



Interview with **James Figgs**

Date: April 4, 1989

Interviewer: Paul Stekler

Camera Rolls: 4123-4124

Sound Rolls: 470-471

Team: D

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.

### **Preferred Citation**

Interview with James Figgs, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on April 4, 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 #4123]

[sound roll #470]

00:00:12:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Second sticks.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Second sticks.

Camera Crew Member #3:

Second sticks.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it, please.

[slate]

Camera Crew Member #2:

Take one.

Interviewer:

OK. We're back in Marks, Mississippi in March of 1968.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Look...I'm sorry, look at Paul not the camera.

Interviewer:

Oh, yeah. Always look at me. Nobody else exists. We're back in Marks, 1968. What I want you to do is—

Camera Crew Member #2:

I'm afraid I have to cut for a second, sorry.

Interviewer:

OK.

[cut]

[wild sound]

James Figgs:

Oh, you're ready to seat me now.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Yes, I am.

James Figgs:

See the [unintelligible] been ran by the establishment.

Interviewer:

Yeah.

James Figgs:

Just totally ran by the local. People had control over it and it really wasn't, they wasn't treatin' 'em right, see, so.

[cut]

Interviewer:

—have been interviewed, too, about this.

James Figgs:

Oh, well, y'all've been interviewin' me.

Interviewer:

Uh-huh.

James Figgs:

The interviews all—

Interviewer:

Was it like that back then, too?

James Figgs:

Oh, yeah. Same, yeah.

Camera Crew Member #2:

All right, we're not seeing speed and power deciding to go ahead.

James Figgs:

It was, it was the same.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Good.

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK. [unintelligible] and hit it when I tell you.

Interviewer:

—looking for that closure, that would be wonderful to be able to put some of that footage into our film as well.

James Figgs:

Uh-huh.

Interviewer:

To make that connection.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it, please.

00:01:24:00

Camera Crew Member #3:

Sound two.

[slate]

00:01:27:00

Interviewer:

So, what I want you to do is to think back to that day in March of 1968 and think it and what it felt like. I want you to paint us a word picture of what the mood was like. Were people excited about Dr. King coming to town?

00:01:42:00

James Figgs:

Well, you know, at, at that time, Marks particularly, and Quitman County as a whole, Marks being the county seat, everybody was excited about Dr. King coming to see about us and our problems. We had been hollerin' in the wilderness for a long, long time and it seemed that no one was listening to us. And with the various civil rights organizations havin' been working in Marks, COFO, SNCC, SCLC and NAACP, and with the amount of problems we had had with the integrations of schools and, and the violent attacks on students, with individuals being thrown off plantations for exercising their right to vote, yes we were excited. You know, some things that you can't re—hardly remember, but Dr. King's visit to Marks, it, it just started the adrenaline flowin' in your body all over again because we saw hope where we thought that there wasn't any hope, as a community and for those of us who had been

involved in the activities of the movement for the rights of people to express themselves. Yeah, we were excited.

00:03:08:00

Interviewer:

How did people think of Dr. King? Did they see him in some way when he came here?

00:03:11:00

James Figgs:

Oh, yes. People thinking of Dr. King when he came to Marks and, and having known and heard about his courageous action in Alabama, it was just truly a Moses coming home to see us and to lead us to that promised land of housing and better schools and jobs.

00:03:35:00

Interviewer:

How'd your mom feel? I mean, she'd been active in, in—

00:03:37:00

James Figgs:

Oh, she had been active and she was, she was totally excited. But certainly, you know, as, as the movie that we observed, *Eyes on the Prize*, she were that person, she kept her eyes on the prize because opportunities and programs and federal grants that, that were not being sought after, because of the local government not wanting to be involved with the federal government and thereby federal government tellin' them what to do in their towns, she was an advocate of bringing in projects to uplift the downtrodden, and the preschoolers, and the homeless and the hungry. So, yes, she was definitely excited and very outspoken, and she stayed that way until she was unable to go any longer.

00:04:27:00

Interviewer:

Let's stop it down for a second.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Yes.

Interviewer:

I wanna make sure that everything's going all right.

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK. I just wanna put, can we just open the window for a second? I just wanna put another layer.

Interviewer:

That's very good.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #2:

Take three.

00:04:41:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it, please.

[slate]

00:04:43:00

Interviewer:

OK, we got a strong start. We'll go stronger here. We're back in Marks. Now, the people in Marks are glad to see King. Your mom's excited about King. You go to this meeting with your mother. You were a lot younger back then. And did you yourself buy Dr. King's program? Were you into nonviolence at that point? What did you think of his ideas and his programs?

00:05:04:00

James Figgs:

I had been one point considering to become a part of the nonviolent movement, but being with SNCC and COFO and what have you, we, we felt that we had to be aggressive and, and we would, would not stand for anybody to, to take our rights or deny our rights to us, but we respected and, and loved Dr. King and we wanted to cooperate. And we felt that he had the kind of national political backing from churches and politicians and people in high places in

government that that would be an avenue that we could, could travel and get where we wanted to go. And, of course, that's why we joined with NAACP and, and the nonviolent movement, and SCLC. And, of course, ***we were very excited about this Poor People Campaign that he spoke about. It's the first time that the concentration had been on poor peoples and their living conditions, and we wanted to be a part of that. That's what we had been workin' toward. We felt through voter registration that political power would bring an economic power.*** And, of course, and, and when Dr. King came to Marks and was so warmly received and ***we were able to turn people out to hear him that had never been to a mass meeting before,*** so, we were excited about that. A lot of work had been put into makin' preparation for Dr. King to come to Marks, and we were just excited, and we were glad the people showed up.

00:07:04:00

Interviewer:

What did he talk about? What was he like that day?

00:07:07:00

James Figgs:

Oh, he was just like a shining star to us. He was, he, he let us knew that there was hope and not to give up. And spiritually he filled our hearts with the, the attitude that all we had to do is just go with him and march with him around, Washington, D.C., around the United States Department of Agriculture, around those areas, Housing, just 'round those various agencies that could make a difference in our lives, and we were ready to go.

00:07:47:00

Interviewer:

Would you have gone anyplace he to—said?

00:07:49:00

James Figgs:

Oh, anyplace. I believe that. And I said to some of my friends, I believe if he had led us to that Red Sea and the water had been there, we would've walked in the water with him because that's the kind of hope that he had instilled in us, and, and his supporters, Andrew Young and Jose Williams and all those people had given us the kind of assurance that we needed that we wouldn't be arrested, that we wouldn't be bodily harmed, and that the shacks that we were living in here in Marks, Mississippi, would one day be brick homes and, and that outhouses that we had would one day become closed-in bathrooms with hot runnin'

water. And, and that was American dream before—for us, and we wanted to share the dream that Dr. King dreamed about.

00:08:46:00

Interviewer:

You wanna stop it down for a second?

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK.

{cut}

[wild sound]

Interviewer:

That was great. That was really nice.

Camera Crew Member #1:

We have a hundred feet left on this roll.

Interviewer:

OK. I wanna take you—

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK, hold on for a second. Mark it, please.

00:09:05:00

Camera Crew Member #3:

Sound four.

[slate]

00:09:09:00



Interviewer:

OK, Resurrection City. And there you are, you're up from Marks, Mississippi. It's May 1968. Again, a word picture. What was it like? What was it like being there? What did you see?

00:09:20:00

James Figgs:

Well, in Resurrection City, I was not as excited that I had been when Dr. King came. Matter of fact, I almost didn't go, because I was scheduled to drive the mule that my brother drove to Atlanta before they loaded up the mules on the train, but consciously had made a commitment to Dr. King in Marks, at that church, that we would go to Resurrection City, and since he had been assassinated and we felt obligated to go. So we, we, we went to Resurrection City to keep a promise to Dr. King to tell the world of our problems. We, we got there, we were excited about the tents. Most of the womens and, and the elder people were put in other areas and those of us who could weather the weather and, and we were in a tent. And it was a coming together of all races of people who were poor and who had concerns for those of us who were poor. And it was exciting, and we were there for two weeks and things was going well. We would meet somewhere between nine, ten-thir—ten o'clock in the morning, had various sessions and with the different agency of federal government that we felt that, that could hear our cry. And waiting on the instructions of the leaders of the Resurrection City, Dr. Abernathy's lieutenants. Waiting on instruction from them, where to move from one place to another one to, to testify before the various committees about the conditions as to what have you. And we, we enjoyed it. We, we—

00:11:11:00

Interviewer:

Was it fun?

00:11:12:00

James Figgs:

It was, it was fun. We were there for business, but we mixed a little fun into it, you know, meeting people from New York and California and Detroit. It was exciting. And, and the, the American Indians and the Chicanos and Mexicans and, and Puerto Ricans, people with all minority backgrounds were there. We were excited and we felt that, once we left Resurrection City, that we had gotten the attention of those who we elected in this country to make sure that those of us who were from Marks and other parts of country would be given a fair share of the American dream that Dr. King talked about.

00:11:54:00

Interviewer:

OK, now you told me—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Camera Crew Member #1:

[laughs] I knew this was gonna happen. This ran out [Inaudible].

Interviewer:

OK.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Two seconds after you said that. Very nice.

Interviewer:

I'm gonna let them load another, another camera roll and we'll go back to Marks.

James Figgs:

OK.

Interviewer:

Not Marks. No, no back to Resurrection City.

James Figgs:

Resurrection City, OK.

[beep]

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK, ready? I'm putting up the—

Interviewer:

In terms of perspiration, you're doing much better than Andy Young. Andy Young was, was sprouting water, so—

James Figs:

[laughs]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Color [unintelligible] please.

Interviewer:

It was one of the first interviews we were doing. We were trying to figure out how to tell the Mayor of Atlanta to pat himself down. It wasn't even that hot outside. I think it was January or December. We were probably using hotter lights back then.

Camera Crew Member #3:

He was, he had, he had his own powderpuff.

James Figs:

[laughs] He actually did?

00:12:43:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Yeah, in his pocket.

00:12:45:00

Interviewer:

Do you remember Jesse Jackson from back then?

James Figs:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

Was he pretty visible at Resurrection City?

00:12:50:00

James Figs:

Not much. No, not much.

00:12:56:00

Interviewer:

As they're doing this, there's something I didn't ask you. Are there any stories about, you know, something that happened in the first couple days that, that give a sense of the feeling of, of, of being someplace new and things that just, just come to mind at all?

James Figgs:

Oh, yes.

Interviewer:

What the feeling was like when you first got there.

00:13:12:00

James Figgs:

Scared as hell.

00:13:14:00

Interviewer:

Really?

James Figgs:

Yeah.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Can, can we roll?

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK.

Interviewer:

Yeah. Hold that feeling and I'll, I'll start with that.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Slate in, please.

[camera roll #4124]

[picture resumes]

Camera Crew Member #2:

[unintelligible]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it, please.

00:13:27:00

Camera Crew Member #3:

Five.

[slate]

00:13:30:00

Interviewer:

So, let me know what it felt like when you got there, I mean, stories or what it was like to be there.

00:13:35:00

James Figgs:

Well, first *when we got to Resurrection City, quite frankly, we were scared as hell being in Washington D.C. and being out on, on the U.S. Government turf and*, and not being authorized to be there. Course we had got used to bein' places that we wasn't supposed to be, but, *you know, you couldn't help but think that, if something happened, Dr. King is not here*, and we knew that if he had been there you'd been a little bit more relaxed. Didn't quite have as, as, as much confidence with Dr. King not being with us. And, of course, but we had

a determination to go on anyway, and meeting strangers. And a lotta people at Resurrection City wasn't there for freedom. A lotta people that came to Resurrection City in Washington D.C. was just there outta curiosity, and my own people, they were just outta curiosity and, and, and they had other alternatives being there. And 'cause even though you, you were there together, you still had to watch those, those, those few who wasn't there about the business. And you couldn't help think about the Memphis situation with Dr. King and the march that he, for the sanitation workers and those who were planted in the sanitation workers' march to disrupt that march, and you couldn't help think about where are they? You knew they were there somewhere, just because Dr. King was gone, but this still was one of his objective was to bring poor peoples together, and the powers to be didn't want poor peoples together because it exposed America for what it really was, had forgotten about those who had built it on their sweats and tears and lives. And we were always watching, even though we were being advised by people who were much older than we were how to conduct ourselves, how to behave and what have you. But after a couple of days, three days there you got the feeling that you had a job to do there and whatever you was asked to do, you would do it. And that's sort of was the general attitude we had. Whatever little part that we could play as a group, individually and as a group we would do it.

00:15:56:00

Interviewer:

Now, some people when they look back on Resurrection City, I mean, for a lotta people they just think it, it didn't work out very well. But you said it had a good start. I mean, what happened, how come?

00:16:06:00

James Figgs:

Well, I, I think it had a good start because the intent purpose of, of us going there was to tell Congress, tell the Senate, and tell the elected peoples in the, in the highest office in the, in the United States that the check that King talked about in August it, it, it still need to be drawn on. And we, we're still suffering. That's what those of us from Marks, Mississippi, was there for. And somewhere in Resurrection City that message just wasn't carried out to the end. Had it—as I look from the hindsight, might've been the communication between the various group leaders and the team leaders, could have been a breakdown there, too much time, downtime between there. And, we began to scatter somewhat. We would go from the tent city to down in, in the city, in the city loitering around and what have, you know, rather than, we were supposed to stay in the tent city. Our purpose there was to, to give to those elected officials our concerns. And, of course, and at the end with all the rain and mud and policemen being discharged on us and, we sorta scattered ourselves. And, but the purpose in which we went I think was accomplished. As to how long we should've stayed, I still question that. Maybe we should've went in and, and, and did our testimonies and demonstrations and got outta there. Maybe we might've stayed too long, I'm not sure. Guess that'll never be known. But our purpose for going there, the exposure of the conditions of

poor people up front to those who vote on legislation dealing with the livelihoods of peoples in this country, I think we made, made our presence known.

00:18:19:00

Interviewer:

That's a good thing in terms of the overall campaign. I wanna get you feeling, you know, what you were feeling at that time, let's say, after the first half, a week or whatever. I mean, you said there was, there was a different feeling that you had over time, that it seemed like when you first came there, there were things, and then something happened. Can you get me from the, the first day to after something happened and what you think was happening, what you feel, what you were feeling at that time that, that, that there was an absence of?

00:18:46:00

James Figgs:

Well, I, I felt that at the time that we were in Resurrection City that the absence was we were not, uh, consistent enough with our programs on a day-to-day basis. And after a period of several days that began to have too much lax time, too much lax time in between, for our team leader, you know. From, from the overall perspective we just did not have, after the first several days we did not have an agenda that we, that we were required then to, to be about for a, a full day. And with that many people being there, lax times should've been a no-no. But, you know, as I look from the hindsight on it, that's basically what I felt that many of us was, just wasn't doing what we should've been doin', you know, because our team leader did not provide us with that kind of leadership.

00:19:49:00

Interviewer:

Was SCLC well-organized for this campaign?

00:19:52:00

James Figgs:

I think so. I, I think for the first time, as a commitment to Dr. King, and wanted to just make sure that what he had started would be successful. That a, a, a lot of the bickering and stuff that normally go on had ceased. And they wanted to put their arms around the Reverend Abernathy. And I think the other groups, civil rights groups, for the sake of Dr. King and the Poor People's Campaign, wanted to make sure that they give SCLC all of the assistance that they need to give 'em.

[rollout on sound roll]

[cut]

[sound roll #471]

James Figs:

Rap wasn't president then, I believe, Stokely.

00:20:43:00

Interviewer:

[door closes] Still president?

James Figs:

Stokely, right.

Camera Crew Member #1:

[unintelligible]

00:20:46:00

James Figs:

Rap took over after, after Stokely.

00:20:49:00

Interviewer:

Was SNCC functioning very much at that point in time there?

00:20:53:00

James Figs:

Yeah, see, see SNCC pro—provided the resources. LC—SCLC came in on the tail end.

Interviewer:

Yeah.

James Figs:



And, and of course NAACP had always been here.

Interviewer:

Sure.

James Figgs:

Right. The granddaddy of organizations had always been here.

00:21:18:00

Interviewer:

And everybody was tied together with COFO at that point.

00:21:20:00

James Figgs:

Right.

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK.

00:21:28:00

Interviewer:

So, we're gonna do a couple wrap-up questions on Resurrection City.

James Figgs:

OK.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Slate in, please.

Interviewer:

Home stretch.

Camera Crew Member #2:

This is take six.

[picture resumes]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it, please.

[slate]

00:21:52:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

[unintelligible]

00:21:53:00

Interviewer:

Oh, sorry. OK. People came into Resurrection City with a lot of energy. And I think most people would agree that, that a lot of things were accomplished in terms of people s—

Camera Crew Member #1:

Can you move your body a little bit towards this way? Yeah. Little more.

Interviewer:

In terms of people seeing the poor. When you were in Resurrection City and people were trying to understand why the agenda wasn't being as clear, [truck passes] did anybody talk about just communication from the leadership to the people in Resurrection City or the communication that was coming within SCLC? Was there any understanding of what was going on at the time?

00:22:33:00

James Figgs:

No. That's what I, I felt in Resurrection City at the time, that when I spoke early on about the agenda not being consistent, our team leaders from our state and our particular area would not have, at some point would not have any communication to us. And until we see such communication then we would just be loitering around and what have you. And we did not question that non-communication to us, 'cause we felt from the Reverend Abernathy and his team leaders that at, at the appropriate time they would advise. Not being f—familiar with the strategies in which the, the, the team captains and Reverend Abernathy was involved in,

so we just didn't know what was goin' on. And 'course we had to try to be as patient as we could and, and just wait until, 'cause we felt that somethin' should've been happening. Naturally we had questioned in our mind, but as far as us really pursuing that, we did not. We just waited, you know. We would just, whatever we were told we would do and we would wait to do. So we just did not question the lack of c—communication to us.

00:24:03:00

Interviewer:

Did you feel like things were going downhill?

00:24:07:00

James Figgs:

Honestly, yes, I felt, I felt that something, you got the feeling, you really got the feeling that, that things were beginning to go downhill and that you had reached a peak there and that it, it was time to get, it was time to go. You know, we had, nothing new was exciting, nothing that you could look forward to the next day, that we were gonna be in front of the Justice Department raising hell. You couldn't look forward to the next day, we were gonna be at some congressman's office raising hell with the congressman about his voting record, you know. So, none of that excitement kinds of stuff that, you know, that, that we wanted, at my age at that time, you know, wanted to, to go on, it wasn't goin' on. And, and it became various disagreements within Resurrection City with some of the various groups. You know, you had 'cause we hear a lot about gangs today—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

James Figgs:

—but you had gangs from New York, Chicago and California in Resurrection City at that time.

00:25:14:00

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm.

00:25:15:00

James Figgs:

And, of course, they were being monitored and, and we had a little disturbance but not, nothing to the point that the press would get hold to, because then they would do a job on. You just kept, if there was some disturbance among those of us who were there, we just kept it among ourselves. But in terms of being aggressive from ten to five each day, after first several days and that began to go downhill and many of us felt that it was time to pack up. And course, I guess that was one of the things that scared us. Now we've been here, now we're gonna return, and what's gonna happen? That, that really, when you got ready to get out of Resurrection City, you, many of us had felt that we should go a different direction than come back home because you knew what was gonna happen. You sort of felt that you was gonna meet all kinds of repercussions from the establishment.

00:26:12:00

Interviewer:

Why don't we stop there for one second?

00:26:16:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Yeah, why, why, why don't you all go out on the porch for one second just to cool—

[cut]

[wild sound]

Interviewer:

I was, I was...were you eighteen years old then?

James Figgs:

I was nineteen.

Interviewer:

Nineteen. I was nineteen years old when Dr. King came to Marks that day.

James Figgs:

Do you want me to say my name, or just say I was nineteen?

Camera Crew Member #2:

No.

Interviewer:

Just I was. So, whenever you're ready.

00:26:34:00

James Figgs:

OK. I was nineteen years old when Dr. King came to Marks to organize the Poor People's Campaign.

00:26:41:00

Interviewer:

That's it.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Why don't you do that once more?

James Figgs:

I was nineteen years old when Dr. King came to Marks, Mississippi, to organize the Poor People's Campaign.

Interviewer:

And one more line. Just say that you, that you, where you were living in Resurrection City.  
[truck passes]

Camera Crew Member #2:

Hold on, we've got this truck passing.

00:27:02:00

James Figgs:

I lived in Resurrection City in tent city, part of Resurrection City. Perhaps in the middle of it. There were many tents, hundreds of tents set up there.

00:27:12:00

Interviewer:

So you were living in a tent.

James Figgs:

Right.

Interviewer:

OK. So...

00:27:15:00

James Figgs:

I was living in a tent there at Resurrection City. About ten more than the tent was supposed to've held in the first place. [laughs] So, that's where we were then.

00:27:26:00

Interviewer:

That's fine.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Can we do that once more?

Interviewer:

Sure. Just, "I was living in a tent."

James Figgs:

I was living in a tent.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Have to ask you if you can wait after Paul talks. Wait a couple seconds and then speak, OK?

James Figgs:

I was living in a tent in Resurrection City, perhaps in the middle of the whole tent city of Resurrection City, during the Poor People's Campaign march.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:27:52:00

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