

Interview with **Wendell Harris**

February 22, 1979

Interviewer: N/A

Camera Rolls: 1-2

Sound Roll: 1

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*.

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[camera roll 1]

[sound roll 1]

[hand slate]

Harris: My name is Wendell Harris and I'm the news director for WAPI-TV in Birmingham. I have a theory just my own theory about the city of Birmingham and the civil rights struggle. My theory is very simple. I believe that the man and the event must come together at a place before it's going to be successful. And I think what happened in Birmingham, Alabama is we had the place, we had the man in Dr. Martin Luther King, and we had the time. The civil rights struggle was ripe for America at that time. And that's what brought the civil rights struggle to the fore in America and that's what gave all our people, really, not just black or white or male or female, gave all of our people an opportunity to be enfranchised, to take part in what we call a democracy. If you go back and think about it for a moment, Dr. King was able to desegregate the buses of Montgomery, Alabama, but when they did that the buses in Atlanta, Georgia or Birmingham were still segregated. When he went to jail for sitting in in Atlanta, Georgia the counters in Birmingham were still segregated as they were in Charlotte, North Carolina or Richmond, Virginia. Nothing happened except in one locality. And what we did was we brought Dr. King to Birmingham, we brought the civil rights movement to Birmingham, and it all came together here. And that's where we got the Civil Rights Act passed, that's where we had the movement for the civil rights struggle across this great country and it all came together. My theory is very simple. Nothing happens until the place and the event and the man come together. And they all came together right here in Birmingham, Alabama, with Dr. King as the man.

00:01:57:00

INTERVIEWER: BACK TO THE FRAME—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: THE LINE?

INTERVIEWER: FRA—THE—HOW LONG CAN YOU STAY IN A LINE?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: YOU WANNA CUT?

INTERVIEWER: NO, FRAME THEN, FRAME CLOSE. FRAME CLOSE. WHAT I'D LIKE TO GET YOU TO SAY IS, IS GIVE ME THE EXAMPLE ABOUT HOW FRED SHUTTLESWORTH HAD BEEN IN BIRMINGHAM FOR A LONG TIME—

Harris: Ok. Surely.

INTERVIEWER: —IN COMPARISON WITH THE MONTGOMERY—

Harris: Sure. Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth had been leading the civil rights struggle in Birmingham, Alabama along with Ed Gardner and some others and nothing really happened. Fred Shuttlesworth went down to Phillips High School downtown one day to do—try to get his children enrolled. That was unsuccessful. When he came out there was a mob and he was actually beaten with chains. There was a little publicity, but nothing happened. Fred Shuttlesworth had worked long and hard in this city, but he had never moved with the civil rights struggle off dead center. In comparison to Montgomery, Dr. King went to Montgomery. And looked at the bus boycott with Rosa Parks and he was able to move something in Montgomery, Alabama. That is he got the signs taken down off the buses. But it really never grew out of Montgomery, just stayed right in Montgomery. And if you—when, when you bring the events of other cities together and into focus into one city with one leader then it begins to move forward and that's what happened in Birmingham.

00:03:26:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: OK.

INTERVIEWER: LET'S GO TO A WIDE FRAME. AND WHAT—I GUESS, WHAT I WOULD LIKE TO GET YOU TO TELL ME IS ABOUT HOW YOU THINK BIRMINGHAM IS A MUCH BETTER PLACE FOR IT.

Harris: Sure. You know, I've been in this city for a long time and I really don't want to leave this city, I guess, it's because I love it. But I also believe that this city is going to be a much better place than a lot of other cities in America and the reason for that is, the example I like to use, when you were a child and your mother whipped you for doing something bad, you remembered your lesson. And you tried to get better because of it. In 1963, this city was brought to its knees. We were whipped to our knees because we were trying to hold onto

something that we could not have. That something that was wrong. Something that we should change. And we were whipped to our knees. And when we rise back up, we get up on our feet and start to build again, as we are now. What we're doing is building with people. We're not building with white Wendell Harris, or a black or, or a female or a male. We're building with people. Because we learned our lesson. And if you learn it well then the people will talk to one another and you are able to move forward and, I think, I think Birmingham, Alabama is going to be a better place because of what happened to us. Some of these days they are gonna put a statue up. To Dr. Martin Luther King. And I don't know that I will see it in my, my, my time. But my children will see it. Because he taught us a lesson. A lesson in how to have human relations among people. And that's what I think we're gonna have here.

INTERVIEWER: COULD YOU REPEAT THAT LAST PART OF YOUR STATEMENT ABOUT MARTIN LUTHER KING? FANTASTIC.

Harris: One of these days we're going to put up a statue in Birmingham, Alabama to Dr. Martin Luther King. I don't think that I'll see it, but I think my children will. And I think the reason we're gonna put it up is he taught us that we have to be humans. We have to be people, not black or white or male or female, just people, working for common good. And I think that's what we have in Birmingham, Alabama.

00:05:40:00

INTERVIEWER: MAYBE YOU COULD JUST RELATE THE, THE ONE STORY ABOUT THE—THAT YOU TOLD ME ABOUT THE, THE POLICE WOMAN WHO STOPPED—

Harris: [laughs] Oh yeah.

INTERVIEWER: —THOUGHT THAT THE PEOPLE WERE JAYWALKING.

Harris: Yeah. We, we had a lot of demonstrations in Birmingham, obviously, the, the—all the reporters from the *New York Times*, the networks, all of us who were here, called it, forty days and forty nights in the park, because that's how many days we demonstrated. But on one day a group of demonstrators came out of the park and went into downtown Birmingham. Well, now that's a distance of about ten blocks from the park to downtown Birmingham. A group of 'em walking down the sidewalk, demonstrating, started to cross against the light. And a meter maid there, Birmingham policewoman or a meter maid, saw 'em, had no idea they were demonstrating, simply knew that she was—they were going across on the light wrong, it was jaywalking, so she blew her whistle and said, stop! And the whole demonstration stopped while the light changed.

INTERVIEWER: OK. THAT'S FINE.

Harris: Is that all?

INTERVIEWER: YEAH. YES.

00:06:40:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

Harris: Anything else?

INTERVIEWER: THANK YOU VERY MUCH.

Harris: My pleasure.

INTERVIEWER: AND WE'LL STILL BE AROUND WHEN YOU GET BACK. [laughs]

Harris: Oh.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:06:49:00

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