



Interview with **James Smith**

Date: October 17, 1988

Interviewer: Paul Stekler

Camera Rolls: 4012-4013

Sound Rolls: 402-403

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 Smith, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on October 17, 1988 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 #4012]

[sound roll #402]

[slate]

00:00:11:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Sound number seventeen.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Hit it.

[slate]

Camera Crew Member #3:

Reverend James E. Taylor [sic].

Interviewer:

Smith. [laughs]

Camera Crew Member #3:

Oh, Reverend James E. Smith. And I'm reading it! God. I don't think I'm gonna get that job.

00:00:28:00

Interviewer:

Think back to that council meeting and the march that came after it. What happened?

00:00:35:00

Rev. James Smith:

Well, nothing really happened. As I recall it, and, it was one of those days where there was great expectation. We had heard that there was going to be some kind of resolution to the strike and we were all looking forward to meeting with the council that day. And as we went to the council, council's chamber we were just there expecting the best and expecting a solution. And we got there and, and there was really not a meeting. In fact, it was a sham and the only thing that happened was they made a few comments and dismissed the meeting. And we were just so let down because our expectations were so high. We were looking for so much. Nothing really happened. That was a sad moment. It was a letdown because we had anticipated so, so much. And then we got to the point that we didn't know exactly what to do or where to go. So the decision was made that we would go back to the, to Clayborn Temple and have a m—a mass meeting and a rally because the morale was low at that point. The decision was made, and we started marching and the police department said that they would make sure that we got there safely. And I thought it was fantastic to have the police department and policemen escorting us to Clayborn Temple. *The march went fine for two or three blocks, but as we approached, Madison Street I think, the policemen began to come in and to move us over, further and further to the curb,* to the sidewalk. And the next thing that I knew all kinds of things were happening. And, and, and there were, I was shocked. They were, there was mace and, and teargas and everything. And policemen everywhere, running over people, clubbing us. And it broke up in that fashion. It was like a dream, that, that shouldn't have happened. I was trying to wake up from that dream but it was reality. That was a sad day. And, and we finally made it to Clayborn Temple though, but it was a trem—an awful day. And a lot of people were, were hurt. And, and as we struggled to Clayborn Temple, not only were we crying from the teargas but our pride had, had been injured. We felt dehumanized. [pause] We got there. And we all got into the Clayborn Temple and then they came down to Clayborn Temple as I recall. And as we were sitting there and they were trying to calm us down and make speeches, they shot teargas in the church. And people started going everywhere, trying to get out of there. And Reverend Lawson was trying to calm everybody down. But, but he couldn't do that. Folks were just trying to leave and get out of there because the policemen were all out in the streets surrounding the, had surrounded Clayborn Temple and just firing teargas into the church.

00:04:47:00

Interviewer:

Were you angry?

00:04:49:00

Rev. James Smith:

I was angry. I was shocked. It was an unbelievable moment. I couldn't believe that Memphis' finest would shoot teargas into a church where people were assembled in a very peaceful way. Oh, I was angry. I was upset. I was more than angry. I was real mad, as we say down here. I was very, very angry and mad. But from that point on, I was more determined. I said that I'm more determined now than ever because of what they had done to us that day.

00:05:39:00

Interviewer:

Stop for a second.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Sound 18.

[slate]

00:05:44:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Just a second. OK.

00:05:45:00

Interviewer:

First of all, what Jackie was just talking about, what about the ministers?

00:05:54:00

Rev. James Smith:

As we walked, there were presiding elders, Bishops, Pastors in, in this march. The pillars of the community. I couldn't believe that the police department would fire upon this crowd. We were law abiding citizens. And here we were trying to do something constructive. Pillars of the community. We had no axe to grind. But *they fired upon us and that was the turning point*. We were extremely angry. *And if they would fire upon us, they would fire upon anybody. Nobody was safe in Memphis.*

00:06:45:00

Interviewer:

What about the decision to bring Dr. King in? Was it tied to morale?

00:06:51:00

Rev. James Smith:

Yes. It was a question of morale because we had been to the city council, they did nothing. And therefore, the morale was low. But the men were sticking together, they were strong and they were standing. But the morale was low. And a decision was, was made that we should try to build the morale of the men and also bring the, the community, the Black community closer together and galvanize it, make it strong and unified like never before. And the decision was made to ask Dr. King to come to Memphis. And Reverend Jim Lawson was asked to get in contact with Dr. King because Jim had worked with Dr. King for a long time. And Jim said, yes. And, and, and, and, and Jim Lawson and Jesse Epps, who worked for our union, went down to meet with Dr. King and that's how Dr. King was invited to Memphis, Tennessee.

00:08:03:00

Interviewer:

OK, last thing. I want you to think back, it's the night before Dr. King, the night that Dr. King comes back for the last time and he's speaking at the Mason Temple giving the mountaintop speech. What do you remember? How did it sound? What was the night like? How did it feel? What were you thinking?

00:08:20:00

Rev. James Smith:

It was raining that night. Dr. King was in town and we were all excited about that. We were excited because he was a great man, coming to Memphis to aid and assist thirteen hundred sanitation workers. But it was pouring down rain. And, and I got to Clay—got to Mason Temple. There was not many folks there at that time. But I got there early because I wanted

to make sure I got me a good seat. And by the time that Ralph Abernathy got there, the place was really packed. It was raining. It was thundering and lightning outside. And, but nobody was worried about the rain. Everybody was just excited because Dr. King was in town and he was coming to speak. That was a night that, that's the night that I knew that everything was gonna be all right for those workers and that we were going to win.

[rollout on sound roll]

[cut]

[camera roll #4013]

[sound roll #403]

00:09:45:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Sound nineteen.

[slate]

Camera Crew Member #2:

OK. Hit the sticks again, please.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Second sticks.

00:09:48:00

Camera Crew Member #3:

Second sticks.

[slate]

00:09:52:00

Interviewer:

So tell me about this, about Dr. King and the march.

00:09:55:00

Rev. James Smith:

Dr. King came to Memphis to lead a march. And in that march, you had thousands of people. And as we marched from Clayborn Temple to Main Street, well, when we got on Beale Street, it, the march broke up because folks started breaking out windows and all of that. But then, when we got to Gayoso and Main, we decided to get Dr. King out of there. Reverend Leland Brown and, and I took him to, to Front Street and Gayoso and stopped a Black lady and her baby. And we put Dr. King in the car and she said, I will gladly take him to the Rivermont Hotel. And, and she did. But lo and behold, we didn't get in the car. I don't know why we didn't get in that car with Dr. King. We walked toward Clayborn Temple and the policemen jumped on us, maced us, beat us, beat the devil out of us. And I don't know today why I didn't get in that car. I wish I had.

00:11:14:00

Camera Crew Member #4:

Nice. Now Sekou, did you want, or do you think that we might want—

Camera Crew Member #2:

Stop. OK. We're gonna cut.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Sound twenty.

00:11:20:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:11:24:00

Interviewer:

Pick up at [unintelligible] So, are you ready?

00:11:26:00

Rev. James Smith:

There was an overcoming spirit in Mason Temple that night. We knew that we were going to win. Dr. Abernathy spoke well. But we were waiting for, Dr. King. And because he was in town, there was an overcoming mood, an overcoming spirit in that place. And when Dr. King spoke that night, we knew that we were going to win. And there was something about Dr. King. A man who could walk with kings but he was just as simple when he spoke that all of us understood him. I've never met a man like that before.

00:12:35:00

Interviewer:

That's great. That's it.

[cut]

[wild sound]

Camera Crew Member #3:

OK. End of room sound.

Rev. James Smith:

Oh, man. I hope you'd never tell me to hold my breath.

Interviewer:

[laughs]

Camera Crew Member #1:

[laughs]

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:12:46:00

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