

Interview with **Michael Smith**

Date: August 22, 1988

Interviewer: Terry Kay Rockefeller

Camera Rolls: 3114-3118

Sound Rolls: 352

Team: C

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 Michael Smith, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on August 22, 1988 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 #3114]

[sound roll #352]

00:00:20:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

And mark it.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Take one.

[slate]

00:00:24:00

Interviewer:

OK. What was it like when you first came to work as a guard at Attica? What kind of preparation had you had, and how did you fit into the place? What kinds of things were you observing in terms of relations within the, within the institution?

00:00:39:00

Michael Smith:

When I first came to Attica, I'd had approximately six months service with the state as a correction officer. And my observations was, were that the inmates of Attica were dissatisfied with the system. Specifically in the areas of—hold it, I can't, my mind is—

Interviewer:

OK.

Michael Smith:

I'm not used to doing this.

Interviewer:

That's OK.

Michael Smith:

OK.

00:01:17:00

Interviewer:

You were talking before about some of the demands that, that Don Noble showed you on a piece of paper. The, the kinds of things they were, they were hoping to get, the kinds of changes that they were hoping for. Do you remember some of those?

Michael Smith:

Some of—

Interviewer:

Tell me how that happened. Tell me about Don Noble showing you those.

00:01:28:00

Michael Smith:

One, one inmate in particular, Don Nobles, was in a company that I was in charge of in the metal shop. And during the summer of 1971, he showed me a list of demands that they had prepared to present to the governor. And that list consisted of such things as less censorship of mail, and more showers, and no rationing of toilet paper, and primarily things to do with, with, I don't, I don't know what you would call that, Terry. I'm sorry.

00:02:21:00

Interviewer:

What did you think about the issues they were raising? What did you think about conditions at Attica as a guard who was working there? How did you feel that the prisoners were treated, and what did you think about their request for change?

00:02:35:00

Michael Smith:

I thought that most of the, most of the things, most of the things that were listed on the demands were, were reasonable and that they were just being asked to be treated as human beings.

00:02:48:00

Interviewer:

Can you talk some about the kinds of people that were guards and the kinds of people that were, were now increasingly becoming inmates? Obviously the, the guards were from very different backgrounds than the majority of the inmates. Describe to me if you could what that, what that scene was like, and what the confrontations were like.

00:03:13:00

Michael Smith:

Guards were, the guards at Attica were for the most part from rural communities surrounding that area and had been born and raised in those communities. And the inmate population was increasingly more Black. And there was difficulty for the two people, the inmates and the guards, to communicate because of their differences in background. They hadn't shared the same experiences growing up, and there was a lack of interest or a lack of desire, I thought, especially on the guards' part to attempt to communicate with the inmate.

00:04:05:00

Interviewer:

Were you aware of a growing Black Power movement in the prisons? Was that, was that something that you saw expressed in, in those, in the, in the early months when you were there? Were you aware of political organizing going on among the inmates?

Michael Smith:

Oh, yes. Yeah. There were—

Interviewer:

Tell me how that manifested itself.

Michael Smith:

There were—

Interviewer:

What, what did you see?

00:04:26:00

Michael Smith:

There were meetings that took place in, in different areas of the prison. One of the most common places for meetings were the recreation yards where the inmates were congregated. And there were different political groups within the institution represented such as the Black Muslims and the Young Lords. And also the White population broke off into their, their own sects also.

00:05:01:00

Interviewer:

What was the reaction of the guards to that kind of, to most of the guards, to that kind of political organizing? Were they scared of it?

Michael Smith:

They—

Interviewer:

Or what, what—

00:05:08:00

Michael Smith:

Yeah, the guards, the guards [pause] didn't condone that type of organizing. And it made the, the guards, correction officers, very uncomfortable. It was in fact tolerated by the institution as long as it was a peaceful organization.

00:05:33:00

Interviewer:

I'm going to move on now to the actual uprising that went on at Attica. And I want you to just tell me where you were, how you found out about the uprising, and how you were taken hostage. Just paint the picture for me.

Michael Smith:

OK.

Interviewer:

You were in the metal shop.

Michael Smith:

Yes.

Interviewer:

OK. Tell me, tell me what happened.

00:05:51:00

Michael Smith:

On the morning that the riot took place, I was in charge of the metal shop upstairs that's located over the industrial metal shop toward the rear of the prison. And the prison siren sounded, and from the upstairs windows, you could see inmate movement that wasn't supervised. And you could hear a lot of shouting going on, and see inmates running around areas that they, that they shouldn't be running around in unsupervised. And the inmates, there were approximately thirty in the room that I was located in, were, were confused and didn't know what was happening either. At first, they thought that it was a struggle between possibly two political groups of inmates in the prison itself. So, their reaction was to take up weapons to protect themselves and find hiding places in, in the room where they were located.

00:07:09:00

Interviewer:

And how were you taken hostage? What, what happened to you?

00:07:13:00

Michael Smith:

When I was taken hostage, there was only one set of double entry/exit doors in the room that I was located in. And the inmates, the rioting inmates, gained entrance to that room through those doors. As I had mentioned before, most of the inmates that were in that room had taken up hiding, had taken up weapons and found hiding places for themselves. [sighs] The inmates broke into the room where I was. And at that point in time, I was knocked down, and they moved to the rear of the room where I had secured some civilian employees. They destroyed some things in the room, and broke into the room where the civilian employees were, took them hostage. And on their way out, left me.

00:08:22:00

Interviewer:

And then what happened to you?

00:08:24:00

Michael Smith:

I was, there were two particular inmates at the time when the inmates were breaking in, gaining entry to that room that, that protected me. And in kind of a spread-eagle fashion, they put their body over mine to protect me. Told the rest of the inmates that were breaking in that I was OK and to leave me alone. So, the, the whole inmate movement, the rioting inmates went right past me, moved, and took the civilians hostage and went right back out the room again, and left me laying on the floor. Most of the inmates in the room at that time also left with them with the exception of the two that had protected me. And they made an attempt to get me out through the prison to safety.

00:09:16:00

Interviewer:

And what happened to their attempt? Why don't you just—

00:09:20:00

Michael Smith:

OK. I was located at the rear of the prison—

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm.

Michael Smith:

—so I had to go through the whole complex, including a central intersection in the prison called Times Square. And Times Square divides the four recreation yards in the prison, which is centrally located. We made it through the housing area in the rear of the prison and to Times Square successfully. But when, on reaching Times Square, there were a militant group of inmates that directed the two inmates that were helping me out that all hostages had to be taken to D yard where I was transported to.

00:10:03:00

Interviewer:

OK. I want to stop for a second.

Camera Crew Member #1:

We're at about twenty five.

Interviewer:

OK. All right. From the end?

Camera Crew Member #1:

Yeah.

[cut]

[camera roll #3115]

Camera Crew Member #2:

Take two.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Speed. Mark it.

00:10:16:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Take two.

[slate]

00:10:18:00

Interviewer:

OK. There you are in D yard. And I, I guess it's really kind of chaos. What were your initial feelings about being there and seeing what had happened? What, how, how did you feel?

00:10:31:00

Michael Smith:

Initially there was, there was a lot of chaos in the initial takeover of the prison. And I guess I was amazed at how easily this fortress fell. There was no plan. I had never been instructed in, in how to handle a riot situation or what to do. And it was amazing to me that the institution fell apart as easily as it did.

00:11:11:00

Interviewer:

Now, what kinds of things were going on in those first hours that you were collected, as you, the hostages were brought into D yard, and, and the inmates were there? What kinds of things were going on? How did you feel about what you were hearing and seeing?

00:11:26:00

Michael Smith:

I found it all very interesting in the initial stages of the riot that, [pause] well, initially there was a lot of violence involved in, in the retaking.

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm.

Michael Smith:

There, it was a physical retaking of the prison. And because it was physical, a lot of people were injured. Not, not solely officers, correction officers, but also inmates were injured through the chaos. And the destruction, as I was being led from the rear of the prison toward Times Square going through a housing—one of the housing areas, they were throwing things from the tiers. Desks were being overturned. Chairs were being thrown. Papers were being burned. Clothing was being burned. And it was just a, a real chaotic situation. And upon my

arrival in D yard, the hostages, where the hostages were being gathered together, it was evident that some of the hostages had been beaten in the, in the retaking process or in the riot process, during the riot.

00:12:52:00

Interviewer:

What happened to the hostages as you were brought into the yard?

00:12:55:00

Michael Smith:

As we were being brought into the yard, all the hostages were directed to one area in D yard. And in that area, we were surrounded by inmates who were Black Muslims. And they were instructed to protect us to the death with their own life.

00:13:25:00

Interviewer:

Were you blindfolded? Were, how, how were you treated in the early hours? How, how did you feel? Were, were, were you fearful? Did you feel like your life was in danger, or, or once you got to D yard did you feel OK? How did you, how did you react?

00:13:41:00

Michael Smith:

My initial reaction was I wasn't fearful of being injured at that point because we were being protected by the inmates. The Black Muslim group that was protecting us had, had told us that it would only be a short period, maybe a couple hours, and that we would be rescued by, by people from the outside. And I personally had felt if I made it through the initial takeover of the prison that I was past the physical violence. There were obviously people in, in the inmate population that, that would have liked to inflict some kind of physical abuse on the hostages. However we were being protected by the inmates.

00:14:46:00

Interviewer:

Can you tell me what it was like in the yard? How the inmates organized, and, and what kinds of things impressed you as, as time went on and as things got settled, and as the community got organized? Describe that for me. I mean describe it, thinking—

00:15:01:00

Michael Smith:

As, as time went on, the, the movement became more organized. And there were committees or people put in charge of medical needs, food needs, water, communications, negotiations, and [pause] protective, protecting the hostages. And as time went on, the inmates just became more organized in, in those areas.

00:15:50:00

Interviewer:

Can you tell me now about some of the things that happened while you were in the yard? One thing, one important event was learning about the death of Officer Bill Quinn. Can you describe learning that and, and how you knew that was a turning point?

00:16:16:00

Michael Smith:

One of the, one of the demands of the inmates was for amnesty. And up until the point where it, that it was announced that Officer Bill Quinn had been killed, they, they felt, as did the hostages, that that could be a possibility.

Interviewer:

Can you just start again and say the inmates instead of "they."

Michael Smith:

OK.

Interviewer:

Just, just, you're doing except I don't, I'm afraid viewers won't know who they is.

Michael Smith:

OK. All right.

Interviewer:

Just tell me again, yeah.

Michael Smith:

Where, where, start when—

Interviewer:

Yeah, just starting over again.

Michael Smith:

OK.

00:16:56:00

Interviewer:

About it's on, I believe it's on Saturday night that the announcement is made that Bill Quinn has died.

00:17:01:00

Michael Smith:

One of the, OK, one of the inmate demands was that of amnesty. And up until the point where it was announced that Bill Quinn had been killed, that was, the amnesty was considered to be a real possibility. And with that announcement, the death of Bill Quinn, that cast a totally different light on the situation. And now instead of amnesty, the question was who and how many could be found guilty of murder.

00:17:50:00

Interviewer:

How did you feel? What, how did it change the mood in the yard when that announcement was made?

00:17:55:00

Michael Smith:

It changed, that, that, the announcement that Bill Quinn had died changed the mood in the air dramatically from one of, of hope to one of despair. That now the amnesty, which had been requested, was possibly hopeless.

00:18:21:00

Interviewer:

I'd like to ask you about Governor Rockefeller and your hopes and other peoples' hopes that he could grant amnesty or that he would at least come to Attica. Tell me how especially the hostages felt about that and how you felt about that.

00:18:37:00

Michael Smith:

It was a common, I think it was a common feeling between the, the hostages and the inmates that it was imperative that Governor Rockefeller be present at Attica and physically see what was happening. And physically pay attention to the demands and the situation himself. And at the time that it was announced that he definitely wasn't going to be there, that also cast a negative light on the situation. There were peoples' lives at stake, and it was, it was despairing to say the least that he was going to stay aloof of the whole situation. Not only on the officers' parts but also on the inmates' part. That, that here we were talking about peoples' lives at stake, and that, and that he couldn't personally look into the situation. That he didn't want to personally be responsible for whatever decision was made.

00:20:07:00

Interviewer:

You s—you mentioned before about how you felt that it wasn't, as time went on, it wasn't inmates versus hostages but that you were all in something together. How, how did that feeling come about? Tell, tell me more about what you mean, meant by that.

00:20:20:00

Michael Smith:

I, I, I think that it was a [pause] the riot [pause] made it possible—

Interviewer:

Just start again and say, "The riot made it possible."

Michael Smith:

The riot made it possible for inmates and correction officers who never had anything in common or never took the time to communicate to see if they could have anything in common, that they were both human beings. It, it, it gave them an opportunity to communicate, and it gave them a common basis to communicate on. That common basis—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

00:21:15:00

Interviewer:

I want, I want you to hold onto the thought—

Michael Smith:

OK.

Interviewer:

—we're just, it's, it's just the timing of the film. Just maybe think some more about what you want—

Michael Smith:

OK.

Interviewer:

Communication that, that started going on. Maybe something that was kind of really new because of—

Camera Crew Member #1:

Three one one six.

Interviewer:

—the uprising, OK?

[cut]

[camera roll #3116]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Recording. [pause] Speed. Pushing the button.

[slate]

Camera Crew Member #2:

Oops.

Camera crew member #3:

False sticks.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Just aim the board a little more at the camera.

Camera Crew Member #2:

OK.

Camera Crew Member #1:

And mark it.

00:21:43:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Take three.

[slate]

00:21:45:00

Interviewer:

OK. Tell me about the communication that started to occur between inmates and hostages, and the, and the sense in which you became one community rather than two groups in opposition. What, what, what happened?

00:21:58:00

Michael Smith:

Inmates and correction officers for the most part lacked communication. Partly because of the different backgrounds from which they came. Correction officers were primarily from rural communities and had grown up there. And even though [pause] weren't as outward as Ku Klux Klansman, some had feelings of bigotry and had no desire to communicate with the inmate population. In the same way, there were inmates that weren't interested in communicating with their captors. The common basis of communication during the riot was

that the inmates and the hostages had the same thing at stake—their lives. So, now there was, there was a readiness to communicate because everybody had the same common goal. And everybody, everyone would benefit from a positive outcome to the riot.

00:23:42:00

Interviewer:

I wanna move now forward in time a little bit to Sunday night when you told me things got really dark, and, and when negotiations had pretty clearly broken down. And you knew Governor Rockefeller wasn't coming. Describe to me what you did. You, you wrote a letter. You, you had some conversations with, with the inmate who was guarding you. Tell me that story if you will.

00:24:07:00

Michael Smith:

By Sunday night, the, was, was a feeling generally with the, among the hostages and also with the inmates that we were communicating with, that the negotiation process was breaking down. Governor Rockefeller had refused to come and take part in the negotiation process, and the negotiating committee didn't seem to be coming back with any positive response to the demands that were most important. There wasn't any problem with the insignificant demands, but the demands that were most important hadn't been addressed. Either hadn't been addressed, or the inmates hadn't been given a positive response to those demands. And Sunday night was, it was raining. All the hostages were in one area, and it was just commonly felt that something was going to happen the follow mo—morning. That was generally felt that the prison would be retaken by force.

00:25:41:00

Interviewer:

What did you do? You, you had been hopeful up to that point. But then—

00:25:43:00

Michael Smith:

Yeah, I, I'm sorry.

Interviewer:

That's OK.

Michael Smith:

I had been, up until Sunday night, I had thought positively, and I guess never really considered that I might not be walking out of the yard at the end of this siege. Sunday night, that feeling changed. And I had the opportunity to find some paper and some pen, and write my family a letter. And in that letter, I, I communicated to them that, that I love them all very much, and that I was sorry that this had evolved into what it had. But that, that I was sure we'd meet again someday.

00:26:44:00

Interviewer:

Tell me about your conversations with Don Nobel and, and how you swapped addresses and promised to keep in touch with each other.

00:26:51:00

Michael Smith:

On the—following Sunday evening, Monday morning, a number of the hostages had been taken to an elevated area in the prison called the catwalk from which they could be observed. And each hostage was assigned a number of ho—inmate executioners. And one of my executioners was an inmate who h—I, I had known who was in my company previously, and who in fact had, had protected me in the metal shop when the, when the riot initially started. And Don, I had three executioners, three inmate executioners. And Don was located directly to my left. He had his right arm over my right shoulder and held what appeared to be a, a tar paper knife. And that was held at my throat on the right side of my throat. I had another executioner behind me with a hammer and, and I had another executioner to the right side of me with a hand-fashioned spear made from parts from the metal shop. While on the catwalk, I had an opportunity to have a serious conversation with Don, a friendly conversation. And Don said that he was sorry that he'd had—the situation had deteriorated to the point that it had. And he asked me if there were anything that he could do for me. And I, I, I guess first I asked Don if I made it through alive if there were anything that I could do for him. He told me who his family was and where they were located, and asked me in the event of his death to get in touch with 'em, which I promised I'd do. Then Don asked if there were anything that he could do for me. And I said, Yes. That when the time came, that I didn't want to suffer. So, he knew what he was doing, just make the cut as clean and neat as possible so that I didn't have to suffer. And he promised me that he would. He also promised me that if he made it through it, he'd be in touch with my family.

00:29:39:00

Interviewer:

OK. I want to cut for a second. Where are we?

Camera Crew Member #1:

A hundred—

[cut]

[wild sound]

Michael Smith:

OK.

Interviewer:

—with Don because you've told me that already.

Michael Smith:

All right.

Interviewer:

But, but talk about the helicopter coming overhead. Maybe—

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Speed.

Interviewer:

—the, the—

Michael Smith:

OK.

Interviewer:

Quickly, OK. OK.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Push the button. Mark it.

00:29:59:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Take four.

[slate]

00:30:02:00

Interviewer:

Now just talk me through what happened to you Monday morning as the retaking of the yard occurred.

00:30:09:00

Michael Smith:

Monday morning, the negotiation process had broken down, and the inmates felt that their, that their bargaining power was in hostages that they had. So, they took so many of the hostages and moved 'em from D yard to an elevated area called the catwalk located in the center of the prison. And—

00:30:47:00

Interviewer:

Tell me what happened to you. When you were sitting in the circle.

00:30:51:00

Michael Smith:

Yes.

Interviewer:

OK. How were you chosen? How were you—

Michael Smith:

The hostages were all together in, in, in one area very close on the ground on mattresses. And we had our, had blindfolds on and had our wrists bound. And the inmate—or the hostages that were to be taken to the catwalk to be executed were just chose randomly. The inmates reached into the group of hostages and pulled us by the binding. And if they got ahold of

your wrist then you were one of the hostages that were taken to the catwalk. I was one of the hostages taken to the catwalk. Once at the catwalk, once on the catwalk, some of the hostages were standing. And I was given a chair to sit down and made as comfortable as possible. I was also given a drink of water. [sound of children playing] Where we goin' now, Terry?

00:32:12:00

Interviewer:

I just want you to describe that scene when the helicopter flew over and what happened—are you at the end of a roll?

Camera Crew Member #1:

Yeah.

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Interviewer:

OK. We just need to switch. I just want you to describe—

[cut]

[camera roll #3117]

00:32:25:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Take five.

[slate]

00:32:28:00

Interviewer:

OK. So, just describe being brought up to the catwalk and then all the things you felt, even when you couldn't see them. What happened to you.

00:32:38:00

Michael Smith:

Once we moved from the—

Camera Crew Member #1:

Start again. I'm sorry. Go ahead.

Michael Smith:

OK. Once we moved from the hostage area in D yard, ***I was led blindfolded to the top of the catwalk.*** And although I was blindfolded, the conversation of the inmates that surrounded me indicated that there were sharpshooters with guns on the roofs, rooftops located around us. And the, the signal for those sharpshooters to open fire was to be when a, a helicopter flew overhead and dropped a pro—gas projectile down into the yard. Upon the explosion of that gas projectile, the sharpshooters were to open fire. ***And I can recall when that helicopter flew overhead, besides being able to hear it, you could actually feel the concussion of the propellers from the helicopter overhead.*** And then the, I could hear the bang of the, or the pop of the gas projectile. And then the forces retaking the prison opened fire, and that seemed to last forever. It was a period of probably ten minutes. But at the time, it, it was a, it seemed like forever. You could hear all kinds of gunfire: shotguns, handguns, automatic weapon—automatic weapons, rifles. And you could hear the bullets hitting around ya. I can remember as soon as the firing started feeling a tug at my left shoulder, and I knew that Don Nobel was on my left side. And he pulled me off to the left, and I was able to jerk loose and sit up straight in the chair that I was sitting in. And at that point, I was hit. And I was hit four times in the abdomen and fell to the roof of the catwalk, which was directly below me. And as I lay there, I, I didn't know what had become of one of my executioners, but one laid dead over my legs. And one of the other ones, Don Nobel, laid behind me, parallel to me with his body up tight next to mine. And we laid there, and I was conscious during the time. It was very painful. And I can recall seeing forces through the fog. There was a lot of teargas. And forces through this fog that were retaking the prison run past with, with guns. And at, and at that point, there were, there were state troopers, and, and also correction officers from Attica that came in with the state troopers to help identify the officers from the inmate population. And I can recall looking up and seeing a, a state trooper come up to me. And at point blank range, he pointed his gun toward me. And a correction officer was not far behind and told the state trooper that I was OK, that I was one of them. He then raised the barrel of the gun and pointed it directly at the inmate, Don Nobel, behind me. And Don asked me at that time to tell him who I was, tell him, tell them who he was, and, and asked me to tell them what I did for, or what he did for me. And I said, His name is Don Nobel, and he, and he saved my life.

00:37:38:00

Interviewer:

Just tell me that again. Tell me about the trooper coming in and pointing the gun at you, and that, and just, just so you get the he's and the me's right.

00:37:46:00

Michael Smith:

OK. After I was shot, I laid on my left side on the top of the catwalk. And there was one inmate's body that was one of my executioners that laid dead over my legs. Another one of my inmate executioners was Don Nobel, and his body laid parallel to mine, directly behind me. And as the gunfire st—started to subside, became more sporadic, there were people, rescuers that were using the catwalk on which I laid to gain entry to D yard. And along with the rescuers, there was also the retaking force that consisted of state troopers. And one state trooper in particular, when he got to me, looked down and pointed his gun at me at point blank range. And a correction officer that was close by that recognized me told him not to shoot, that I was okay, that I was one of them. He then raised the barrel of the [siren] weapon—

00:39:09:00

Interviewer:

Oops. We need to cut. I'm sorry.

Michael Smith:

It's OK.

Interviewer:

It's the—

[cut]

[wild sound]

—siren. It's just making a noise—

Michael Smith:

OK.

Interviewer:

—and if we have the film with the siren—if you just want to start this part of the story with the forces that were, that were retaking and how the trooper was coming through.

Michael Smith:

OK.

Interviewer:

Yeah, you don't need to talk again about—

[cut]

00:39:32:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

All right, take six.

[slate]

00:39:35:00

Interviewer:

OK. What happened with this trooper coming in?

00:39:39:00

Michael Smith:

As I lay on the catwalk, one of the troopers that came in with the forces to retake the prison pointed his weapon at a point blank range directly toward my head, and an officer, correction officer from Attica that recognized me, that was close by, told him not to shoot, that I was one of them. He then lifted the weapon that was directed at me and, and pointed it at the inmate, Don Nobel, who was behind me. Don then asked me to tell that officer who he was and what he had done for me. So, I explained that his name was Don Nobel and that he had saved my life.

00:40:33:00

Interviewer:

OK. Tell me about how you were wounded and the kinds of weapons that were used against you, against—in the retaking.

00:40:41:00

Michael Smith:

The, when I was shot, I was shot four times in the abdomen, and the ent—the, the bullets entered on the, on my front side, broke up and exited out the back side of my body. And during surgery, it was discovered that the, the bullets had in fact been fixed, what they call a dum dum bullet, and they were outlawed during World War I. But that bullet fixed in that fashion is specifically made that way to cause damage and maim.

00:41:36:00

Interviewer:

We're near the end?

Camera Crew Member #1:

Seventy two.

Interviewer:

We're gonna stop for a second. I wanna go back and do some pickups, but I want—

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:41:50:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Take seven.

00:41:52:00

Interviewer:

OK. Tell me about who became a guard, who chose to become a guard, and why.

00:41:56:00

Michael Smith:

The correction officers that I met were primarily from rural backgrounds, had been brought up in the country. And the inmate population was increasingly more Black and were from

urban areas. And there was a difficulty in both communicating with each other primarily because of two reasons, they were from completely different backgrounds which neither could understand, and also a lack of intent or a want to try to communicate with each other.

00:42:50:00:00

Interviewer:

What about you? How did you feel about bridging that gap? How did you bridge that gap? How did you try to?

00:42:56:00

Michael Smith:

I tried to communicate on a basis of mutual respect and not looking at the person as an inmate but a human being. And I had a good rapport with the inmate population for the most part. And found that I was very successful communicating on that basis.

00:43:24:00

Interviewer:

What was it about the job of, of, of being a guard that was appealing to people? Why did, why, why did people take that job?

00:43:30:00

Michael Smith:

Initially I took the job, I was 21 at the time. Had just gotten married. I needed a job. I needed income, and I was looking for security.

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

00:43:47:00

Interviewer:

Whoops. We did run out. [laughs]

Michael Smith:

Oh.

Interviewer:

It's OK. I just thought I'd try to squeak an extra one in, and it—

Michael Smith:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

I mean, were the inmates getting rehabilitated? Were they treated humanely? Did they have what they needed? I mean, just tell me. I'm gonna ask you about—

Camera Crew Member #2:

Camera roll 3118. Camera roll 3118.

Michael Smith:

OK, you're gonna do something—

Interviewer:

I'm gonna ask you that.

Michael Smith:

OK.

Interviewer:

And then I'm gonna ask you a different question.

Michael Smith:

OK.

Interviewer:

But don't worry. OK?

[camera roll #3118]

[sound roll #353]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Speed. Mark it.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Camera—

Camera Crew Member #1:

Tilt, tilt it towards me just a bit.

00:44:15:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Camera roll three one one eight, sound roll three five three. Take eight.

[slate]

00:44:19:00

Interviewer:

OK, now in the summer, the demands, there were, there were a list of demands that the inmates put together to give to Governor Rockefeller, and Don Nobel showed those to you. Just tell me the story of how he brought them to you, what the demands were, and what you thought about them.

00:44:36:00

Michael Smith:

During the summer [pause] during the summer prior to the riot, I hadn't—

Interviewer:

Just say during, I'm sorry. But just say during the summer of 1971.

Michael Smith:

OK.

Interviewer:

So we know—

00:44:50:00:00

Michael Smith:

During the summer of 1971, an inmate who I had come to know quite well, Don Nobel, showed me a list of demands that were still in the preparatory stage, and he asked me to review those demands and tell me, tell him what I thought. And I don't recall specifically what all the demands were. However, most of the demands were of a humanitarian need category. Such things as unrationed toilet paper, more showers, less censorship of mail, more visits, and less censorship of who, who was allowed to visit. And that list of demands, I don't recall seeing anything that I considered to be unreasonable.

00:45:52:00

Interviewer:

Now, during the uprising, while you were in D yard, tell me about the importance of Governor Rockefeller's decision not to come to Attica. Just describe the meaning that that had for you and how that changed the mood in D yard. Tell me about how you were hopeful before that or—

00:46:17:00

Michael Smith:

During the riot, I was in, in hopes that Governor Rockefeller would make a personal appear—appearance and give his personal input to the situation and at least look into what was going on and at least look at the demands and listen to the people involved. Talk with the hostages and talk with the inmates that were involved in the riot. Governor Rockefeller was, was asked repeatedly to give that personal attention and make that personal appearance at Attica. And when he refused, it was very disheartening to me and threw a very negative light on the situation that the hopes could ever, that the situation could ever be re-resolved.

00:47:31:00

Interviewer:

Tell me how the mood changed. You used a phrase before that people were willing, if they couldn't live like men they'd die like men. And that that—

00:47:38:00

Michael Smith:

Yeah, through, through the riot one of the mottos, if you will, that was, that was spoken by the inmate population was that if we can't live like men then we'll die like men. And with Governor Rockefeller's refusal to come to Attica to address the [siren] situation—

00:48:12:00

Interviewer:

I'm gonna cut just for the siren, and I'm gonna ask you to do that.

Michael Smith:

OK.

Interviewer:

And that'll be it. Unless—

Michael Smith:

All right.

Interviewer:

[laughs]

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Marker.

Michael Smith:

You're gonna lead in, right?

Interviewer:

Yeah.

00:48:23:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Take nine.

[slate]

00:48:26:00

Interviewer:

OK. There was this phrase, if we can't live like men, we're gonna die like men. Just tell me, tell me about that phrase and then tell me how that sort of became a real feeling.

00:48:36:00

Michael Smith:

During the riot, the inmates had adopted a phrase that if they couldn't live like men then they'd die like men. And with Governor Rockefeller's refusal to address the situation personally, it just put that much more likelihood—li—likelihood that there, that there wouldn't be a positive outcome to the situation, and it leaned more in the di—direction that we were gonna die like men.

00:49:11:00

Interviewer:

OK. cut for a second. [pause] Questions?

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

00:49:20:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

OK. Take ten.

00:49:23:00

Interviewer:

Just tell me about the average guard and what his motivations were, and, and how, how you felt compared to them, and, and what you were trying to do, and the frustrations you encountered working as a guard in the system. Tell me about the average guard.

00:49:39:00

Michael Smith:

I was probably pretty representative of the average guard. I had a high school education, graduated from high school, and had no degree in social work. And for the most part, I don't think that—the average correction officer wasn't interested in communicating with an inmate. They were there because it was their job. And they'd go there. They'd punch a clock. They'd be there for eight hours, and they'd leave. And that was the extent of the interest in their job.

00:50:23:00

Interviewer:

Was the system frustrating for you? What, what did you see happen to people who came into the system? What—

00:50:27:00

Michael Smith:

The system was especially frustrating for me. There was, there was no, there was no system of segregation. And by segregation, I mean there were people there that were, that had mental problems that should have been addressed in a different manner than a maximum-security state prison could provide. There were, there were people that were long—had been criminals for a, for a long time. Long-term criminals. And for all practical purposes or, were probably not able to be rehabilitated. And at the same time, you had inmates that were guilty of a first offense. At that point in time, smoking marijuana was against the law. So, you might have an eighteen-year-old kid that was doin' time next to somebody that was in for doing murder for throwing a baby off a bridge or, or some, some capital crime. And I don't think that, I don't think that it was a good idea to throw everybody into one melting pot like that.

00:51:55:00

Interviewer:

Do you think the system was damaging to the people that came in?

00:51:58:00

Michael Smith:

I think the system was damaging to the people that came in. I think that the, the only redeeming factor to a system like that would be that it was such a place of desperation and

abuse that *the only inspiration anybody could have not to go back to, or desire not to go back to a place like that is because of what a horrible place it was.*

00:52:35:00

Interviewer:

OK. Good. cut. OK. Is there anything else you wanna tell us?

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:52:44:00

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