

Interview with **Rudolph Lee**

February 22, 1979

Production Team:

Camera Rolls: 2-3

Sound Roll: 2

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 2]

[sound roll 2]

[hand slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #1: AND WE'RE ON. HOLD IT.

[clap]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #1: AND AGAIN.

[clap]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #1: OK.

00:00:10:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, WE SORT OF NEED YOU TO GIVE US COMPLETE, YOU KNOW, COMPLETE SENTENCES. AND I'D SORT OF REALLY LIKE TO GET YOU JUST TO START OFF WITH, YOU KNOW THAT, YOUR NAME AND THE FACT THAT YOU WERE INVOLVED A-, AS A NINE-YEAR OLD IN THE THING. AND THEN JUST GO ON.

Lee: Oh, kind of like in the sense of saying, like tell a story—

INTERVIEWER: YEAH.

Lee: —and just, just describe—

INTERVIEWER: JUST WHAT YOU WERE TELLING US EARLIER, IS, IS—

Lee. OK.

INTERVIEWER: —WAS FANTASTIC.

Lee: So starting out with my name?

INTERVIEWER: MM-HMM

Lee: OK. My name is Rudolph Lee. During the time of '63, I was, I was nine years old. OK? Can you hold it for a minute? I'm just losing train of thought.

00:00:54:00

INTERVIEWER: SURE. DO YOU WANT—IS THAT DISTRACTING? I MEAN...

Lee: Yes, turn it off.

[laughter]

[cut]

[wild audio]

INTERVIEWER: I DID NOTICE—

[cut]

[hand slate]

00:01:06:00

Lee: OK. Let's start from the top again.

[clap]

Lee: OK. My name is Rudolph Lee.

INTERVIEWER: I'M SORRY, I JUST, I WASN'T QUITE READY. GO AHEAD. SORRY.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #1: YOU CAN LOOK AT ME.

Lee: OK. My name is Rudolph Lee. During the year of 1963 I was about nine years old. And, and participating in the demonstrations I used to follow my mother to 16th Street Baptist Church. And from there we would leave and go to Kelly Ingram Park as far as to start our demonstrations. OK. I can remember at that time, as seeing the Police Commissioner, Bull Connor, standing on the corner of—I guess that's 15th Street—with the fire department and the police department. With the police holding their dogs and the fire department holding their fire hoses. And as for us at the time—Cut, cut, cut, cut.

00:02:12:00

INTERVIEWER: WHY DON'T YOU JUST CONTINUE, JUST PICK UP THE THOUGHT OF—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #1: WE'VE GOT TO REFRAME THE SHOT.

Lee: OK. As far as those times, I remember as far as, like I said before, that police standing on the corner with Bull Connor telling people to get back. And I can remember my mother saying, come on son, get out of the way before these police dogs get you. And all along he kept saying, get back, you have no rights to be here. Disband, or go back to your church and have your meeting. But you will not demonstrate on these streets.

00:02:45:00

INTERVIEWER: REFRAME.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #1: OK.

INTERVIEWER: HOW DID YOU FEEL WHEN THEY STARTED SPRAYING THE HOSES AND THE DOGS STARTED COMING?

Lee: Pretty terrified.

00:02:53:00

INTERVIEWER: OK. YOU SORT OF GOT TO SAY, “WHEN, WHEN THE DOGS WERE COMING AND THE HOSES...”

Lee: When the dogs were coming, I was very frightened and very terrified. The only thing I could think was to run and to try to protect myself, to cover myself as far, getting away from the dogs. Because during, I can remember times that they would sick the dogs, but they never would turn the fire hydrants on. They just let the dogs and the police beat and the dogs tear away at people.

00:03:24:00

INTERVIEWER: REFRAME. DO YOU HAVE, DID YOU HAVE ANY FRIENDS WHO GOT BITTEN BADLY?

Lee: Well, one friend that I remember that got bitten, but this was a little later than the time of maybe, a little later in '63, it was during, in Ensley, where we had a, a demonstration that we were marching against the merchants of Ensley. And a friend of mine named Jerome Nixon, got bitten and almost got his foot or his leg bitten off by the dog.

00:03:57:00

INTERVIEWER: HAS HE RECOVERED?

Lee: Yes. Fully.

00:04:00:00

INTERVIEWER: OK. DID YOU GO TO SCHOOL AT ALL DURING THAT TIME?

Lee: Off and on, when my mother did let me go. Sometimes she was very frightened of me going to school because, well, I used to live in a community called Ensley. And, well, there, there lived a little section next to Ensley called Sandosk-, Sandusky. And there was supposed to be a chapter for the Ku Klux Klan. And they would ride horses through our community at night, breaking out windows and shooting and so forth and so on, you know?

00:04:42:00

INTERVIEWER: DID YOU GET EXPELLED FROM SCHOOL?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #1: WE JUST RAN OUT.

[cut]

[wild audio]

Lee: No.

[cut]

00:04:48:00

[camera roll #3]

[hand slate]

INTERVIEWER: OK.

Lee: To, to tell again about what happened during—

00:04:58:00

INTERVIEWER: DON'T DO IT THAT WAY. WHAT, HOW DID YOU FEEL WHEN THE DOGS WERE LET LOOSE AND THE HOSES WERE SPRAYED?

Lee: When the dogs were let loose, I was very terrified, very afraid, and all I could think to do was to run, to try to hide. And I could hear my mother hollering, telling me to get out of the way before the dogs get me. And to try to go back to the church.

00:05:23:00

INTERVIEWER: OK. HOW DID YOU, WAS EVERYBODY IN ENSLEY, HOW DID YOU DEAL WITH, WITH OTHER KIDS WHO WERE, YOU KNOW, THE SAME AGE, WHO WEREN'T INVOLVED WITH THE DEMONSTRATIONS? HOW DID YOU TELL THEM ABOUT WHAT WAS HAPPENING?

Lee: Well, my mother had told me to just to look over those people because she said, well, their parents was saying they didn't want to be bothered with, they considered it as mess, or that it was just trying to start trouble. And well, the friends that I hung with, most of them, they participated. Which were, most of my friends at the time were ladies, anyway. Girls, little girls.

00:06:06:00

INTERVIEWER: IF WE JUST GO THROUGH THAT, JUST ONCE MORE. OK. WHAT, WHAT YOU DIDN'T GIVE ME WAS WHO WE WERE TALKING ABOUT.

Lee: OK.

INTERVIEWER: SEE, I ASKED YOU ABOUT—

Lee: OK.

INTERVIEWER: PEOPLE WHO...SO YOU GOTTA SORT OF TAKE IT FROM—

Lee: OK.

INTERVIEWER: WHEN I TALKED TO, WHEN I TALKED TO PEOPLE WHO, WHO WEREN'T INVOLVED IN—

Lee: OK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #2: THEY'RE NOT GOING TO HEAR HIM.

Lee: OK.

INTERVIEWER: NOBODY KNOWS WHAT MY QUESTION IS.

Lee: OK. Would you reframe or repeat that question?

INTERVIEWER: WHEN YOU, WHEN YOU TALKED TO PEOPLE WHO WEREN'T IN—

Lee: OK, when I talked—

INTERVIEWER: —HOW YOU EXPLAINED THINGS—

Lee: As, for instance, trying to relate what was happening to my friends, well, I really didn't really try because I was told by my mother to, just to look over those people because their parents had informed them to, just to, that they were part-, that we were trying to start trouble and was just trying to make things worse than what they were. And like my friends, like Patricia Harris, and Murphy, that we all just kind of hung as a group and most of the time we spent our time either going to church or trying to participate in like cooking breakfasts or something to that effect to help people that came in to help us in our demonstrations.

00:07:25:00

INTERVIEWER: SO IT WAS A REAL SENSE OF COMMUNITY AMONG ALL THE PEOPLE WHO WERE INVOLVED IN THE...

Lee: Among the people that were, I associated with, there was a sense of closeness, or a sense of togetherness.

00:07:37:00

INTERVIEWER: WOULD, WOULD THAT APPLY TO LIKE EVERYBODY WHO WAS INVOLVED IN THE, IN THE CHURCH AND IN THE DEMONSTRATIONS?

Lee: Well, among the people that were in the demonstration, or that, that came to the meetings, there was a sense of togetherness. But there was still a lot of people that were, they just kinda hung on the outside, or they had very, they liked to criticize, because they thought we were wrong. They didn't understand what was going on. And I would say they were kind of naïve.

00:08:07:00

INTERVIEWER: HOW DO YOU THINK IT'S AFFECTED YOU?

Lee: As far as the effect it's has on me now, I think it has made me kind of very biased toward people, sort of prejudiced. Like I've worked in different jobs functions since that time, as far as being a manager and an assistant manager, and I've tried to be impartial toward employees, or even in my hiring practices, but yet it's still, I still see myself being biased or not being impartial.

00:08:37:00

INTERVIEWER: TELL ME ABOUT THIS. WHEN YOU WERE NINE AND YOU USED TO GO TO THOSE MASS MEETINGS, WHAT WAS THAT LIKE?

Lee: Well it was, it was a lot of fun, it was a—

INTERVIEWER: THE MASS MEETINGS...

Lee: As far as the mass meeting, it was a, it was a great feeling, or, 'cause, as for the singing and the togetherness of the people and everybody seemed like they were all into it, you know? It was just a fantastic feeling. It was a sense of joy, in a sense, just to go and participate, even just to sing. And to even like, in that time I was singing, they had, they had started a little junior group as far as to sing with the Alabama Christian Movement Singing Choir. We call it the [unintelligible] now. And I got in that group and I got in the [unintelligible] to, to help, you know, seat people and all, when we wasn't singing.

00:09:30:00

INTERVIEWER: OK. LET'S CUT FOR A MINUTE. CAN YOU THINK OF ANY—

[cut]

[hand slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #1: ROLLING.

00:09:38:00

Lee: As far as my feeling...

INTERVIEWER: SORRY. I WASN'T, I WASN'T READY. OK.

Lee: OK. As far as my feeling during that time, I was, as far as to tell people now what to say to people now, those were times that, to me, that people were very together, as far as the people that participated within the demonstrations or the movement, and it was a feeling of believing in their brother, where now people are so disbanded. And I wish people would look at those times and see how people got together and worked for a cause, and accomplish that mission or that goal, which we all as black people now, can, can go to restaurants, can ride

the bus, and do other things that, if it hadn't had been for, my mother, myself, my friends, and others, that this never would have come about.

00:10:35:00

INTERVIEWER: TELL ME THIS: WHAT WAS IT LIKE, WHAT WAS IT LIKE TO BE EIGHT OR NINE AND, AND RIDE THE BUS AND HAVE TO GET IN THE BACK ALL THE TIME?

Lee: Well it was, it was confusing because really, my mother...

INTERVIEWER: RIDING THE BUS WAS CONFUSING? I'M SORRY.

Lee: Riding, riding, having to go and sit in the back of the bus was very confusing. Because I can remember times that my mother would take me to town on the bus. And, well, as far as the bus would be crowded in the back, but there would be seats in the front, and she was, I would say there are seats. And she would say, you can't sit there. And yet it still, she would try to explain, but I never could understand at the time, what it all meant, as far as to have to sit in the rear of the bus, or to have to stand up.

00:11:21:00

INTERVIEWER: DID, WHEN, WHEN, WHEN SHE GOT YOU INVOLVED IN THE DEMONSTRATIONS, HOW DID, HOW DID YOU PERSONALLY GET INVOLVED, IN TERMS OF HOW DID SHE EXPLAIN TO YOU WHAT, WHAT WAS GOING ON THROUGH THE DEMONSTRATIONS?

Lee: Well, in a sense, the way she explained it to me, as far as what she was doing, she saying, and she motivated me to, to take part, was that she said well, as far as like you, riding the bus, or you being able to go in restaurants and sit down and eat with whites. She said, this, what we are doing, we hope that, as a result of this, that we as black people will have equal rights as everyone else. And somehow she got the message across as, because maybe her motivation alone, motivated me to participate. Because she was very much into it. Because she believed in freedom for blacks.

00:12:16:00

INTERVIEWER: WHAT WAS YOUR—

INTERVIEWER #2: OH.

INTERVIEWER: YOU, YOU HAD A QUESTION EARLIER.

INTERVIEWER #2: YEAH, I WAS JUST WONDERING IF YOU COULD—I MEAN, HE WAS TALKING ABOUT THE MASS MEETING—IF YOU COULD TALK ABOUT HOW YOU FELT MAYBE WHEN YOU KNEW THAT THERE WERE BULL

CONNOR'S MEN IN THE AUDIENCE, OR WHEN THE COPS WOULD COME TO ARREST YOU. AND ALSO GOING OUT, YOU KNOW, WHEN YOU MET THE LINE COP.

INTERVIEWER: ANSWER TO ME THOUGH.

INTERVIEWER #2: YEAH.

Lee: OK. As far as in going to the meetings or just being there, as far as knowing that seeing policemen come in, or policemen say, y'all stay in here, if y'all know what's best, it was, well it was a frightening feeling, but as far as the people, all together, sticking together, gave courage to everyone. And as far as me being a child, it gave courage to me with me really not really understanding, or being able to really feel what was going on, or to know.

00:13:17:00

INTERVIEWER: OK.

Lee: Did that pretty well answer what you want?

INTERVIEWER: YEAH.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:13:21:00

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