

Interview with **Clyde Killens**

Date: March 21, 1989

Interviewer: Madison Davis Lacy, Jr.

Camera Rolls: 1061-1062

Sound Rolls: 124A-125

Team: A

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 Clyde Killens, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on March 21, 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 #1061]

[sound roll #124A]

00:00:11:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

Clyde Killens:

[clears throat]

Camera crew member #1:

OK, Davis.

Interviewer:

OK, Clyde.

Clyde Killens:

Yeah.

00:00:23:00

Interviewer:

Take me back to a time when Overtown was in its heyday and this was pretty much all that Black people had during the time of segregation. They say it was exciting. What was it like?

00:00:35:00

Clyde Killens:

Well, it was in, we, we'll start in the fifties. We can start there when they started piling into Miami, the, the Black businessmen and the sportsmen and athletes and things because of the hotel they'd built here. It was the Sir John and first it was the Lord Calvert.

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm.

00:00:57:00

Clyde Killens:

And something happened between the owner and, and the politicians and they changed it to the Sir John because he got in a little trouble, and in fact he had, he was with the liquor, Sir Calvert's Liquor. And the doctor told him to rest up, get out of the business, Ben, you had enough, and all like that. So he got out, but he went into a banking business which he wasn't a banker.

00:01:26:00

Interviewer:

What was this like in style? Did the people like living here, lots of people?

00:01:31:00

Clyde Killens:

Yeah, well, I'm getting to that now, where he built the hotel. And he went in the banking business, he got into a little problem and they had to change it from the Lord Calvert to the Sir John because the Sir John people bailed him out. And that's why, [coughs] that's why it didn't stay the Lord Calvert. [coughs] It was Sir John. And they took off from there. In the fifties, the acts, *Nat King Cole, Sammy Davis, George Kirk, all those guys when they come down here, they worked at, in Miami Beach but their shows in the hotel, they off at 2:00 and they all would come over to Sir John* and all their White friends would follow them, you see. And they didn't have the crack cocaine and all of that going on then and they didn't have

a problem. Nobody robbed anybody. You could come out and you could be as high as you want to be. Nobody would touch you, because back there it was a little different then it is now. And they would follow up and then when they, the musician would come out ***and they would go in the lounge and there would be seven or eight or ten musicians there jamming.*** They jammed there all night until six o'clock in the morning. And they had private parties, birthday parties around the pool. You know something, the PA system just went on all day long, calling different ones for the hotel and the hotel was full. Then they built the Caravelle and the Caravelle got full and then Mary Elizabeth had made quite a bit of changes there. And then you had the Rockland Palace and you had Harlem Square, the Cafe Society. You had all of those places to go to plus they had a few good restaurants, like that. And it was just nice to be around. It's kind of like in Atlantic City with Club Harlem, if you'd just been around there, you had a lot of things happenin' there. A lot of people going in and out. And that's the way it was in Miami. And most of the businessmen could get away and the sportsmen they could get away. Then they had the, the North Side Golf Tournament here. It made a big—added lots to it. And they gave us the golf course five days free because it was supposed to get people to come, come down here and to buy homes and whatnot. And they did a good job on that.

00:03:50:00

Interviewer:

Of all the famous people you met, who made the most impression upon you?

00:03:52:00

Clyde Killens:

I liked Jackie Robinson. Jackie Robinson was interested in what going on with your city. He didn't care 'bout talking about baseball. He wanted to know what goes on in your city. And he wanted to know, could he got to another, any other theatre he could go besides the one we had, which was the Rex Theater. And I happened to know where he could go, one place, other than the Rex Theater, but it was a drive-in and it was out on U.S. 1 and I took him down there where he'd know how to get there and every time he'd come into Miami, he'd stay at the Mary Elizabeth, he would go down to the drive-in, take his family, his two kids and his wife, Rachel. I know her. And they would go down there. And when I would see Jackie, he would come to the club, we'd sit down, we'd talk. He'd just sit and look until, I guess, time for him to go in, and his conversation was very interesting. In fact he'd ask you some interesting questions because he wanted to know about the city and so I found him to be very attractive to me.

00:04:57:00

Interviewer:

What happened to your town?

00:05:00:00

Clyde Killens:

Well, they tore it down the middle of it with this expressway. That was the beginning of it. Because the Classic used to be here and they used to parade down Second Avenue, but when the Classic, cut them off, cut them off they went to Liberty City. That hurt. It killed, in other words, the Classic started going down from that at time on when they moved to Liberty City and then there—different places started dropping out because of the integration. They integrated and then the acts, and it was on the beach, but coming to the Sir John delayed things. They booked, when them cats signed a contract, the contract with room and board, you see, so that slowed them down from coming over here. And the hotel, then would wind, wind up with the home people, and you know how that is. That'd lower your rent, and you might get paid and you might not. And things started going downhill. But before that it was very attractive. I don't know no city that was more attractive than Miami because they was opening up hotels like The Pershing in Chicago, they opened and The Gotham in Detroit, it was around. But all that's gone now. All them hotels are gone out of business. And Miami stood up for quite a while.

00:06:12:00

Interviewer:

How did you feel watching all this happen?

00:06:15:00

Clyde Killens:

Well I felt good about it because I was way down here when you was hemmed in from 6th Street to 20th Street and you could go nowhere. So I had leave here and go to New York to stay, five and six months and get a belly full then I'd come back. Stayed here for six months here and go back, and was back and forth for twenty-five years.

00:06:34:00

Interviewer:

But how did you feel when you, when you noticed the community basically changing with integration, your town?

00:06:39:00

Clyde Killens:

Well, I felt bad about it, and because I knew what was—I, I knew what was coming up. I knew what was going, I knew that we had something, and the youngsters didn't know how to handle it. We had, we had some good advantages there that we could use. But we, we didn't use it. We had, they didn't want us to vote. And we got the power. They knew what that was, that's power. And we got it, and we didn't use it. We're not, still are not using it. And they went—they didn't want to integrate the schools. That was another advantage we had. We blew that. We carried knives. We carried guns. And you take his lunch money and they go on, I'm a gorilla and you got to do, do what I say. And the people took their children out of the schools. And left it all, wind up with the school being all Black. They took them out one year by year, year by year. And, and you couldn't blame them in a way because if they'da went there, get what they're supposed to get out of the schools other than trying to gorilla somebody and be mean to the other races, they wouldn't have pulled them so fast. But that was, that was our problem. We didn't use the weapon we had to our advantage.

00:07:57:00

Interviewer:

Well, now, are young people today more violent than you witnessed them to be?

Clyde Killens:

Yes.

Interviewer:

Why? Why are young people more violent?

00:08:06:00

Clyde Killens:

Well, I hate to say it, but it's because the treatment, the justice we have now. We don't have 100 percent justice. But we have justice now. You cannot beat a negro over the head now and get away with it like you could years ago. They would kill you years ago and wouldn't be no trial. And now, they— incidents happen here and they wind up suing, getting 800 and a million dollars for a kid and you know and whatnot but before they'd kill you and there wasn't no trial. It would hardly hit the papers. And especially if you had a gun anywhere near you, you see. And now you can say what you want to the police. He can't say nothing but talk back, he can't beat you up. But before, and I know, you took something, and they said you took it and you say you didn't. They'd take you down to the station house, you would tell them you took something if you didn't or what they would call a foreman come in the room and beat you until you couldn't walk. And when they came, when, and, and, and nothing would be done about it. You couldn't go nowhere. You couldn't go to the newspaper. Newspaper wouldn't get in it.

00:09:23:00

Interviewer:

Let's stop.

00:09:24:00

Camera crew member #2:

OK, stopping down.

[cut]

00:09:27:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:09:35:00

Camera crew member #1:

OK, fine. Go.

00:09:41:00

Interviewer:

OK. Taking you back to 1980.

Clyde Killens:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer:

McDuffie has been killed. How did the community react to McDuffie's killing?

00:09:50:00

Clyde Killens:

Well, they thought it was unjust the way they did and they, they, you know, you don't need to do all the things that they were doing but that's the young people's style, of breaking in, looting. They use that. They do it during a storm. When they have a storm here, they take a brick and throw in a window and they figure the, the storm did that and then they go in, you see. Instead of them going in to try and save they life, they get out there where the storm is at. I don't care how hard the wind blowing, they'll be out there with the, in the streets, to go in places and do those kind of things. So, it's nothing for them to act up because they use that. And the only way to prevent that, you got to be prepared for that. Well it depends on when it happened. Now, this last incident happened here with—

00:10:46:00

Interviewer:

Now, we don't want to talk—we're only in the period between 1980, 1982.

Clyde Killens:

OK.

Camera crew member #1:

Can we stop for a second.

Interviewer:

Yes.

Camera crew member #2:

Cut?

Camera crew member #1:

Yeah.

[cut]

[camera roll #1062]

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it, please.

[slate]

00:11:02:00

Interviewer:

Let's go back to 1980 in May when the riot took place over here in Overtown after the McDuffie acquittals.

Clyde Killens:

Uh-huh.

Interviewer:

Tell me why you think all of that happened the way it did.

00:11:14:00

Clyde Killens:

Well, they, there was some out-of-towners came in here during that time. Some out-of-towners came in here, they were here. And this thing was going, was going on during the trial. They came in here and I remember they were having a meeting in this 600 block, this 500 block, one morning they had a meeting there. And I really didn't know what they was up to but I remember the meeting and I remember so many people that I saw in the meeting. And this thing was kind of planned. And it was planned in a way that wasn't an amateur thing.

00:12:02:00

Interviewer:

You mean the riot?

00:12:03:00

Clyde Killens:

Yeah, the riot. When they'd burn places, it wasn't like you put gasoline on and set a place afire. This was done, like, army style. Like you would leave a place in the army. They was done in army style. That the Fire Department got, they would get there too late, the way they were doing it. And this thing went on and a lot of Whites got caught in the thing. They didn't know what was going on. Well, I know I saved one woman, she was bringing her maid home and she run right into it and I happened to be out there at the time. It was Liberty City, 62nd Street and 15th Avenue, no, 14th Avenue, and a friend of mine named Hiram Johnson and myself, we stopped the car because she was supposed to, she going on through to take her maid home. And we told her, Don't go down in that next block. And there was two, the three



of them in there. So I said, let her, we're taking her home, I said, well, let her out. Then the guys come around the car. They were trying to get their pocketbooks and we wouldn't let them. And we turned them around and let the maid get out and through to get away, get home the best way she could, just get them out. But we didn't really know at that time it was going to be as bad as it was. But it just, it was, it was, it was happening down in the next block. It hadn't come up this way. So that's one of the things I remember during that riot and they, they kept doing things. Well, they had the national convention, the public convention on the beach and they had a Black writer by the name of C.T. Taylor. He could get out there and get all the information he wanted because he was Black. And he could talk to them and he was right in the middle of it and he was sending the messages back and the people began to tell the station, we don't want to hear nothing about the convention. We want to know what's going on in Liberty City from C.T. Taylor, made a name for himself and got a—he got a program for, with Channel 4 and he had it for years.

00:14:08:00

Interviewer:

All right. Be specific. Who was C. T. Taylor? He was on the radio, right?

Clyde Killens:

Yeah.

00:14:11:00

Interviewer:

Tell me now, who was C. T. Taylor?

00:14:13:00

Clyde Killens:

No, he, he, he had a, he had a, a TV program, too. And he went from radio to a TV program.

00:14:20:00

Interviewer:

OK, well state it this way. C.T. Taylor was someone who—

00:14:23:00

Clyde Killens:

He was with CBS, I mean, Channel 4 here, local. And he got, he made his name in this riot by giving so much important news back during the convention and all of that. People was wanting more, hear more from him than they did the convention because they had the convention on, too.

00:14:41:00

Interviewer:

OK. Thank you. Stop.

00:14:43:00

Camera crew member #1:

OK. Stop down—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Clyde Killens:

Year ago, the politicians—

Camera crew member #2:

Block, set, Eyes on the Prize.

Clyde Killens:

—ran the country.

Interviewer:

Right.

Camera crew member #2:

Camera roll ten sixty-four

Clyde Killens:

Newspaper would shut up. And—

Camera crew member #2:

—sound roll one, two, five.

Interviewer:

Oh, went along.

Clyde Killens:

—went along—

Interviewer:

Right, exactly.

00:14:57:00

Clyde Killens:

—you know what I mean, they didn't, they didn't know whatever, whatever.

Interviewer:

Right.

[cut]

[sound roll #125]

00:15:01:00

Camera crew member #1:

Marker.

[slate]

Camera crew member #1:

OK.

00:15:09:00

Interviewer:

In the mid '60s or so with integration, Black people started to leave Overtown and Liberty City. One of them was Frank Legree. Tell me the story of Frank Legree.

Clyde Killens:

Well, he—

Interviewer:

State Frank Legree.

Clyde Killens:

Frank Legree, this house was for sale and I—

00:15:25:00

Interviewer:

Can I stop one more time? Frank Legree was—

00:15:27:00

Clyde Killens:

Frank Legree was the Black guy that bought the home in a White neighborhood, and they didn't want him there. But he insist on staying. And it, things got harder and harder by him staying. They began to break the windows out of the house and so on. And he got a job as an MC/dancer on, on the 79th Street Causeway. And they got to the owner and threatened him, and he had to let him go. So he didn't have a job. So, he don't have a job, don't have nowhere to stay, because he's staying to The Caravelle. He's not paying his rent. He not paying his mortgage. So the owner of the property got after the bank. It was financed through a bank. Bank was handling the money. So the bank give him a certain time, pay up or get out. So, he was in the radio station, which was WMBM, which Butterball was a fantastic disc jockey at the time. He was there telling him about it, and I had an appointment with Butterball to play a record for me that was new, too new for my club and I wanted him to heat it up on, on the radio. Play it a while and let them get used to it then we'd come back. And when I walked in, he spoke, "Mr. Clyde, you got the record?" I said, "Yes." He said, "You know Legree don't you?" I said, No, I don't know him. I read about him." He said, "Well this is Frank." [Frank said] "God, I'm so sick of this," I don't know what else. I say, "What's the matter?" He say, "Man, he got to get out of the house." I say, "Why do he got to get out of the house?" He said, "'cause he ain't paid no mortgage in God knows when." And he's sayin', "You know, he ain't got but a couple days to get out of there." And he said, "If he could stay there about ten more days, we could win this thing." I said, "How much is the mortgage?" He told me. I thought for a few seconds and I, I said, "Tell you what, come by the club tonight at 10:30. I'm going to give you the mortgage money." And he's, "Sure enough?" I said, "Yes." And

Butterball said, "When Clyde tell you that," he said, "go by there". So he came by. But before he come by, when I walked out of the station, I walked across the street, see and they had a little drugstore by the name of, a woman named Miss Barkley and I went to her and I told her about the story. I said, I'm going to collect this money from the public, to get him to pay for this. And so she gave me five dollars. I went to Garth Reeves who's the publisher of The Miami Times. His daddy was in charge a block from there. He gave me \$5.00. I went to the Economy Drugstore, which is owned by Ward, he gave me ten. My next stop was a, a Jewish place, Jack's Clothing Store. I went to him and I was telling him about it and he gave me a lot of lip. So, I said, "Jack, let me tell you something, I've been here." I say, "I saw when the Warner Plaza Hotel on Miami Beach when it said, 'No Jews,' and that meant you." And I said, "But y'all fought back and scratched and now y'all own the beach." I said, "This is what we're doing." "OK, then, if I give you a hundred, I'll write you a check for a hundred dollars." I say, "Fine." So, I took his check and went to the other joints. To Doobie's, I went to Rick's Department Store, Ken the tailor and I collect more money until I got the money that I invested in Frank's mortgage. And I got the names, went out, I went out the next day and went to work too and so the next day I saw him and I had all the people down I had got donations from and so I told him, I said, "Frank, put on your clothes. Go to every one of these places, introduce yourself and tell them who you are and thank them for the contribution they give you for this, for this house." He did that. Then he come back the next day. He says, "Some people wasn't there." I said, "Go back." I had to go back two or three times. So, then, the people began to call me and thank me for, for asking them for a donation since they didn't know him and he went to see them and thank them for the donation. And things started breaking down. Everything started changing now. It looked like things started breaking down. They changed the White security to the Black security. There were White Citizen Council, they come into town, they put them in jail. The newspapers started breaking down. Shortly after that, you saw some signs going up for sale here and there and then people got interested and went there with whatever money they had. They would accept it and take the mortgage, you see. And they started moving north. And the Black people started moving in. That was it.

00:19:48:00

Camera crew member #1:

All right. Cut.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:19:51:00

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