

Interview with **Gussie Nesbitt**

August 28, 1979

Montgomery, Alabama

Camera Rolls: 13-15

Sound Rolls: 8-9

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

[camera roll 13]

[sound roll 8]

[wild audio]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: THIS WILL BE MRS. NESBITT WALKING.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: SPEED.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: ROLLING.

Nesbitt: The bus stop.

INTERVIEWER 1: NOT YET.

Nesbitt: Not yet?

INTERVIEWER 1: WHAT WAS IT LIKE BEFORE THE BUS BOYCOTT?

Nesbitt: It was—we had to get on the bus, when we worked all day and we didn't—couldn't, couldn't sit down. And we got on the bus, if we got on the bus, we had to get up. They put us back in the back like cattles [sic]. We were stuffed in the back just like cattles. And if we got

to a seat, we couldn't sit down in that seat. We had to stand up over that seat. I work hard all day, and I had to stand up all the way home, because I couldn't have a seat on the bus. And if you sit down on the bus, the bus driver would say, let me have that seat, nigger. And you'd have to get up. And you couldn't sit down. And a lot of times that we'd go to the front. He wouldn't let us in the front, but he'd take our money at the front. And then he'd drive off and leave us standing there without—he done took our money and gone. And that's how it was when—during the bus boycott. And that's why I walked.

00:01:15:00

INTERVIEWER 1: WHEN DID YOU FIRST HEAR ABOUT THE BOYCOTT?

Nesbitt: When Rosie got on the bus and the white man asked her for his—the, the bus driver asked her up. And she refused to get up. And they had her arrested. And she called E.D. Nixon and E.D. Nixon went down there and they got her out. And that's where the, the bus boycott first started off.

INTERVIEWER 1: AND DID YOU GET A LEAFLET ABOUT IT?

Nesbitt: Got what?

INTERVIEWER 1: GET A—ANY PAPER ON IT TO TELL YOU THAT THERE WAS GOING TO BE A BOYCOTT?

Nesbitt: Yes. It was, it was announced in the church. It was first organized at Mount Zion Church and it was—and they told us all then that we was gonna start boycotting. And that night when they was all organized, Pastor King was the last man walked in. And he sit in the back. And when he sit in the back, E.D. Nixon pointed to him and said, there's our leader. And he said he wrestled with it all night. He couldn't go to bed. And he wrestled with it all night to see if he would take it. And said he asked the Lord to show him. And so sitting at the table he drank the cup of coffee. And sitting at the table he leaned over on the table and he must have dozed off to sleep, but it come before him to take it. And so he's the organizer that night. And then the next boycott, when we had the full gathering of the boycott was at the Holt Street Baptist Church which I didn't attend that night because my husband was real sick.

00:02:42:00

INTERVIEWER 1: NOW WHAT WAS IT LIKE HAVING TO WALK? I MEAN WHAT KIND OF HARDSHIP DID IT PUT ON YOU?

Nesbitt: Well, it was pretty hard to walk because I had to walk about a mile and a half or more to work and back. And it was pretty, pretty hard to work. I was, I was tired. I worked all day and then I was tired, but I had to walk.

INTERVIEWER 1: WHY DID YOU HAVE TO WALK?

Nesbitt: I walked because I wanted better—I wanted everything to be better for us. And, and then, and they had on the boycott and I wanted to cooperate with, with, with the majority of the people that was, was—had on the boycott. I wanted to be one of them that tried to make it better. I don't want somebody—didn't want somebody else to make it better for me. And I, I, I—and I didn't cooperate with them. And I went—I walked.

00:03:27:00

INTERVIEWER 2: WAS THERE EVER A TIME YOU WERE TEMPTED TO TAKE THE BUS?

Nesbitt: I never attempted to take the bus. Never.

INTERVIEWER 2: YOU WEREN'T TEMPTED? YOU WEREN'T TIRED?

Nesbitt: I was tired, but I didn't tempt—my feets [sic] was tired, but my soul was willing. I didn't, I didn't have no desire to get on the bus.

INTERVIEWER 1: DID THEY EVER—DID THE BUSES EVER PASS YOU BY AND OPEN THEM AND ASKED YOU TO COME ON?

Nesbitt: They have, they've, they have stopped many times. It was Oak Park bus then, but it's another bus now. They changed it. But it was Oak Park bus at that time. He has stopped many times on the corner of High and Jackson and opened the door for people to get on, but they didn't get on. There's a mighty few, two or three might have gotten on, but didn't nobody else get on.

INTERVIEWER 2: DID YOU EVER GET RIDES FROM PEOPLE?

Nesbitt: Well, we had a pick-up down at the Hudson Street Baptist Church. And by my husband being sick sometime I would get there too late or sometime I, I would get there before he got his load going my way and I had to keep walking, because I didn't want to be too late getting through on my job and getting back to my husband.

00:04:30:00

INTERVIEWER 2: THE POLICE SAY THAT THE CRIME RATE DROPPED OFF IN MOST OF THE CITY. DO YOU REMEMBER THAT?

Nesbitt: The what?

INTERVIEWER 2: THE CRIME.

Nesbitt: Yeah, the crime rate dropped off. They didn't have much of a crime. No more than they—bombing. We had a lot of that.

INTERVIEWER 2: WAS THE COMMUNITY REALLY TOGETHER THEN?

Nesbitt: It was, yes sir. They really was. Every—everybody was together. And I remember the night when they, when they bombed Pastor King's house. I was living right around the corner from there. He was living on Jackson and I was living on Sharp and we went out, went—he was, he wasn't there. His wife was in there with a small baby at that time. And somebody said had done bombed his house. He was in a meeting. And when they got there all the colored peoples had had their weapons. They had their guns and everything was ready. But King come out. He went in there and he said, my wife and baby's all right. He held up his hand and he said, put down your weapon. He said, this is non-violent. And so that's why I didn't, didn't, we didn't do anything that night, because I was—they was mine.

00:05:35:00

INTERVIEWER 1: WAS IT HARD SOMETIMES REMAINING NON-VIOLENT?

Nesbitt: No. No. It wasn't hard for me because he preached it. He preached non-violence. Now, sometime I think we would have did some if it hadn't been for him and Reverend Abernathy.

INTERVIEWER 1: DID YOU FIND THAT YOU WERE RIDING WITH PEOPLE SOMETIMES THAT ORDINARILY YOU MIGHT BE AFRAID TO RIDE WITH OR THEY WOULDN'T PICK YOU UP, BUT BECAUSE IT WAS THE BOYCOTT FOLKS JUST KIND OF COOPERATED WITH EACH OTHER?

Nesbitt: No, we wasn't afraid of anyone that picked us up. Because Reverend Johnson, H.H. Johnson, the Pastor of Hutchins Street, he—it was at his church and he knowed [sic] who was picking up and who wasn't. And who was—you was supposed to ride with and who wasn't. And if the peoples wasn't there what you supposed to ride with, he'd take you himself.

INTERVIEWER 2: CUT.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: THAT WAS RUNOUT ON CAMERA.

00:06:32:00

[cut]

[slate]

[change to camera roll 15]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: SPEED.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER 1: WHAT IS IT LIKE NOW WITH YOUNG BLACK PEOPLE?

Nesbitt: Well, there's a lot of these young black peoples who's holding their, their jobs now. They don't know what the struggle was all about. They was—some of 'em was small and some of 'em was in college in, in high school. They didn't, didn't know what it was all about. And some of them think they did it all by themselves. They don't know what a hard struggle we had to make it possible for them to have the job what they got now.

INTERVIEWER 1: AND HOW DO THEY TREAT YOU?

Nesbitt: Some, some of 'em are very nice and some of 'em is just as nasty as the white folks used to be.

INTERVIEWER 1: WHY DO YOU THINK THAT IS?

Nesbitt: Because they don't understand how they got the position they got. That's why they do it, because they don't know. They didn't have no struggle. It come easy to them because we made it possible for them to have those jobs.

00:07:22:00

INTERVIEWER 1: HOW DO YOU—HOW DID YOU FEEL GOING BACK ON THE BUSES THAT FIRST—THOSE FIRST COUPLE OF DAYS AFTER THE BOYCOTT FINISHED?

Nesbitt: I felt fine because I could sit anywhere I want. I sit right—when I, first time I got on the bus, I sit right back behind the bus driver. If there was any—anyway that I could I would sit in his lap. [laughs]

INTERVIEWER 1: WHAT DID WHITE FOLKS DO? I MEAN HOW DID THEY REACT TO THAT?

Nesbitt: A lot of them stood up. For a good, for a good long while they wouldn't sit down.

INTERVIEWER 1: COULD YOU SAY, SAY, A LOT OF WHITE PEOPLE—

Nesbitt: A lot, a lot of white people stood up.

INTERVIEWER 1: AND, AND WHY DID THEY DO THAT?

Nesbitt: Because they didn't want to sit beside us. That's why. They didn't want to sit down beside us. And they stood up.

INTERVIEWER 1: OK. CAN YOU START AT THE BEGINNING OF THAT AND JUST SAY A LOT OF WHITE FOLKS—A LOT OF WHITE PEOPLE AND THEN EXACTLY THE WAY YOU SAID IT?

Nesbitt: A lot of white people stood up.

INTERVIEWER 1: OK. IF YOU COULD SAY, LIKE, A LOT OF WHITE PEOPLE STOOD UP CAUSE THEY DIDN'T WANT TO STAND NEXT TO US—THE, THE WHOLE THING. YEAH.

Nesbitt: OK. A lot of white people stood up because they didn't want to sit down beside us.

INTERVIEWER 1: AND WHAT DID YOU DO?

Nesbitt: I sit there and was proud to sit there. Because I had walked to make it possible for me to sit down when I got on the bus.

00:08:30:00

INTERVIEWER 1: WERE WHITE FOLKS NASTY AT ALL TO YOU?

Nesbitt: No, they didn't—they wasn't nasty. They didn't say anything to us, but they just stood up and wouldn't sit down beside us.

INTERVIEWER 2: WHO WAS THE TRUE HERO OR HEROINE? WHO WERE THE PEOPLE WHO WERE REALLY WERE—

Nesbitt: Pardon?

INTERVIEWER 2: THE HEROES OF, OF MONTGOMERY? OF THE WHOLE BOYCOTT? DR. KING WAS THE LEADER.

Nesbitt: Well, Dr. Wilson was one and Dr. Hubbard. Dr. H.H. Johnson. They was the leaders of, of all of us.

00:08:59:00

INTERVIEWER 1: DO YOU THINK THAT THE BUSES WOULD HAVE CHANGED WITHOUT THE BOYCOTT?

Nesbitt: No, it would have been worse. Cause it was getting worse everyday. You didn't have room to stand up back there was so many packed back in the back of the bus. And you couldn't sit down. If a seat was a vacant, you couldn't sit down and you had to stand up. And it was getting worse.

INTERVIEWER 2: DID YOU KNOW YOU WERE GOING TO DO SOMETHING THAT WAS GONNA CHANGE THE WORLD? THE MONTGOMERY BOYCOTT—WERE YOU AWARE THAT THE WORLD WAS GONNA CHANGE AFTER THAT?

Nesbitt: Yeah, I, I felt like it was, because God sent Dr. King just like he sent Moses to the children of Israel. And he led them out of bondage and he sent King here for our leader. And we followed our leader. And that's what made it better for us today. He is gone. I wish today that he was here could see all the changes. But he's gone. But his work still lives on.

INTERVIEWER 1: DID YOU THINK THAT BLACK PEOPLE WOULD STAY TOGETHER THE WAY THEY DID?

Nesbitt: No, I didn't. I didn't have the slightest idea that we would stick together and pull together like we did. Because—that's why I say God sent King. Because didn't nobody do that, draw us together like that, but a God.

INTERVIEWER 1: THANK YOU VERY MUCH.

00:10:20:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: THAT'S A CUT.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: OK, THIS WILL BE WILD, WILD SOUND OF MRS. NESBITT; OUTSIDE.

INTERVIEWER 1: WHAT WAS IT LIKE FOR BLACK—FOR, FOR BLACK PEOPLE BEFORE THE BUS BOYCOTT? NOT JUST THE BUSES, BUT THE SEPARATE WAITING ROOMS AND ALL THAT STUFF?

Nesbitt: Well, we couldn't go into cafes. If you wanted to eat anything you had to order it from the front and you'd have to go around to the back and they'd hand it to you out the back door like it was a dog. And the restrooms, you couldn't go in the restroo—white people's rest rooms. You had—some places they had separate. And if they didn't have a separate you couldn't go in there regardless you had to wait and go someplace else.

00:11:00:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: COULD WE HAVE THAT QUESTION AGAIN?

INTERVIEWER 1: OK. TELL YOU WHAT, IF YOU CAN ANSWER IT TOWARD ME, CAUSE THE MIC IS OVER HERE. SO, LET ME, YEAH. WHAT WAS IT LIKE FOR BLACK FOLKS? [laughs] DO IT ALL OVER AGAIN.

Nesbitt: Well, we couldn't go in the restrooms. And if you went to a cafe, we'd have—if we wanted anything to eat, they would hand it to you out at the back door. And, and, like you was a dog and you couldn't go in the, in the rest—in the restaurant. And you couldn't go in

the restrooms. Some places had separate restrooms and some didn't. And if you wanted to go in a—if you wanted to go, you'd just have to hold whatever you had until you got to another, another place that you could go to the restroom.

INTERVIEWER 1: WHAT HAPPENED WHEN YOU WERE TRAVELING?

Nesbitt: I was working for Ms. Thomas and we had went to Florida. And we was on our way back. And I had to go to the restroom. And the man, her husband, stopped at the station and he said he was gonna get some gas while I go to the restroom. And the, the white lady there said, she's, she's not going in there. She's not going in that restroom. And he said, well, we'll go somewhere and get the gas. And her husband say, open the door and let her in. And the only way I could get in there, was for the man, her husband to buy the gas—was the only way that I could go to that restroom.

00:12:14:00

INTERVIEWER 2: DID YOU EVER HAVE TO, TO HAVE ARGUMENTS WITH PEOPLE ABOUT THAT? I MEAN ABOUT WHERE YOU COULD GO?

Nesbitt: No, I never did. Because we—I knowed better than to argue with anybody because the sign was there. They had the signs up there. And I knowed they was for whites. You see, the signs was always up there, "White Only." And I didn't even try—make an attempt to go in there, because I, well, I wouldn't have an argument with them, because I knowed I couldn't go in there.

INTERVIEWER 2: HOW DID YOU FEEL ABOUT WHITE PEOPLE BEFORE?

Nesbitt: Well, I didn't have no hatred against—in my heart against nobody.

INTERVIEWER 2: EVEN THOUGH ALL THOSE THINGS?

Nesbitt: All those things happened, but I didn't have no hatred. I don't—I didn't hate nobody.

INTERVIEWER 2: WHY NOT?

Nesbitt: And I still doesn't hate anybody. I don't know why, but, but I guess because I was raised that way. I, I don't, I don't hate nobody.

00:13:04:00

INTERVIEWER 2: DO YOU THINK DR. KING PREACHED NON-VIOLENCE AND THAT MOST OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT WAS NON-VIOLENT.

Nesbitt: Yeah, that's right. That's right.

INTERVIEWER 2: DO YOU THINK NON-VIOLENCE WAS THE WAY TO GO? YOU



THINK IT WAS THE RIGHT WAY TO DO IT?

Nesbitt: No, because—violence don't accomplish nothing. You don't accomplish nothing by violence. A fire—you can't fight fire with fire. There's got to be some—something in between there. There's, there's stop the evil part of it. And so King said non-violence and that's what we followed, non-violence.

INTERVIEWER 2: WERE YOU EVER IN A SITUATION WHERE YOU MIGHT—  
WERE, WERE THREATENED BY, BY SOMEBODY BEING VIOLENT?

Nesbitt: No, never have.

INTERVIEWER 2: DO YOU THINK IF YOU HAD BEEN YOU WOULD HAVE BEEN—

Nesbitt: I think I would have did a little somethin'. [laughs] I'll be honest, I think if, if, if anybody would have attacked me I would have did something, sure.

00:14:00:00

INTERVIEWER 1: WHEN YOU WERE TALKING ABOUT HOW HARD IT WAS  
WORKING BACK THEN, WHAT WAS IT LIKE? I MEAN YOU SAID YOU HAD TO  
GO AND DO ALL THAT STUFF AND YOU WERE WORKING AND THEY DIDN'T  
PAY YOU ANYTHING.

Nesbitt: They didn't pay me anything, but I had to do everything in the house. Cook, wash, and all that and look after children too. But I wasn't paid—they wasn't paying anything. At that time I was making nine dollars a week.

INTERVIEWER 1: WHAT IS IT LIKE NOW?

Nesbitt: Oh, it's wonderful now. It's wonderful now. I don't work hard and I get good pay.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: CUT.

INTERVIEWER 2: THAT'S GOOD. THANK YOU MA'AM.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: CUT.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:00:14:42:00

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