

Interview with **A.W. Wilson**

1979

Production Team: N/A

Camera Rolls: 6-7

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Interview gathered as part of *America, They Loved You Madly*, a precursor to *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*. Produced by Blackside, Inc. Housed at the Washington University Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.

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**Note:** These transcripts contain material that did not appear in the final program. Only text appearing in *bold italics* was used in the final version of *Eyes on the Prize*.

00:00:02:00

[wild audio]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: OK.

A.W. Wilson: A.W. Wilson

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: THANK YOU.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: REVENUE ALSO.

[cut]

00:00:08:00

[camera roll 6]

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: OK, I GUESS WHAT, WHAT I NEED—IF I CAN GET SOME INFORMATION ABOUT WHAT WAS IT LIKE THAT FIRST MINISTERS MEETING WHEN YOU WERE PLANNING THE BOYCOTT? RIGHT AFTER MRS. PARKS GOT ARRESTED?

Wilson: Well, it was a meeting where that—most folks who were disturbed at that time, were ministers who made up the ministry of the—union of compass, we called it. And to the

movement of E.D. Nixon who, who met with us and briefed us on what had really happened to Rosa Parks. And from that the ball started to rollin'. Now that first meeting was in the basement of Dexter Avenue. The next meeting was at Mount Zion, but the real first mass meeting was here.

00:01:02:00

INTERVIEWER: AND WHAT, WHAT DID YOU DISCUSS AT THE FIRST MEETING AT DEXTER?

Wilson: What we would do about Ms. Park [sic] being arrested and we decided that a, a suit in court wouldn't mean anything until we got the public aroused or what was happening to black people. So that, that's where the birth of this protest come by, see. And the peculiar thing about it—we didn't ask for what we got. We, we best asked for courtesy by the bus drivers and that we would cut out the question of black people having to get up and give that seat to white folk. And that we would, would—that first come, first serve when it come to seating. And that those—and the next was that we have some black bus drivers especially in the predominant black section. Now those are the things we asked. And if they had given us those this thing might never have gotten where it did get to. And we got to love—and by them objecting over us they helped us more than they hurt us. See, by objecting to it, see.

00:02:14:00

INTERVIEWER: WHERE THE, WHERE THE MINISTERS UNIFIED ON THAT FIRST MEETING?

Wilson: Very much so. The ministers discovered in Dr. King the type of leadership that we needed. And as it was us ministers were content to follow and push the man who could carry the ball and he carried it to our satisfaction. That's it. You see.

INTERVIEWER: WHY WAS HE CHOSEN?

Wilson: Well, first place he was chosen, he was not obligated to the power structure in Montgomery. He hadn't been here long enough for them to have done anything to make him obligated to them, see? Most of us had been here so long until we'd had anniversaries and this fella had given a donation and this friendship come near finding something for this celebration—in a way, in a way we were naturally obligated to some of those folk. But here's a man that owes nobody nothing and we can get behind this man. And he can say for us what we want to say. And then we discovered, within him, that that was his calling.

INTERVIEWER: OH. CAN YOU HOLD FOR JUST ONE SECOND? OH, OK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: WE'RE JUST GONNA CHANGE.

00:03:34:00

[cut]

[slate]

[change to camera roll 7]

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: HE SEEMED TO BE THE, THE BEST PERSON FOR THE JOB?

Wilson: Well, well other than his qualification and, and, and, and our feeling that that was his calling rather than—pastor lead his people out of this question of bondage and slavery and oppression. And he seem to been [sic] the type of man who would hold masses together, see. We—for an instance, these mass meetings we had they went from church to church, but five o' clock in the af—four and five o' clock in the afternoon you couldn't get in some of these churches. They want, they want to hear King, see. And some people just—delighted to just go lay—he had, he had the people, see, and I don't think he could've beat it for anybody else, you know, carry on. Now, but those who'd been here long many of the people believed in us, but I—we all felt that he just the man for the job.

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INTERVIEWER: AND WHAT WAS THAT FIRST MASS MEETING LIKE ON MONDAY?

Wilson: It's rather hard to describe. Within six blocks in any direction here you couldn't get a parking place. And we had outside speakers, see. Police ordered us to cut 'em off and everything and we refused. They called me up and said, it's coming out of the restroom. Someone gonna come by. So I, I told 'em come on. I wasn't gonna cut—I—the Catholic Church up here had tower chimes and the Catholic Church downtown had them. First Baptist church had 'em and they played 'em whenever they got ready. So I said to them when they said, sir we're coming out and arrest you, but you know what I say, when you all, when you cut out the tower chimes at St. Jude, First Baptist downtown, and the Catholic Church downtown then I'll cut 'em, might as well see. Not until then. And I didn't hear anything else. Now, we had two black police to lose their job. They was two—they were out there that night and the white police ordered them to come in here and order us to cut the mic off. And they refused. And when they refused—they ultimately lost their job. But they did it in a way where you couldn't lay it on that particular meeting. Ultimately they lost their job.

00:06:06:00

INTERVIEWER: AND WHAT WAS THE SPIRIT LIKE THAT FIRST NIGHT?

Wilson: The spirit was high. Mostly it was—in fact it could be—it had a religious tone, because they called us the bunch of hymn singing Negroes. They met, they sang and prayed. Nobody was—no program was made. We just took it by—when you got in here. They

opened the crowds here. Somebody just started singing, praying by four, five o' clock. They sang to My Nearest Heaven; having service. Then somebody else said, pul—somebody from the pulpit. One of the ministers got up and started saying something. Talking about what had happened and then, finally—we's [sic] on the stool knew what was going to happen, but nobody—there was no program of it, see. And Martin Luther King got up and made his speech and when he got to speaking he had solidified their hopes and they were ready for anything, you see. Ready for it.

00:07:04:00

INTERVIEWER: WHAT KIND OF HARRASSMENT WERE YOU UNDER? THE CHURCH HAVING PROVIDED THE FACILITY?

Wilson: Oh, oh yeah. We had—I'll give ya a good illustration. Some—we not—I've never known [sic] who did it, but the evening before that mass meeting somebody had a little strip of paper just about that long they mimeographed and just throwed [sic] 'em over this town come to Holt Street tonight for the final mass meeting. No, no, the get, get together meeting. So they—and, and, and, and they talk about final plans. So they, they *Advertiser* called me up and they asked me what did the meaning—what was the meaning of the expression, for the instruction. I say, well the—it means what it says. See and that's all right. They were—they—don't you know you goin' be in the newspapers tomorrow morning and all that kind of stuff and what's goin' to be said? I said, as far as I'm concerned I don't care. The only thing I'm saying to you is that there better not be anything in the paper I didn't say it, see? And it went away I would think. So that they played down that sort of—because they, they thought that that might create a little more stink to say they, they interfered me. Now I was with that group who were arrested. I think there's ninety of us. I was the only minister that was subpoenaed at the grand jury. Now because the meeting is here. And one of the statements they made in the—you refused to tell that night who called that meeting. Now since you're immune from persecution you ought to be able to tell us who, who did it, see. I said, all right—cause I had talked with, with brother King and those and asked what I should reveal. And we had agreed that the Baptist—that the ministers—that the minister union, which is Methodist and Baptist, would do it—would call the meetings, see. Well, they wanna know then who the Board of Directors. I say, we don't have a Board of Directors. They said, how you do your business? I say, well, you don't know us. We meet and do what we gonna do. Why we there. Go on, but I'd be—

00:09:36:00

INTERVIEWER: WHAT DID YOU FEEL WHEN YOU GOT THE VICTORY? WHEN YOU HEARD THAT YOU, YOU WON?

Wilson: All of us were overjoyed, you see. And we were, I believe, we were in, I'm not so sure about this, but I believe we were in court on the trial of these ministers when the news came over that we'd won.

INTERVIEWER: WAS THERE A MASS MEETING AFTER THAT?

Wilson: Oh yeah. Mass meeting last a long time after that, you see. After that, you see.

INTERVIEWER: OK. I APPRECIATE IT. CUT.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:10:06:00

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