

Interview with **James Peck**

October 26, 1979

Camera Roll: 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*.

00:00:02:00

[sound roll 1]

[wild audio]

Peck: You see, the, the '47 ride was based on the Supreme Court decision in the Irene Morgan case, which ruled that segregation is a burden on interstate travel. It dealt right with the buses. But the, '61 was based on the Supreme Court decision of that year, that ruled that the terminals also had to desegregate.

00:00:36:00

INTERVIEWER: JIM, I'M, I'M INTERESTED IN A NUMBER OF THINGS, BUT WHAT I WANT TO DO IS, I WANT TO TALK A LITTLE BIT ABOUT GETTING READY TO GO INTO BIRMINGHAM AND THEN I WANT—FOR A MINUTE WHEN YOU'RE READY TO GO WITH THE FILM—THE, YOU JUST TELLING ME—

[cut]

00:00:51:00

[slate]

[camera roll 1]

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: NOT MANY PEOPLE KNOW THIS STORY.

Peck: No.

INTERVIEWER: OK.

Peck: Ready?

INTERVIEWER: YEAH. NOW WE CAN GO.

Peck: When we left Atlanta for Birmingham on May 14th, 1961—I'll tell you late-, later how come I know the date—we knew that we were in for a very rough reception upon arrival. Because we had telephoned to Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth, who was to be our host in Birmingham, and he told us that the Klansmen had been preparing this reception for a full week.

00:01:38:00

INTERVIEWER: STOP RIGHT THERE. I'M IN THE WRONG PLACE.

[cut]

[wild audio]

00:01:42:00

INTERVIEWER: [unintelligible]

Peck: What?

INTERVIEWER: “THEY” BEING WHO?

Peck: Being Marvin Ritz. I mean he, you could call him the general manager. And he is a person of integrity and, and a very good fundraiser. There are very few good fundraisers in the movement. He's now fundraising for the new school here.

00:02:07:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, READY?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #1: YES.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #2: WILD AUDIO. WILD AUDIO.

Peck: Continue?

00:02:10:00

INTERVIEWER: LET ME GET GOING, AND WE'LL PICK IT UP—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #1: ROLLING.

INTERVIEWER: —AT THE BUS ROLLING INTO BIRMINGHAM.

Peck: Yes, but we did not anticipate that the violence would start two hours before we would get to Birmingham at Anniston. When our bus pulled into Anniston, I was on the Trailways bus, the other people were on the Greyhound bus. We learned that the Greyhound bus had been waylaid just outside of town and bombed. Shortly after we learned that, as we were waiting in the station, a group of six Klansmen boarded our bus and bodily threw the black riders into the back seat. Walter Bergman and I were sitting in the back seat so we decided to go up front and intercept with our bodies. We got clobbered on the head. I didn't get it so bad, but Bergman got it so bad that he later had a stroke and has been paralyzed ever since. As, he has been in a wheelchair ever since. And so Walter and I are both suing the F.B.I.—Bergman for a million dollars and me for a half a million dollars.

00:03:53:00

INTERVIEWER: WERE, WERE YOU FUNCTIONING WITH NONVIOLENCE AT THAT POINT? WAS IT A CLEAR PHILOSOPHY—

Peck: We always function with nonviolence. And in fact, a person can't go on a project like that without training in nonviolence and an agreement that he can adhere to nonviolence.

00:04:13:00

INTERVIEWER: DID EVERYBODY ON THE BUS REACT WITH NONVIOLENCE WHEN THEY WERE ATTACKED?

Peck: Everybody.

00:04:22:00

INTERVIEWER: WHAT, WHAT HAPPENED AFTER BIRMINGHAM? THE RIOT DIDN'T CONTINUE BEYOND BIRMINGHAM, DID IT?

Peck: It didn't continue beyond Birmingham for the reason that the bus drivers refused to drive us onto Montgomery. We were supposed to go on to Montgomery, Jackson, and then New Orleans. But we had a big rally staged for New Orleans, so after we found it clear that the bus drivers weren't going to change their minds, we flew to New Orleans. And that was quite a production, too, because the first two planes we were on got bomb threats after we boarded them.

00:05:06:00

INTERVIEWER: JIM, IF YOU COULD LOOK AT ME IF YOU WILL. AND, IT'S ONLY TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO, BUT THE WORLD IN, IN THE DEEP SOUTH THEN, WAS A DIFFERENT PLACE. SOUTH AFRICA IS PROBABLY THE ONLY EQUIVALENT. DO YOU REMEMBER DISCOVERING THINGS AS YOU WENT INTO THE DEEP SOUTH EVEN THOUGH YOU—

Peck: Well, you know, a couple of years ago a _Chicago Tribune_ reporter told me, this nonviolence is all right, but what has it ever accomplished? I replied, I'm going to give you a big example. In five short years, from '60 to '65, it changed the face of the South. The South used to be a complete apartheid, like in South Africa. Now there is, it's like the North. Not that that's so perfect. But this is a tremendous change. There's no more segregation. There's no more white and colored signs, there are no more two drinking fountains and four toilets.

00:06:10:00

INTERVIEWER: WHEN YOU WERE GOING INTO ANNISTON, AGAIN, OR COMING OUT, RIGHT BEFORE YOUR BUS WAS ATTACKED, WHERE WERE YOU SITTING AND, WHEN THEY CAME—

Peck: Well, we were sitting the way we had a habit of sitting. The, Walter and I were on the back seat where the blacks are supposed to be segregated, and the other blacks were in the forward seats.

00:06:35:00

INTERVIEWER: WHAT HAPPENED, THE, YOU CAN'T GET IT, YOU KNOW, PUT TEN PEOPLE ON A BUS AT A TIME, SO ONE OR TWO GUYS MUST HAVE COME UP, THEY WALK RIGHT UP TO YOU? DID THEY WALK RIGHT UP TO THE BLACK RIDERS?

Peck: Yeah, and, and they seized them physically and threw them into the back seat. So to, to carry on the story, these Klansmen boarded the bus and told the driver to drive on. Now, we thought that maybe they were going to have him go up some side road and have a little party. But apparently that didn't happen. He went on into Birmingham. When we arrived in Birmingham, we saw along the sidewalk about twenty men with pipes. We saw no cop in sight. And now I'll tell you what, how I remember the date. The next day, Bull Connor, the notorious police chief was asked why there were no police on hand. He said, he replied, it was Mother's Day and they were all visiting their mothers. Well, we got out of the bus and Charles Person, the black student from Atlanta, and I, had been designated to try to enter the lunch counter. We, of course, we didn't get there. This mob seized us and, well, part of it seized me and the other seized Person, and I was unconscious, I'd say, within a minute. I woke up. I came to in an alley way. Nobody was there. A big pool of blood. I looked at that pool of blood, I said, I wonder whether I'm going to live or die. But I was too tired to care. I lay down again. Finally I came too again, and I looked and a white G.I. who had come up

and said, you look in a bad way. Do you need help? And I looked the other way and Bergman was coming. So I said, no, my friend is coming, he'll help me out. So, Bergman took me in a cab to Shuttlesworth's home. When Shuttlesworth saw me, he said, man, you need to go to a hospital. And so he called the ambulance and they took me to the hospital and put fifty-three stitches into my head.

00:09:21:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #1: GO AHEAD AND BREAK FOR A MINUTE?

INTERVIEWER: YEAH.

00:09:30:00

Peck: —that kind—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #2: ONE.

INTERVIEWER: WHERE DO YOU THINK THAT KIND OF STRENGTH CAME FROM? BECAUSE THEY HAD TO KNOW—

Peck: Well I'd say, I think one thing. I think these people, when they signed up, were committed and, or they wouldn't have signed up. They weren't going on some little pleasure trip. They knew it was dangerous. They didn't know it, they had no idea that it would be as dangerous as it turned out to be. They knew it would, they knew what the South is, the Deep South.

00:10:03:00

INTERVIEWER: IT'S REMARKABLE THAT NOBODY WAS KILLED, RIGHT? IS THERE SOME-, WHY, WHY—

Peck: Isn't it? I could have been killed. Just chance. I mean all that blood. Suppose, I lay in that alley way a few more hours, I'd be dead.

00:10:22:00

INTERVIEWER: OK.

[sync tone]

Peck: Zwerg too. He was pretty near killed.

00:10:30:00

INTERVIEWER: I KNOW. THERE'S SOME NEWS FROM ZWERG. JIM, DO YOU THINK YOU'VE GOTTEN FAIR CREDIT FOR THAT, FOR THE ROLE THAT YOU PLAYED THEN? WHAT THE FREEDOM RIDERS DID?

Peck: Credit from whom?

INTERVIEWER: FROM, FROM HISTORY?

Peck: Well, I think, I think, I think we did. And I mean, my book _The Freedom Ride_ is in many of the libraries. And since then there's been a really scholarly book written, do you know the one by Augie Meyer?

00:11:08:00

INTERVIEWER: LOOK, THE F.B.I. WAS CLEARLY AWARE OF WHAT WAS GOING TO HAPPEN TO YOU.

Peck: They'd reached this agreement. Of course they were. And I didn't tell this in the story. The day after this happened, the FBI wanted to talk with me. My attitude was, what's the use? But the other riders wanted me to go, so I went. And dig this: I told them my story, like I'm telling it to you now, when I was finished, he didn't have any questions. Shows how interested he was, you know? He didn't have a single question. Wouldn't you think that he would have at least asked a question like, would you recognize any of the people who beat you? You know? Any question. Just for form, but no question, I mean.

00:12:05:00

INTERVIEWER: ARE YOU AWARE NOW THERE WAS A KLAN INFORMANT IN THE FBI?

Peck: Well, it was Rowe.

00:12:11:00

INTERVIEWER: ALSO IN THE BIRMINGHAM POLICE DEPARTMENT, TO WHOM...

Peck: Yes, I know. There was a cop in the Klan. Probably more than one.

00:12:21:00

INTERVIEWER: LAST QUESTION ABOUT THE JUSTICE DEPARTMENT AND THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT. WHAT, WHAT ROLE DO YOU THINK THEY PLAYED DURING THAT, THAT THREE DAY PERIOD?

Peck: Well, I didn't see that they played any. And furthermore, I think that it was pretty disgusting that Robert Kennedy tried to get us to call the rides off. I think that really best summarizes the attitude of the Justice Department. I mean, he's, he's the attorney general.

[cut]

[wild audio]

INTERVIEWER: TWENTY, TWENTY-FIVE?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #1: ABOUT TWENTY-FIVE.

INTERVIEWER: SAY JIM, I [inaudible]

[cut]

Peck: —'53, he worked this organization for ten years.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #2: WILD.

[wild audio]

00:13:24:00

INTERVIEWER: I GUESS THE QUESTION I, THE LAST QUESTION I WANT TO ASK IS: THERE WAS A PARTICULAR KIND OF, OF UNITY—AND WE'LL GO WHENEVER YOU'RE READY—AT THAT POINT WHICH ALLOWED A LOT OF PEOPLE TO GET TOGETHER AND GO TOWARD A COMMON GOAL.

[sync tone]

Peck: Yes. Well, also you gotta understand that this unity was made possible because the CORE and SNCC were not political organizations. You didn't have the usual fights between the—

[cut]

[wild audio]

Peck: —C.P. and the S.W.P. and the factionalism. They were, people were united on nonviolence and united on the goals.

00:14:11:00

INTERVIEWER: WE SEEMED TO HAVE COME A LONG WAY FROM THAT NOW.

Peck: Oh now. Now, it's pathetic. There, there isn't a, there isn't a black organization that is really carrying on the struggle. The NAACP was so disgusting. They endorsed nuclear energy—twice. Not only nuclear energy, but the entire energy program of the oil monopoly. Awful. And, you see, I think the situation is, you see, is that like with the whites and the blacks, all the action came from the middle class. So now the middle class has virtually won its part of the struggle, and so the poor blacks are left holding the bag, with no leadership, with no organization.

00:15:13:00

INTERVIEWER: IS THAT TRUE OF THE PEACE AND ANTI-NUCLEAR MOVEMENTS THAT THE MIDDLE CLASS IS MOVING OUT OF THEM NOW AND LEAVING THEM TO—

Peck: Oh no. I mean, because they, because we haven't won our goals yet. You see, the black middle class has more or less won their goals. They can get housing, non-menial jobs, they can move into a white neighborhood, I mean...

00:15:38:00

INTERVIEWER: BEFORE WE GO INTO THAT CONTEMPORARY ARGUMENT OR OUR DISCUSSION, THE MOVEMENT ITSELF. IF YOU GO BACK AND YOU LOOK AT THE PERIOD FROM '54 TO '65. 1965. THAT'S THE PERIOD.

Peck: You mean the civil rights movement. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

00:15:54:00

INTERVIEWER: WAS IT AS MAGNIFICENT AND HISTORICAL A MOMENT AS, AS IT SEEMS TO BE WHEN YOU LOOK BACK AT IT?

Peck: To me it was, yes. To me it was. And, of course, I, in addition had the sense, that, though I never was a leader, that I was one of the pioneers in this movement. That CORE would have gone under in the McCarthy era had it not been for Farmer's wife, myself, and a guy called Jim Robinson. And so I feel like an affirmative answer to that question.

00:16:51:00

INTERVIEWER: I'D LIKE TO DO A LITTLE BIT MORE SOUND, BUT WE CAN START CAMERA NOW?

[production discussion]

INTERVIEWER: THE WORLD OUGHTTA KNOW ABOUT THAT PERIOD. IT DOESN'T HAVE TO BE JUST THE FREEDOM RIDES BECAUSE I'M—

Peck: Well I, I, I think that, that they should know that little anecdote about the Jim Crow bylaws. And, generally now I follow up with the anecdote about shittin' on the courthouse lawn. I mean, to make sure they see that this kind of mentality still is around.

00:17:34:00

INTERVIEWER: DO YOU HAVE KIDS OR YOUNG PEOPLE LOOK AT YOU AND NOT, WITH DISBELIEF WHEN YOU TRY TO EXPLAIN WHAT WAS GOING ON?

Peck: Well, you see, since there is no more civil rights movement, all the kids are in the peace movement. So they don't talk about that much. I mean, they, they are all against bigotry and they never talk about it. [pause] Did you say you had talked with Marvin Rich?

00:18:22:00

INTERVIEWER: I HAVE NOT TALKED TO MARVIN RICH.

Peck: I think it would be productive. I told you he's at the, at the new school, every day.

00:18:35:00

INTERVIEWER: IS, THERE WERE A LOT OF PEOPLE LIKE THAT WHO WERE—WHO WAS THE ONE, THE GUY THAT JUST DIED, WORKED FOR KING ALL THESE YEARS?

Peck: I can't think right off who you mean.

INTERVIEWER: A FUNDRAISER, STANLEY HAGENSON?

Peck: Oh, did he die? I didn't know he died.

00:18:56:00

INTERVIEWER: I THOUGHT. DIDN'T HE? I THINK HE DID BUT I—

Peck: I would never know. I wasn't in contact with him. But I was, my latest trip to the South, you probably heard about it, was because Dick Gregory and sixty others were busted. Reidsville, Georgia. I was there.

00:19:21:00

INTERVIEWER: WHAT, WHAT DID YOU DO AFTER '61? DID YOU STAY INVOLVED?

Peck: Oh yes. I was with CORE until '65, when they kicked me out because of skin color. You remember, they cleaned out all the whites. And since then, I've been full-time with this outfit. But I've continued to join up with major demonstrations like the March on Boston, which I mentioned.

00:19:58:00

INTERVIEWER: DO YOU THINK THE MOVEMENT ENDED IN '65 IN A CERTAIN WAY, JIM?

Peck: Yes. I'm afraid so. And then, you see, SNCC collapsed, CORE became a black fascist group, headed by a man who I call the "American Idi Amin"

00:20:21:00

INTERVIEWER: ROY, ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT ROY?

Peck: That's what I'm talking about. You know, Amin did make him an honorary citizen. But you know what is the most ridiculous display now? Roy is saying that he is about to get a big sum of money from the Arabs. And so right away, Farmer and McKissick are trying to put their claws on it. They didn't give a shit about CORE before. But now, do you believe they're going into court? And the biggest joke of all is that Roy is bullshit. He's not going to get any big money from the Arabs. He, he, he had said that he was going to get money from Amin. It never came. Well that guy, he was in, on the National Action Committee, and he's so filled with hate. He hates whitey as much as any Klansman hates the black.

00:21:26:00

INTERVIEWER: JIM, WHAT ROLE DO YOU THINK THE LEFT PLAYED IN THE, IN THE EARLY PART OF THE MOVEMENT? COULD THE MOVEMENT HAVE OCCURED WITHOUT, WITHOUT THE LEFT?

Peck: Oh, I, I know, they didn't even participate in it. I mean, the, CORE was founded by a group of pacifists, who were non-political. The C.P.L., S.W.P., none of those were in the picture.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:22:00:00

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