Interview with **Arlie Schardt**
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Interviewer: James A. DeVinney
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Team: A

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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 II*.

[camera roll #1044]
[sound roll #118]

[slate]

00:00:19:00

Interviewer:

OK, tell me what it was like when the leaders began to gather in Memphis.

00:00:23:00

Arlie Schardt:

Well, within hours after Meredith had been shot, and was in the hospital in Memphis, many of the top civil rights leaders from all over the country started flying into Memphis, and began meeting that night, and early the next morning. Because they felt that, that this was an opportunity and also in a way, a requirement to try to carry out the march that Meredith had begun, and thereby regenerate the civil rights activism that had been flagging throughout the country. Essentially, since the Selma march and the passage of the Voters' Rights Bill, Voting Rights Act of 1965.

00:01:01:00

Interviewer:

Were they saying anything to you, that was very specific as to what their goals were?

00:01:03:00

Arlie Schardt:

At first, nobody was saying anything specific because I think they, they, they—there was a certain amount of organizational competitiveness at that point. I think, I think everybody was looking for, as I say, for a way to regenerate activism around the country and, and support, and dedication, and so on. And so, there was a lot of jockeying for a position, in terms of who was going to lead it, what it, what form it was going to take, and how they were going to go about putting something together on the spur of the moment. This was very different from the Selma situation where weeks and weeks of planning had, had gone into it. Even though there was the, that terrible day at the, of the practically massacre at the, at the Pettus Bridge in Selma. Nevertheless, there had been weeks of planning and when the march go-ahead was given by the federal courts later on in Selma, a lot of planning had been done and a lot of, of support systems were in place, everything from food services to bathroom facilities and so on, and places to stay, and all that. Here, there was nothing because Meredith had wanted to do this by himself, and had just set off with three or four other friends of his alone. And that was the whole point that he wanted to make. Meredith was not happy about the idea of all these leaders coming in to, to in effect, take over the march. In fact, he was very much opposed to it, and said so publicly within a day or so after he had started his recovery from his wounds. He said that he had wanted to make the point that a, that a, a man, a male Negro, we, everybody used the word Negro at that time. But, a—that a, a Negro man could walk unassisted, and alone safely through Mississippi. He wanted to, he wanted to, to instill courage in the Black male was one of his—

Interviewer:

Let me stop you—

Arlie Schardt:

—specific goals.

Arlie Schardt:

Sure.

00:03:01:00

Interviewer:

I just want to make sure all the systems are going.

00:03:02:00

Camera crew member #1:

You, you wanna cut?

00:03:03:00

Interviewer:

Yeah, I wanna cut.

[cut]

[slate]

00:03:07:00

Arlie Schardt:

Probably the most dramatic difference was the fact that it was obvious that Governor Paul Johnson of Mississippi had made up his mind that there wasn't going to be the kind of incident, the kind of dramatic incident, that had focused national attention on an area where White resistance took the form of, of violence and police brutality, and so on. And so, he had put out the word via his top officials in the State Highway Patrol, to go throughout the towns and villages along the route of the march and talk to local leaders and so on and tell them to cool it, that, that they were to accommodate the marchers to the greatest extent possible so tha, —so that incidents would be avoided. The South was really, the White South was really realizing by this time that, that it was very bad for business, to be as brutally resistant to civil rights progress as, for example, Alabama had, had demonstrated the year before. And, and local communities were finding that same thing. They wanted, they wanted peace and quiet. They wanted it on their terms, in terms of the White power structure, but nevertheless, they were trying to avoid violence if they, if they possibly could. So that was quite different. At, at points in the early days and first couple weeks of the march, it even reached the degree where these big orange trucks were going out a mile or two ahead of the march and mowing the grass along the road, along the shoulders of the road so that the marchers could move along more, more easily and more smoothly. And, and then as we would get into the towns, in the early days, and really for most of the first two weeks of the march, there were, there were very few incidents and there were, the incidents were all ones of surprising moments of, of accommodation on the part of the White power structure on the part of the city officials, in terms of making it possible for the marchers to find some place to set up their tents, and to camp for the night, and to make sure that they had food. And, and then in some of the communities that had been terrible centers of, of, of violence in the, in the past, Blacks were enabled, were allowed to go to the courthouse very peacefully and, and register and a lot of them, a lot of them took advantage of that opportunity. There were a lot of concessions made in places like Granada and Greenwood where, for example, negotiations with, with local officials on the part of Dr. King, and Floyd McKissick of CORE, and some of the other

leaders resulted in longer registration hours so that workers could come in the evening and register, which was unheard of. There were opportunities for Blacks out in the county to register without having to come into the county seat, which was always a more fearsome experience.

00:05:59:00

Interviewer:

Tell me about something that you observed in the midst of all this. Was there a particular moment that was sort of touching, or—?

00:06:04:00

Arlie Schardt:

Well, one moment in—that was, that was, that was very touching in Grenada which was, which had been, for many years, one of the most violent places in, in the South, the scene of many terrible incidents. Dr. King took part in a negotiating session one afternoon with town officials in the courthouse, and several hundred local Blacks had, had gathered in the courthouse to watch this. It was just an unbelievable spectacle of, of, of seeing Black leaders sitting down with these powerful local White officials, and hammering out agreements that they never, ever would have dreamed were gonna take place, such as the evening registration and, and in Granada, they even wound up adding four Blacks to the staff of officials who, who did the registering. And, and by the end of the week that the march had gone through Granada, something like 900 Blacks had registered to vote. I think before that, there were about 690 had been registered in all the years before that. So, in some places it turned into a very successful voting registration effort.

00:07:22:00

Interviewer:

OK, let's just stop down real briefly.

Camera crew member #1:

OK.

[cut]

00:07:27:00

Camera crew member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:07:30:00

Interviewer:

OK, describe your reaction to the Black Power speech at Greenwood.

00:07:33:00

Arlie Schardt:

Greenwood was a, was a kind of a milestone because it was there that although, although Stokely Carmichael had been talking about Black Power from the very beginning of the march, it was in Greenwood that it was really dramatized. He had worked there before as a civil rights worker. He knew all the police. The police all knew him. The officials all knew him. And that evening there was a rally in a, a big open field, kind of like a—if I remember rightly, it was kind of like a big parking lot, or maybe a, a playground, a dirt playground or something like that. And there was a, a flatbed truck set up, and it was about dusk, and hundreds and hundreds of local Blacks had gathered for the rally, and then there was a sort of fringe of, of White people on the outside of it. And there were a number of speakers who were, who were on the agenda that night, Stokely and Willie Ricks of SNCC was another one and then, and then I believe—

00:08:30:00

Interviewer:

I'm going to move you forward to when he's, he actually gave the speech. We don't need quite so much setup.

00:08:35:00

Arlie Schardt:

OK, all right. Stokely gave a very, very fiery address that evening, in which he basically told the group that they couldn't count on support, or cooperation, or help from the White man and that Blacks had to, had to do it on their own, that Blacks were being sent off to fight and die in Vietnam, and yet they couldn't even vote. They had no rights at all in the communities where they lived, and that they were going to have to gather their, their own courage and not, not worry about outside help and, and, and he began leading the crowd in a chant for Black Power which of course many people began interpreting as a, a call for Black separatism, and this was contrary to, to Dr. King's goal of integration and as a result.

00:09:25:00

Interviewer:

Were you startled by it? Did it affect you?

00:09:26:00

Arlie Schardt:

I wasn't startled by it because I had heard Stokely talking for several days by this time along the same line. There were talks as we walked along the highway. He made, he made brief little talks, even to the Chief of Police in, in Greenwood, he—we went around during the day, and he made calls on a number of, of offices tha—where there were officials that he knew well, and told them that it was a new day, and that they were, and that, and that Negroes, at that time the Black—the word Black was just beginning to be used, but that Negroes were, were tired of waiting and that they were going to gain their rights on their own. Later that day, of course, Stokely was arrested because he had been told and the, the march had been told that they could not set up their tents in a, at a, in a schoolground where they had planned to set up the tents. And Stokely and others began setting up the tents anyway, and Stokely was arrested, and taken off to jail, but he was out on bail by the end of the day in time for the rally.

00:10:29:00

Interviewer:

But, now, I'm going to take you right back to that speech again, you said Black Power, did you feel anything different at this time when you heard Black Power than you—

00:10:37:00

Arlie Schardt:

Yeah, very definitely. It was a change, even in the way—even though I knew him well, and we had, we had many a meal together and walked on, on marches together and so on, his attitude toward, toward me as a White reporter and toward other White reporters whom he knew just as well, was different. He—there, there was a, there was a definite barrier between us, and, and, and he, he wanted us to call him Sir from then on, and the—and he wanted a little more formality, at least publicly, in our, in our relationships, which had been very casual in the past because there had been tremen—tremendous amount of dialogue, and long interviews, and everything, and definitely there was a sort o—of, Keep your distance, Whitey. I'm, I'm, you know, this is a new day now and, and I mean it at all levels. I'm paraphrasing Stokely, but there was a definite change there. There was no question about it.

00:11:39:00

Interviewer:

OK, so King is making his speech.

00:11:44:00

Arlie Schardt:

Well, he had—King had made a speech, we're facing the courthouse and, facing a lineup of Cecil Price and a lot of deputies and King, at one point said that he had a feeling that the murderers were nearby and then this voice from back behind us where the—where the White locals were lined up on the, on this elevated sidewalk, a guy yells out and says, They're right behind you. And the whole crowds cracked up, laughing and, and then Dr. King started to deliver a prayer and I, I'm standing right next to him at the time about, about, just maybe six inches away from him, we were essentially side by side, suddenly this great big cherry bomb [claps] landed right between our shoes and exploded and both of us and all the people around us naturally leaped back. We were startled. And the crowd started roaring even more and that in turn generated, it just turned—it was like a signal to, in effect attack, the, the people taking part in the demonstration. More cherry bombs began raining down from all sides, other things, sticks and stones and stuff like that, bottles, started being thrown at the marchers and—and King and the other leaders realized that we had to get out of there right away. So he and the parade marshals and, and other leaders of the march began trying to move everybody, to the right, to our right down the main street, I think it was called Beacon Street to start this long walk back to the church, back to the Baptist, Baptist Church that been the starting point of the march. And, and as we began going back, the crowd literally began plunging in on the, on the marchers and attacking them. A number of people were, were slugged with baseball bats and sticks and stuff like that. There was a, a—one man, took a, had an epileptic fit, one of the marchers. And a nurse named Dorothy Williams, I remember noting at the time that she was 28 years old. She was with the Medical Committee for Human Rights from New York City. She was a White woman and she started helping this, it was a Black man, who was on the, on the street and a crowd began gathering around and insulting her and—and saying, Leave him alone, and Leave him there, and everything. Finally, a pickup truck backed up to them and they were helped up by some of the other marchers. And this man was put into the truck and he was coughing and shaking and everything and the crowd began throwing cherry bombs right into the, into the pickup truck, and, and they were exploding all around this helpless guy who was, who was in a, in a desperate condition, and Dorothy Williams of course was, was terrified. And somehow the truck managed to plow through the crowd and so on and as the marchers proceeded down the, down the street and out of town, a number of times, cars driven by Whites would make a pass at the, at the march and reach out with a stick or a baseball bat and swing at the marchers and so on, and—

00:14:51:00

Interviewer:

Tell me about your camera.

00:14:52:00

Arlie Schardt:

I was taking pictures of all this all the time. I had just a little, a little camera, 35-millimeter camera, and I had strapped it around my wrist, because there was so much turmoil going on. And I was, often holding it up to shoot down over the crowd and stuff like that. I had shot pictures of Williams in the, in the truck and things like that. And some guys, somebody hit me with a, with a stick in the ribs, or something like that, and somebody else grabbed for the camera, and there was a lot of wrestling going on. And then I, I broke away from them, and started running up the street, and somebody else hit me from behind. They were really, they really wanted the camera, there was no question. The crowd had already flipped over one of the television cameramen, a guy who had just gotten back from Vietnam, survived that. And he was knocked down, and his camera was smashed and everything. And so, I, I ran again and, and several more people tried to tear it loose but I, I had this leather strap around my wrist and that, that kept the camera in place so that I was able to, to get away. Eventually, we got away from the center of town and—and the turmoil began to subside a little bit. And I was walking with King, and he was talking with Andy Young. I've never seen Dr. King so shaken, all the, all the dozens or hundreds of times that I had been with him in, in, in public situations. And he said to Andy that this is the most, this is the most terrible place we have ever been, and this is—and we—and then he said, We've got to, we've got to find a way to protect these people. One of the local ministers had been grabbed out of the march on the way back, and arrested by, by some of Price's Deputies and had been taken off to jail. He was one of the local Black leaders, and King was really frightened. This was the same jail where they had taken Schwerner, and Goodman, and Chaney before they murdered them. And King was terrified that the same thing was going to happen to this minister. And so, we got back to the church, and he was—he was still just absolutely shaken. And he, I remember, he kept just wiping his head, and, and forehead, and, and saying to the people around him that we've got to go back, and I, I, I, I'm trying to remember the name of the minister. I could do that if you wanna stop for a moment.

00:17:07:00

Interviewer:

No, I think I'm gonna step because the—because [unintelligible] now, just cut.

Camera crew member #2:

Cut.

Camera crew member #3:

Yeah, cut.

[cut]

[slate]

00:17:16:00

Arlie Schardt:

That night in Canton was the single, most unbelievable, and awful moment that I saw or experienced in all the seven or eight years that I covered the civil rights movement. Of all the other things that you've ever heard about happening there, the horror of that, and the brutality of that, and the madness of it was, was simply unforgettable. And it was without any warning that suddenly the troopers donned their gas masks, and started lobbing tear gas into this crowd of women, children, elderly people; chaos ensued. People were choking and gasping. It was just at dusk, so it was getting dark as they, as they started lobbing the stuff in on everybody. There had been picnic tables set up under these kind of canvas coverings, canvas tops and everything. In the bedlam, those started falling down on everybody, the, the troopers would spot people who were kind of squirming and crawling away, getting over toward the school building, or something like that to protect themselves, and they would go over, and fire tear gas on those people. After, after a few minutes of, of God knows what was happening, people might, might have been trapped under there, and suffocating under the canvas parts that had fallen down. I went in to start trying to take some pictures again, and, and was hit this time by one of the, one of the troopers who knocked the camera loose from me for a minute, but I got it back, and started trying to shoot some more pictures but the, the thing that was the most notable was that as you would move through this, ***it was like a scene of hell, with the smoke rising and people vomiting, and crawling around, and choking, and crying. And, and then there was a kind of an eerie silence, and the one thing you could hear over and over again was the thud, thud, thud sound and what it w—was the Mississippi troopers kicking people on the ground, or hitting them with their rifle butts.*** One, one young man, I remember seeing him crawl out, and he was obviously already in terrible shape, and a trooper came up, and just bashed him three times in the head with his rifle butt. And I remember that at that point, a White man who turned out to have been a, a minister, a White minister from Mississippi, of all things, came over and, and pleaded with the trooper to stop it, and said, My God, why are doing this? And the trooper just said, Shut up or I'll give you the same thing, or something like that. And that went on for 5 or 10 minutes of a—of just constant—wherever they saw people starting to, to move away, or form other clusters, they would lob some more tear gas on them. And then the, the beatings just continued for, I—as I say, I suppose about five or ten minutes of just solidly pounding people who were already helpless and sick. It was, it was just horrible. It was just unbelievable.

00:20:11:00

Interviewer:

OK, that’s good. Let’s stop down now.

[cut]

[slate]

00:20:20:00

Arlie Schardt:

At first, I really wasn't sure what to think. The, the Black Power, the Black Power theme was being, was being put forward by Stokely, and Willie Ricks, and other SNCC leaders whom I had known for a long time. I wasn't quite sure how seriously to take them, if—in terms of my personal working relationship with them. I had known them for a long time. We had had a good relationship. I knew that they needed the media. They knew that they needed the media. So, at first when, when this, when this kind of thin veneer of hostility began coming from them toward myself, and toward other White reporters, I really wasn't quite sure how seriously to take it, or whether Stokely was saying this for effect. There were a lot of new reporters coming down there, and I knew he wanted to make an impact on, on them, as well as ones who had known him, and known his thinking for a long time. And at the same time, there were plenty of Black leaders who were dead set against that theme because they knew that it was going to be interpreted nationally as an anti-White approach, and they didn't want that. They felt that integration was still the way the country had to go if there was going to be any justice at all. So, I, I felt that hostility, but I—and I, I would have to say, I was never physically afraid. I didn't expect that anybody was going to hurt me. But I wondered if we really were going to be cut off from further contact about what was going on behind the scenes, and it was gonna impair our ability to report. And I could certainly see that a lot of people were—a lot of Whites were interpreting this, some because they wanted to, others because they just saw it that way, as the beginning of an anti-White effort on the part of the civil rights movement.

00:22:07:00

Interviewer:

Did you ever confront Stokely about this?

00:22:09:00

Arlie Schardt:

Oh, yeah. Both then and the following—

00:22:11:00

Interviewer:

Start over again. Give me a statement. Because they don't hear my question.

00:22:13:00

Arlie Schardt:

OK, Stokely and I talked about this at great length, not only, not so much during that couple of weeks on the march, because there was, there weren't that many times to, to have a really prolonged conversation. But immediately after it was over, the following weekend, or a Monday, whatever it was, we spent a long—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Arlie Schardt:

—night together over dinner in Atlanta.

Interviewer:

OK, we're gonna stop down because the film just ran out.

Arlie Schardt:

Oh, OK.

00:22:44:00

Camera crew member #1:

OK. Rollout on ten-forty-five

Arlie Schardt:

All right. [laughs] We'll see—

[cut]

[camera roll #1046]

00:22:48:00

Camera crew member #2:

Mark it. OK.

[slate]

00:22:53:00

Arlie Schardt:

Well, I think that the media coverage of, of this event was interesting also because ***there was a tendency, I thought, to overplay it.*** I think the reason, I think there were a couple of reasons for that. One is that as I have mentioned before, there were a lot of new reporters coming in and out.

00:23:10:00

Interviewer:

I'm going to stop you because I don't want the reference to what you said before.

00:23:12:00

Arlie Schardt:

I'm sorry. I knew it the minute I, I think one reason is that ***there were a lot of new reporters, reporters who were new to this beat, who were coming in from a lot of papers around the country, as the march began to pick up momentum, and as this Black Power theme began to get some publicity. The second reason was that it was never, the theme was never really clearly articulated. Or at least what it meant was never clearly defined. And so, it, it was open to very broad interpretations. And there were some Whites, for their own reasons, who wanted to take this as a signal of real Black hostility and enmity,*** and there were others who simply didn't know how to, how to read what was being said, and therefore it was left open to the idea that, that this was a dramatic change in the civil rights movement in which Blacks were telling the Whites to get out, and forget it, we're on our own and, and it was, and, and that it would be anti-White. And—but remember, that there was a lot of confusion because there was no unanimity about this. There were, most of the Black leaders were still arguing strongly for integration as the, as the only approach to take to achieve justice throughout the country.

00:24:23:00

Interviewer:

OK, we'll stop down now.

[cut]

00:24:26:00

Camera crew member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

Camera crew member #1:

OK Jim.

00:24:32:00

Arlie Schardt:

There was every reason for local Blacks, and this, this march was primarily local Blacks marching as the march got near their, their home areas. There was every reason for them to be not only—not only to have the traditional fear of physical violence against them, but economic violence was another factor, and it, it meant that it took great courage for these people, for the local Black people to come out in any way be associated with it. Either to march, or even to stand out on the sidewalk, and watch the march come through their town. Let me just read you one thing that I think would set the example of that. A local banker told me along the march; this is a White man, owner of a 2,000-acre plantation. And he said, The march is just a farce, and the better class niggers aren't paying any attention to it. I've got niggers working on my plantation, and they're better satisfied now than they ever were. Last year, I was guardian angel to about 20 families living on my plantation, and they wouldn't take a crap without checking with me first. But I don't have any living there now. I just hire them by the day, and I'm happy because we don't have to feed their little bastard children anymore. And he said all this very calmly as if he was just calmly presenting to me the White point of view about, about daily life as we moved along Highway 51, and then off into the Delta. And that was the atmosphere that these people had to confront. And so, they, they had to make a very courageous decision in order to come out and, and march, or support the march in any way. Provide food, or water, or shelter, or anything like that as the march came through their areas.

00:26:01:00

Interviewer:

OK, let’s stop down.

[cut]

00:26:06:00

Camera crew member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

Camera crew member #1:

OK Jim.

00:26:10:00

Interviewer:

OK, that night in Greenwood.

00:26:11:00

Arlie Schardt:

Well the, the kind of contest that was going on was epitomized by the night in Greenwood, where there was a very large rally. There were hundreds and hundreds of people, and first there would be a speaker from SNCC, it would be Stokely, or it would be Willie Ricks, who was terrific at generating crowd enthusiasm, getting, lining up their speeches with the climactic phrase, Black Power, and getting the, getting the crowd to be chanting, Black Power! Black Power! Black Power! Then Ralph Abernathy from SCLC would—would get up, and he would give his speech, and then he would get the crowd, then he would say to the crowd, Chant freedom! Call for freedom! Freedom! So, then the crowd was calling for Freedom! Freedom! Freedom! and the Black Power chant has been set aside. So, there was this constant pulling and tugging, both among the, the, the, the leading groups in the march, the leading civil rights groups in the march, to get the crowd to respond in a certain way. But also, they were obviously trying to get their messages across on the media. I think both sides were worried that maybe the only television coverage that night would show either King would be worried about, about the Black Power slogan being the only thing, and Stokely was probably worried about the integration theme still being the only message that was, that was getting out to the nation at large. So, this competition was, was kind of epitomized that night. But it was going on all the time, every day. There was a lot of this jockeying, and pulling, and hauling for primacy of, of one's message.

00:27:37:00

Interviewer:

OK, let’s stop down. I think that’s the end of it then.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:27:41:00