided not to walk out?

00:29:39:00

Willie Felder:

Well, it wasn't easy. Remaining was not easy. It took some real fast and serious thinking on my part because [car horn] you have to remember that those sixty-five percent or better—

00:29:51:00

Interviewer:

We gotta cut.

Camera Crew Member #3:

That's a perfect beginning.

[beep]

[cut]

[wild sound]

Interviewer:

Now you know what the actors go through when they—

Camera Crew Member #3:

That's right. [laughs]

Interviewer:

—when you watch television next time.

[picture resumes]

Willie Felder:

[laughs]

00:30:05:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it, please.

[slate]

00:30:08:00

Interviewer:

Now, Willie, why did you remain with those in the Michigan dele—Michigan delegation who decided not to walk out?

Willie Felder:

Well, it, it, it, it wasn't an easy thing to do. It was, it was very hard for me—

Interviewer:

If you could do, "Remaining wasn't easy..."

00:30:22:00

Willie Felder:

OK. I'm sorry, OK. Remaining was not easy for me. As a matter of fact, it was one of the harder periods of my lifetime that I had to make a decision of that magnitude because you have to understand that sixty-five percent or better of those who walked out were my constituents of the labor movement. And it, it, it, it pained me to have to do it but then I had to weigh what was the objective of that assembly, vis a vis, the, the insults and the intimidation that had been engendered by Baraka and people of his attitude. But the content

of the agenda outweighed my urgent inclination to leave with the rest of them. It meant more to them or to those who had left and to the national Black family, for me and others, it seems to me, to have remained and saw the whole thing through in order to be able to interpret it to those who weren't able to be there, and in order to be able to help to whatever extent you could to implement the resolves of the agenda. I did not share the view that it was anti-labor, or anti-White, or anti-establishment in that sense. It was my view that Black folk had every right to come together and develop an agenda of socioeconomic directions that's developed out of their own minds and their own souls and based on their own experiences and their needs. And this is what happened. And that's, that was the, those were the things that persuaded me to stay. I don't regret having made those decisions now that I look back at it.

00:32:23:00

Interviewer:

Let's cut.

Camera Crew Member #3:

That's lovely.

Interviewer:

Very nice, very—

[beep]

Camera Crew Member #3:

Yeah.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:32:39:00

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