Interview with **Robert Williams**
1979
Camera Rolls: 15-16
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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.*

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[sync tone]

[interview is audio only]

INTERVIEWER: OK. HOW DID YOU, HOW AND WHY DID YOU START THE DEMONSTRATIONS IN MONROE [NORTH CAROLINA]? WERE THERE ANY SPECIFIC INCIDENTS?

Williams: Yes, well the demonstrations in Monroe started early, in fact we had demonstrations before the whole sit-in movement had started. That was because early in the summer in the late fifties, we had a situation wherein I think it was three cases of small black boys drowning, and, as a result of this we asked the city officials to build a black pool in the community, in the black community. So that black kids would have a place to swim, without swimming in these unsupervised swimming holes. And they said they didn't have the money. So then we asked that they set aside three days a week. That in the regular pool that had been built by federal funds under the WPA Work Projects of America system and they said they couldn't do that. So we asked for two days. Then we asked for one. We were willing to settle for one day that the local pool would be reserved for black kids. And they said no. And we asked why, and they said it would be too expensive. And we wanted to know, how would it be so expensive? And they said that because after the blacks had finished swimming in the pool, they would have to empty all of the water out and drain it, and this was an expensive process. So then we took the position that if they didn't have the money, that segregation was too expensive for them, it was a luxury they couldn't afford and they had no business trying to have it. So we just started direct action against the local pool which was closed and has

been closed ever since. In fact, I was back there a few months ago and the pool is still closed, and on the highway and they called, the local people, refer to it as "Robert Williams Monument" because it is standing there dry. That's how it got started with the demonstrations. Also in later years as we continued dealing in NAACP chapter there, we attacked a library, integrated it early, but in the final analysis, the—when we started the serious, very serious demonstrations and 1961—that we had a ten point program. In fact we produced a program that's early 1960 that had ten points. When other people in the South just asking for service and lunch counter stools and that public restrooms, we were asking for integrated facilities in the hospital and the school and in the county and local government employment, also an abolition of police brutality. So we had the first widespread program in the whole nation.

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INTERVIEWER: OK. WHAT WAS, WHAT WAS THE, WHAT DID YOU USE AS DIRECT ACTION? WHAT WAS DIRECT ACTION AGAINST THE POOL?

Williams: Well, we started a line at the pool. We would go and line up at the entrance and where they were accepting the fees with all our things that we needed to swim, and as a result of that nobody could enter into the pool. Finally, sometimes when we appeared on the scene, all the white swimmers would jump out of the pool and would start to run. So as a result, we kept them from doing business, and finally they just closed the pool.

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INTERVIEWER: OK. WHAT—WERE THERE ANY SPECIFIC INCIDENTS THAT, THAT TRIGGERED OR THAT CAUSED YOU TO ARM?

Williams: Well, we had a situation wherein, eighteen black women had been struck with missiles thrown from cars, passing cars, occupied by white men. We had the situation where blacks had been attacked, some had been beaten, and we had a one, one situation wherein a black woman was made to dance at pistol point in the black community by Klansmen. And Klansmen, because we had organized a branch of the NAACP and it was active and we had broken down some discrimination in the town, that the Klansmen started to move in and they had had mass rallies wherein newspapers reported that they had had as many as seven thousand and five hundred people in fields for these mass rallies. And they were beginning to attack us, so having been in the Marine Corps and having been in the army that, I understood, weapons and I understood the military science, so as a result of that, and I had built the branch of NAACP, and the people had authorized me to appoint a member of the fellow officers instead of an election. They said since I had built the branch and I would have to work with these people, I should have the people I wanted to work with. So they authorized me to do this, so I appointed all veterans with the exception of one woman who was the secretary of the branch. And as a result of that, we also—having been in the Marine Corps, I had seen civilians come to Camp Pendleton in California to use the rifle range and I had inquired as to how it was that civilians could have access to the rifle range. And they said they were members of the National Rifle Association and that gave them the right to use the

government rifle ranges when they were not in use. So then I asked questions about the National Rifle Association. So when we ran into difficulty in the South, I started to organize a branch of the rifle association.

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INTERVIEWER: COULD YOU TELL ME ABOUT THE NIGHT THAT, THAT THE KLAN RAIDED ALBERT PERRY'S HOME?

Williams: Well, actually we had had a rally then, a meeting, an NAACP meeting and it so happened that the Klan had been having a meeting at the same night, outside of town. So when they left their meeting, they called in threats to the home, Dr. Perry was not there, his wife was there and they had threatened her, and she had called us and so as a result of this, the men rallied at Dr. Perry's house. They went home and got their guns. And so that also strangely at that time, we didn't really have it organized into offices and they just assumed that because I was president of the NAACP that I also should assume leadership of the rifle club. And this was the type of thinking that we had in the community, which was also somewhat different from what would have been reflected in a regular NAACP branch by the national office.

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INTERVIEWER: WELL, WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENED THAT NIGHT? AT ALBERT PERRY'S HOUSE?

Williams: Well, actually the Klan came through and they made a foray, and there were some exchange of shots, but just lightly, but actually the biggest thing came after that. In fact, and—after they had been parading through the black community and firing pistols and shot guns from car windows to intimidate blacks, a group of black ministers went up and asked the city and county officials to ban the Klan motorcades from our community. And the officials refused to do this on the grounds that the Klan had the same constitutional right to organize as our National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. So we asked the preachers please not to go back and to beg those people anymore, from that time forward we would patrol our communities and that we would drive the Klan out. They need not ask them anymore. And it so happened that in some weeks after that, that we had—did have some shoot-out with the Klan, and drove 'em out. And strangely enough and then all of the little fishes were willing to take away their constitutional rights. In fact they banned them from the community, then, that they couldn't have any more motorcades in the black community, but this was not done out of deference to us, or for the protection of our community, but to protect the lives of the Klansmen.

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INTERVIEWER: OK. WHAT WAS THE RESPONSE OF THE NATIONAL OFFICE OF THE NAACP TO YOUR MEN BEARING ARMS?

Williams: Well, they were opposed to it, but they really didn't get worked up until sometime later, actually in, I think it was in, for about, ‘58 or ‘59, that three black women had been assaulted. One was a woman who, a mother who was eight months pregnant, and a white man attempted to, to rape her, and he beat her. And she along with her white neighbor, went to town to try to get a warrant, they lived in a rural community, for the white man. And they refused to give her a warrant, so we had to intervene with NAACP. Then there was another black woman who was, working in the hotel, a hotel maid, and they claimed she made too much noise in the hallway when she was cleaning, and a railroad worker came out of his room in his underwear and kicked her down a flight of stairs into the lobby of the hotel, so she couldn't, couldn't get a, a warrant, that nothing was, was done about this. So also there had been some other, other problems with whites. So, actually when this black woman had this attempted rape made on her, that the men in the community in the rifle club asked me for permission to go by and shoot in his house, and I told them no, that we couldn't do this. And then they said, well wouldn't it be all right if we kinda lightly sprinkled a few machine gun shots into his house, and I said, no. And they said well couldn't we drop a stick of dynamite on his porch. And I told ‘em no, that we couldn't resort to that type of thing, because we were operating legally, and operating under the law. So I said that we were going to prosecute this man. And so there was a white woman lawyer who—Jacqueline Fince—who volunteered to give us services from New York and came down to help prosecute him. And they didn't even allow her to take the floor. The thing was over before she even knew it. And the only—

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[production discussion]

INTERVIEWER: OK.

[production discussion]

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CAMERA CREW MEMBER: ROLL TAPE.

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Williams: So, on the day of the trial of Louis Medlin who was the white man who had made the attempt on the, on Mrs. Lilly May [sic] Reed.

INTERVIEWER: THIS WAS THE PREGNANT WOMAN?

Williams: Yeah. Mrs. Lilly May [sic] Reed. Well, the only plea that his attorney made, he—they put his, wife, a white woman at his side while he was in court—and the defense attorney turned to the judge and said, Judge, your honor, Mr. Medlin is not guilty of any crime, he was just drinking and having a little fun. He said, you see this woman here, his wife? This is

God's lovely creature, and God's greatest gift to man, the pure flower of life, this white woman, and do you think that he would leave God's greatest gift to man for that—talking about the black woman—and made it appear that the black woman was really on trial. And so the judge dismissed the case on the ground that he was not guilty. The other situation wherein the woman was kicked down the flight of stairs, Mrs. Georgia White, that the man who was indicted, that we had to use NAACP to bring about his indictment, that he didn't even bother to come to his trial and he was acquitted. So then, naturally the cases had attracted most of the woman out of the community, the black women. So the black women turned to me in the courtroom and they said, now if it hadn't been for you these men would have been punished, and now you've opened the floodgates on us, that, they feel now they can do anything to us with impunity. So they said, well, what are you going to say now? And so I turned to them and I said from this day forward, we will meet just—we will meet violence with ju—violence. We will enforce our own laws. We will become our own judges, our own juries and our own executioners. And we will meet lynching with lynching, if this is what it takes to stop lynching, but they can depend on us hereafter to use—meet violence with violence. So then, it so happened that there was an _*Associated Press*_ man in the courtroom and he heard me tell them that. And they had to take the Louis Medlin, had to take him out of the back of the court, because they couldn't bring him through the crowd of enraged black women. So as a result, later that night, that was about four, four-thirty in the afternoon, later that night the _*Associated Press*_ called me from the regional office in Greensboro, North Carolina, they said, you made a statement earlier today, and we want to give you the time to cool off. And we'll read the statement back but do you still hold to this statement? And I told them that they called me six months or six years, that I would still say the same thing. That when there was a break-down of the law and no fourteenth amendment to the US Constitution that we will meet violence with violence. That this is, I thought—felt that a natural right, for people to try to survive, and so as a result, though, they carried it over the wires, and the newspapers screamed that I had, a black leader had advocated indiscriminate slaughter of whites and some even said that I had advocated the slaughter of white babies in their cradle. As a result, the National Office of the NAACP got all worked up. Roy Wilkins called me and he said he wanted me to go on to network television and radio and apologize to the white people of this country, NAACP couldn't support that type of statement because it would look like they were embracing violence, and as a result of that that they would lose contributions from middle-class whites who were heavy contributors to the NAACP. And I told him that I would only go on any television, any place else to apologize to white people after they had apologized to us first for what they had done to us in this country. And once they did that, I would apologize to them, but until that time I would not apologize, and then I held to what I had said. And he called back again in about thirty minutes and he said we are going to have to suspend you if you will not. And I told him well they were going to have to suspend me because I was not going to renounce what I had said, that I meant it. And he said, well we're too close together for—because we'd be blamed, the whole organization. And I told him when I was undergoing economic pressure, they didn't think we were so close together that they had to suffer the same fate that I suffered. And so, as a result I was suspended from the NAACP. But what had happened then the whole branch said, well, they wouldn't have a branch. That they were going to dissolve it. So then the national office agreed that I would be suspended only for six months term. And that in six months I would be automatically reinstated and in that time that my wife could serve as

president of the branch, but it was to appease white America. And I could understand that they were afraid and everybody in confidence I was told later at the national convention that they felt the same way I did, but they said well Williams, you can't say this in public. And I said, well not only must we, we be willing to say it in public, we must be willing to do it in public. And, but, they never did like me from that and through the years I had caused them a lot of trouble. In fact when I had to go into exile they even put the lie out that I wasn't even a member of the NAACP.

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INTERVIEWER: OK. WHAT—TELL ME ABOUT THE ECONOMIC PRESSURE THAT YOU, THAT YOU MENTIONED.

Williams: Well, the idea was that I was denied the right to work and was not given a job. Nationwide Insurance Company cancelled my automobile insurance so that I couldn't have insurance on the car and all kinds of things were taking place. And some training programs I was supposed to have gone in, completely collapsed on the grounds that the Klan had paid a visit to the factories. In fact, a company had moved from Massachusetts, not a company, a textile and they were supposed to make, they were going to make me the first black dyer in a textile plant in the whole country. And, so, that didn't pan out because they came under pressure. Then they were going to train me as an engineer in the plant, and they received visitors in a place called Albe—Albemarle, North Carolina from county officials who said that this was creating a lot of racial conflict. So they dropped it completely. And they got to the place that I couldn't get a job in anything, and the local people kept me there. What they did, men who were earning thirty-five or forty dollars a week, each week would take two dollars out of their pay and they'd all band together, and they gave me that money so that I could stay in the South.

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INTERVIEWER: OK. I GUESS THE ONLY THING LEFT IS WHAT, WHAT, WHAT ABOUT THE NIGHT OF THE STEAGALLS. WHAT HAPPENED THAT NIGHT?

Williams: Well, after we had held off the Klan for six years. We had a rifle club, we had been successful, we hadn't lost any people, we had dug fox holes, we had sand bags, steel helmets, heavy rifles, and we also had introduced the Molotov cocktail to the civil rights movement. But we allowed—because I was coming under pressure from many people in the North who said that Reverend King's method was the proper method, and that I was going to ruin the whole civil rights movement. And that I should give Reverend King an opportunity to come in to demonstrate to Monroe, and I took the position that I was not trying to promote any philosophy. I just wanted effectiveness, and if Reverend King could prove to me that he was effective in a situation like that, that I too would become a pacifist. So I agreed to let him come in there. So, but as a forerunner, he sent one of his aides, Reverend Paul Brooks, a young minister and also James, James Foreman—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: WE'VE GOT A JAM [INAUDIBLE]

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Williams: So I agreed to let Reverend King come in, but he had sent some of his people in advance, people sent down Reverend Paul Brooks came to represent him and set up the possibility of a mass meeting that he was supposed to come in. And at that time, SNCC was just beginning to be formed, in fact it wasn't really an organization then. And James Foreman came, he was in Monroe, he came representing also the pacifist forces. But the situation got real bad, and started to deteriorate as soon as the Klansmen discovered that these pacifists had come. In fact one Klans—the head of the local Klan—called me and said that he had heard from the press conference they had had, that the struggle was going to be non-violent. And he asked me if I had become a pacifist, and I told him, no, that I wasn't going to partici—participate in it. But I had agreed for them to demonstrate their power of non-violence and love and that, that they would be conducting it. And he said, well Robert, we sure glad to hear that you not going to be involved in it, because we've got a message for these people. So, the thing deteriorated over a period of time. They started to beat them and to arrest them and some had to run away into the woods. They had there also seventeen Freedom Riders who came in, and most of them were white, from white schools and from the North, they had just come out of prison in Alabama. And but, the thing broke down and on the twenty-seventh, which was Sunday. I was also opposed to any Sunday activity. We had never had Sunday activity for sit-ins, on grounds that these people, factory workers, would not be working on the weekend, and they were available, you see, for mobilization. And so we took time when we knew that they were working in the plants and they could muster the man-power that they needed, but the non-violent forces said that was not the way of non-violence. That non-violence was a powerful force of love and understanding, and that they had to take on the most difficult task and that's what they did and it collapsed on a Sunday, the twenty-seventh. And whites started attacking blacks who had come from church, who had nothing to do with the demonstration. All kinds of things took place. And this white couple who had been active in the Klan were taken out of a car about a block from their house as a result of this, it was stated that since I was the leader, that I bore the responsibility, but afterward people were crying and screaming to kill them, and they would have killed them if I hadn't intervened. But as a result of this we felt that many people were going to be killed that night and—

INTERVIEWER: [UNINTELLIGIBLE]

[production discussion]

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Williams: So we—it was clear that many people were going to be killed that night. And they know that they had made the four attempts on my life, and two of these aided by and in the

presence of the police, in the presence of the state police, and I had escaped. They tried frame-ups and it hadn’t worked, also that I had been indicted on the sit-in, and I had a case then on appeal. In fact one of my, my case was one of the ones that went to the Supreme Court that, that called the, the new laws for abandoning segregation in public places. In fact there were seven cases went up and mine was one of them. They don't tell that because they try to rewrite the history of the whole thing. Plus the fact that the NAACP took the others and dropped mine in the middle of the case and of the emergency—

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[end of interview]

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