

Interview with **James Armstrong**

February 22, 1979

Camera Roll: 1

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

[camera roll 1]

[sound roll 1]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: HERE WE GO. CUT.

[hand slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: CUT.

[hand slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: OK.

INTERVIEWER 1: OK. MR. ARMSTRONG, WHEN DID YOU FIRST GET INVOLVED IN THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT IN BIRMINGHAM?

Armstrong: Back in the '6—'50s.

INTERVIEWER 1: YOU MAY—YOU SORT OF HAVE TO SAY A COMPLETE SENTENCE. SAY, I GOT INVOLVED—

Armstrong: I got involved back in the six—in the '50s. '56 and, you know, beginning in '56.

INTERVIEWER 1: OK. CUT FOR JUST A SECOND JOE.

00:00:40:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

INTERVIEWER 1: YEAH. THIS IS—I THINK WHAT I NEED, WHAT I NEED YOU TO DO IS GIVE ME A LONG, GIVE ME A LONG PIECE WHERE YOU STILL SAY—

Armstrong: I got you.

INTERVIEWER 1: —I FIRST GOT INVOLVED BACK IN 1956 WITH FRED SHUTTLESWORTH.

Armstrong: Yeah, I, I get your point.

INTERVIEWER 1: WE WERE HAVING MEETINGS, DEMONSTRATING AND SO ON AND SO FORTH. AND TAKE ME, GIVE ME ONE LINE THAT TAKES ME ALL THE WAY UP TO 1963. AND THEN YOU CAN END IT WITH THE CIVIL RIGHTS BILL THAT CAME OUT OF THAT.

00:01:14:00

[cut]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: GO ON.

[hand slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: OK.

INTERVIEWER 1: OK. MR. ARMSTRONG.

Armstrong: Yes?

INTERVIEWER 1: WHEN DID YOU FIRST BECOME INVOLVED IN THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT IN BIRMINGHAM?

Armstrong: Back in '56, back when Shuttlesworth had first organized the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights. We met every Monday night from then on, on up through the '60s and to the civil rights bill and on and on through the integration of the schools and bus station and lunch counters and marches and different demonstrations.

INTERVIEWER 1: OK. YOU WERE SAYING THAT A LOT OF THE KIDS WHO WERE INVOLVED IN SOME OF THE DEMONSTRATIONS IN THE '60s HAVE MOVED AWAY FROM BIRMINGHAM.

Armstrong: Yes.

INTERVIEWER 1: COULD YOU TELL ME THAT THEY'VE MOVED AWAY AND THEN TELL ME WHY YOU THINK THEY'VE MOVED AWAY?

Armstrong: Well, a lot of them move away because they were—some of the kids was in the marches and the demonstrations, their name was, was on the list as, as—you call Communists, I imagine. That's what word they used. And they couldn't find job, because my kid was involved in that. And they never could get jobs because of their name being on wall and people knew who they were, because they was in marches. So they move away for—to find better jobs or jobs period.

INTERVIEWER 1: OK, OK.

[cut]

00:02:53:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: ROLLING.

[hand slate]

INTERVIEWER 1: OK. SO WHEN AND WHY DID YOU GET INVOLVED IN THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT TN BIRMINGHAM?

Armstrong: In '56 and why? I've always concerned about the South and, and what was going on. I never was pleased with the things that happened round here. So I had a chance to do something about it, so I got involved. And glad I did.

INTERVIEWER 2: ASK WHAT BIRMINGHAM WAS LIKE IN '56.

INTERVIEWER 1: OK. REFO—REFRAME IT. WHAT WAS, WHAT WAS BIRMINGHAM LIKE IN '56?

Armstrong: It was, it's, it was prejudiced and segregation and kind of backwards and, well, in some places still is, but back in '56 it was worse though. And there was signs where a black couldn't go and, and there were signs all the way—wherever you went there were signs in your face. Or what color you were, like you didn't know what color you were. So these are things that we fought hard to destroy.

00:04:04:00

INTERVIEWER 1: YOU MENTIONED SOMETHING ABOUT WHAT YOU SAID IS THE PRICE—KEEP THE SAME FRAME. YOU MENTIONED THAT, THAT YOU

CONSIDERED A LOT OF THE SUFFERING AND THINGS THAT YOU HAD TO GO THROUGH TO HAVE BEEN THE "PRICE" FOR THE THINGS THAT YOU WANTED.

Armstrong: Yes. There was a lot of suffering and, and a lot of peoples [sic]—if you're speaking about a lot of peoples, they got, lost their jobs. And well, in my shape, I happen to be self-employed. It was, it was kinda [sic] rough with me because I've had confrontations with the Barber Commissioners and thing like that, but through it all that that I was able to survive because I was self-employed and my people supported me. That's helped me to stand which I am grateful to them who stood beside me while I was doing the struggling. They kept things going for me.

INTERVIEWER 1: WHAT?

INTERVIEWER 2: I WAS JUST WONDERING, COULD YOU, FOR PEOPLE WHO DON'T KNOW WHAT A MASS MEETING IS LIKE, CAN YOU TALK ABOUT WHAT IT WAS LIKE TO BE IN A MASS MEETING WITH ALL THOSE PEOPLE AND THE KIND OF SPIRIT THAT WAS INVOLVED?

Armstrong: Well, there was lot a movement some who can arouse people as to, you know, to keep their hopes and high and, and, keep themselves going. And, and they had a lot of information, knew how to protect yourself, and what we had to do because we were oppressed people and we knew that. So—we knew all our problems. So we just stayed together and sing and march and were jailed and spent our money and, and, and just—from, form each Monday night there was a mass meeting to carry on and the poor folks would walk around the table and put their dollars and dimes or whatever they had. So that these are the things that help us got to where we at today.

00:05:58:00

INTERVIEWER 2: AND WHAT DID YOU DO WHEN YOU FOUND POLICE? I MEAN DID YOU SEE POLICE IN THERE?

Armstrong: Yes, there were polices [sic] always at the mass meeting and taking notes. Even some of the mass meeting you had Fire Department come and try to inti—intimidate you. Like somebody called them, you had a fire. I remember saying, that was nice we had the Fire Department come by without calling. Trying to disperse people, but peoples follow leadership, which we had a good leader, Shuttles—Fred Shuttlesworth.

INTERVIEWER 1: WERE YOU IN THE CHURCH THE, THE, THE DAY THAT THE FIRE DEPARTMENT JUST SPRAYED THE CHURCH AND THE CHURCH—THE SIXTEENTH STREET BAPTIST CHURCH WAS ALL FLOODED IN THE BASEMENT?

Armstrong: I wasn't in there, but I was there. The—

INTERVIEWER 1: COULD YOU TELL US ABOUT THAT A LITTLE BIT?

Armstrong: Well, I was, you know, you were outside in a crowd, you couldn't really see, but all I knew they were pourin' [sic] water in the—cause, I think, the hose knocked Fred Shuttlesworth down at that particular time.

INTERVIEWER 1: OK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: YOU DONE?

INTERVIEWER 1: YEAH.

00:06:58:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

INTERVIEWER 1: OK. IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE YOU CAN THINK OF THAT MIGHT BE HELPFUL FOR US?

Armstrong: Well, [laughs] maybe—I don't know. It's just like I say, you can't think it's so much that happened and time, twenty years makes a difference, you know. And, and this, I said—if you ask me questions, something can come forward you know and because something you hope to forget, because it was pretty rough. Because we, we used to have to follow each other home at night. Because of police on your trail, give you tickets, accuse of [sic] speeding, accuse of running the stop sign and all that kind of, so—

INTERVIEWER 2: HOW DID YOU FEEL AS A PARENT? I MEAN, HOW—YOU KNOW, KNOWING THAT YOUR KIDS WERE OUT THERE IN THE DEMONSTRATIONS, HOW DID YOU FEEL?

Armstrong: Well, I knew that the benefit will be mostly with them. So I felt good. And I was glad they were able to want to do—

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:08:06:00

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