

Interview with **Frederick Leonard**

November 3, 1985

Production Team: B

Camera Rolls: 321-322

Sound Rolls: 1311

Interview gathered as part of *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*.

00:00:01:00

[camera roll 321]

[sound roll 1311]

[slate]

INTERVIEWER: WHAT WE'RE GONNA DO IS YOU'RE GONNA START TELLING ME—

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: —THAT YOU'RE IN BIRMINGHAM, YOU'RE IN THE BUS TERMINAL—

Leonard: Mm-hmm.

INTERVIEWER: —AND ABOUT THE KLAN MARCHING THROUGH AND THAT THERE WERE POLICE PROTECTION THERE AND YOU DIDN'T GET HASSLED AND YOU GOT ON THE BUS AND YOU GUYS DROVE OFF, OK?

Leonard: OK.

INTERVIEWER: GIVE ME THAT FIRST STORY.

Leonard: OK, I'll—when we were in the bus station, the first thing I did was looked over

there—I shouldn't have done that, can we stop?

INTERVIEWER: OK.

Leonard: That's what I'm telling you [laughs]. The first—

[cut]

INTERVIEWER: YOU'RE PASSING THROUGH AND YOU THINK THERE'S GOING TO BE—

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: —SOME HASSLE, BUT THERE ISN'T, THERE'S POLICE PROTECTION. OK?

00:00:39:00

Leonard: OK. Well, we were in the terminal in Birmingham, and what happened here was, I think all of us wanted to believe that we will be taken back to Tennessee like the first group was, but that didn't happen. The sheriff was there, we had plenty of protection, police everywhere—the Klan comes through with their guns and their robes and everything, but we felt safe because they just walked past us, they didn't hassle us at all. And so we were there about maybe a couple of hours before the bus left for Montgomery and when we left going to Montgomery, everybody was relaxed, no problem. We had police escorts, they followed us down the highway, felt comfortable—going into the terminal in Montgomery, everybody was feeling comfortable, we didn't see anybody, but we didn't any police either. *And then, all of a sudden, just like, whoosh, magic, white people, sticks and bricks: "Nigger! Kill the niggers!" We were still on the bus, you know? But I think we were all kind of deciding, well, maybe we should go off at the back of this bus, because we kind of knew that if we had gone off at the back of the bus that maybe they wouldn't be so bad on us. They wanted us to go off the back of the bus. And we decided, no, no, we'll go off the front and take what's coming to us. We went out the front of the bus. Jim Zwerg was a white fellow from Madison, Wisconsin. He had a lot of nerve. And I think that's what saved me, Bernard Lafayette, and Allen Cason, 'cause Jim Zwerg walked off the bus in front of us and they was so, it was like they were possessed, or they couldn't believe that there was a white man who would help us, and they grabbed him and pulled him into the mob, I mean it was a mob. When we came off the bus, they were so, their attention was on him. It's like, like they didn't see the rest of us, for like about maybe thirty seconds, they didn't see us, they didn't see us at all, and we were, we, we were held up by this rail, there was a rail right there, at the bus station, parking lot down below, cars down there. And then when they did turn toward us, we had a choice, about ten or fifteen feet below. We could stand there and take it or we could go over the, over the rail. Over the rail we went, me and Bernard Lafayette. And Allen Cason always carried his little typewriter, always had his typewriter. Over the rail he went, on top of a car, hit the ground, took off, ran into the back of this building. It was the post office and the people were in there carrying on the business of*

*just like nothing was happening outside. But when we came through there, now mail went to flying everywhere 'cause we were running,* went out the other side of the post office, first thing we saw was a black dr-cab driver. We waved for him, cause we all had Reverend Shuttlesworth's address and telephone number, cause we, we felt we would be divided and this will be where we would meet. He wouldn't stop for us, but it was a strange thing on the other side of that post office, it was just as peaceful, just like a Sunday morning. Maybe another minute later another black cab driver came by and he picked us up and took us Shuttlesworth house, and that's where *we heard the news about Jim Zwerg, about John Lewis, about William Barbee. William Barbee was damaged for life really, Jim Zwerg for life. It's amazing that they're still living, they could have been killed.* I think what saved them was, this white fellow who was in the crowd shot a gun in the air and if it was not for him, they would be dead. Jim Zwerg would be dead, Bernard Lafayette, all of us would be dead. Is that good?

INTERVIEWER: THAT'S GOOD. CUT.

Leonard: I'm dramatizing it too much.

00:05:12:00

[cut]

INTERVIEWER: WHY FACE THE-

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: ROLLING.

INTERVIEWER: -POSSIBILITY OF DEATH.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: WHAT DO YOU, WHAT ARE YOU DOING IT FOR? WHAT'S, WHY WOULD YOU PUT YOURSELF, FACE THOSE KIND OF THINGS?

Leonard: Well, I guess the next generation-

INTERVIEWER: NO, NO, GIVE IT TO ME IN A SENTENCE. TELL ME THAT I, THAT WE DID THIS. WE WERE, WE WERE YOUNG PEOPLE WHO DID THIS BECAUSE-

Leonard: Oh, OK, well, OK, OK, well, we, he's not on this thing already is he?

INTERVIEWER: YOU'RE LOOKING AT ME. OK?

Leonard: OK. OK, now-

INTERVIEWER: I WAS A COLLEGE STUDENT, I WAS, I TOOK, I WENT ON THE FREEDOM RIDES BECAUSE-

Leonard: I don't think I can start right there.

INTERVIEWER: STOP CAMERA. PLEASE STOP.

[wild audio]

INTERVIEWER: OK, HOW WOULD YOU START?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: STOP CAMERA?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: YEAH.

[cut]

00:06:00:00

INTERVIEWER: WHAT WAS THE PURPOSE? WHY GE ON THE-

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: SPEED

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: -BUS AT THAT TIME?

Leonard: It was, was like-

INTERVIEWER: WHY, WHY GET ON THAT BUS AT THAT TIME? WHAT, TAKE YOURSELF BACK TO THAT TIME. GETTING ON THAT BUS AND WHAT WAS IT ALL ABOUT?

Leonard: It was about being treated like a human. It was like if you were black you had one right, and that was the right to die, not to live. And we wanted to change that. Kill me now, but they won't kill my children. They'll have the right, the doors will open for them, if they don't open for me, they'll open for them. And when, when we boarded the bus, I think Leo, Leo Lillard, I think, and he was like, he coordinated everything and, and we were anxious to go, everybody was anxious to go, even though we all felt that people will be, will be killed, everybody felt people would be killed, but everybody wanted to go, to make the ultimate sacrifice for the next generation. And it all seemed so easy when we got to Birmingham, it all seemed so easy because, you know, we said, nobody will get killed, we have police protection and everything is just fine and lovely. We're going to integrate this place, and that's, that's just, just A B C, 1 2 3, just like that. But when we got to Montgomery, it was a whole different story.

00:07:37:00

INTERVIEWER: GOOD. GOOD. OK. CUT. CUT.

[cut]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: SPEED.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: LET ME GET SETTLED HERE FOR A SECOND.

INTERVIEWER: OK SO YOU'RE GONNA TELL ME ABOUT HOW YOU GOT INTO THE CHOIR AND TO THE CHURCH AND WHY YOU HAD TO BE, YOU HAD TO GO INTO THE CHOIR.

Leonard: OK, there, there was a mass rally there, that same night, in Reverend Shuttlesworth's, not Shuttlesworth, Abernathy's church. And we were all there, the ones who escaped, but we were sought after like criminals, you know it was kind of strange because it was, we were the victims, but we were sought after. And they were looking for us so there were some people outside the church who warned us that they were coming. They came in and said, well, they're coming for them, they're coming for the Freedom Riders. And someone in church suggested-well, hide in the choir stands-and we took off and ran up to the choir and put on little robes and started singing you know, so they came in and looked, didn't see us, and they left. That good enough? [laugh] Cut.

[cut]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: SPEED. MARK IT.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: OK LET ME SETTLE IN HERE. JUST A SECOND TO GET-

00:08:48:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, TELL ME, TELL ME ABOUT GETTING, BEING THE FIRST BUS TO JACKSON, WHAT YOU EXPECTED, WHEN YOU GOT THERE, AND THEN WHAT REALLY HAPPENED.

Leonard: OK, now, on the ride to Jackson everybody was tense because of what happened in Montgomery. Ross Barnett had promised there will be no violence in Mississippi. Well, we wouldn't believe this, because we know what happened in Alabama, and Mississippi had the reputation of, Mississippi and maybe the South Carolina had the reputation of the worst southern states. So, you know, we expected something worse than in Montgomery. Well, when we got to Jackson, Mississippi we didn't see anybody except the police. Oh, we stuck our chests out then, because we, we didn't see this mob. We walked on off the front of the

bus, the police were standing there, said just keep moving. And they had the little line right there to go to the white waiting room, cause they knew where we were going, so we walked on through the white waitin' room, wh- wh- oh, oh, can you stop, I got kind of, can you stop there? Can we go back? Can you, can, can you, can you just stop?

00:10:00:00

[cut]

Leonard: –start now?

INTERVIEWER: WE'RE GONNA START ABOUT–

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: I'll tell you when.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: WE'RE GONNA START ABOUT, WE'RE START YOU GOT, WHEN WE START YOU GOT TO JACKSON AND SAW THE POLICE, OK?

Leonard: OK, in the, in the wa-

INTERVIEWER: YOU WENT TO JACKSON, YOU SEE NOTHING BUT POLICE.

Leonard: OK. *In Jackson, there were only police outside the terminal, inside the terminal. As we walked through, the police just said, keep moving, and let us go through the white side. We never got to stop, you know? They just said, keep moving, and they passed us right on through the white terminal into the paddy wagon, and into jail. There was no violence in Mississippi.* The next day, we went to court. The prosecutor got up, said–Your Honor, the defendants are accused of trespassing. And that's just about all he said. He took his seat. Our attorney, Jack Young, he stood up to defend us, you know, defend our rights, we had rights, we were humans. Oh–

00:11:13:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: DID YOU GET THAT LAST ONE?

[cut]

[slate]

[change to camera roll 322]

Leonard: Start with the next day?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: SPEED.

[sync tone]

00:19:00:00

INTERVIEWER: START WITH THE NEXT DAY AFTER, AFTER WE GOT ARRESTED IN JACKSON.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: LET ME JUST GET SETTLED HERE.

INTERVIEWER: THE NEXT DAY AFTER WE GOT ARRESTED IN JACKSON.

Leonard: OK, the, the ne-, *the next day after we were arrested in Jackson, we went to court. The prosecutor got up, accused us of trespassing, took his seat. Our attorney, Jack Young, got up to defend us as human beings having the right to be treated like human beings. While he was defending us, the judge turned his back, looked at the wall. When he finished, the judge turned around, bam, sixty days in the state penitentiary. And there we were, on the way to Parchman, maximum security.*

INTERVIEWER: OK.

Leonard: Cut, OK? [laughs]

[cut]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: ROLLING AND I HAVE-

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: MARK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: MARK.

[sync tone]

00:12:18:00

INTERVIEWER: SO YEAH, TELL ME ABOUT BEING IN PARCHMAN AND THE WHOLE STRUGGLE OVER SINGING AND THE MATTRESS STORY.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: OK. IT'S ALL YOURS.

Leonard: OK, all right. Now *in the penitentiary, Parchman, we were only allowed one book. That was the Bible. So we did a lot of singing. Praying, too. But a lot of singing. And those folks just couldn't understand how we could be happy singing. So they would say, "Shut up! Shut up!" And the women, we could hear the women on the other side, they'd sing to us and we'd sing to them. So they came through and said, "Well, if you don't shut up, we'll take your mattresses." That didn't bother us, we kept singing. So they came*

*through and took our mattresses. I let my mattress go, everybody let their mattress go. The next night they gave us our mattress back, mattresses back. So, we start singing again. They, they threatened us again. We will take your mattresses and you have to sleep on that steel without a mattress. That steel was cold, and you only had a pair of shorts and a little t-shirt on. We kept singing freedom songs: "Freedom's coming and it won't be long." They came through a cell b-, block. Stokely Carmichael was my cell mate. I told Stokely, "I'm not letting my mattress go." Everybody peacefully let their mattress go, but I remembered the night before when I had to sleep on that steel. So they came in to take my mattress, I was ho-, holding my mattress. They drug me out into the cell block, I still had my mattress, I wouldn't turn it loose, and one of the inmates, they would use the black inmates to come and get our mattresses. I mean, the inmates, you know? And there was this guy, Peewee they called him, short and muscular, they said, Peewee, get him. Peewee came down on my head man, whomp, whomp. He was crying. Peewee was crying. And I still had my mattress. That's when I, do you remember when your parents used to whip you and say, "It's going to hurt me more than it hurt you"? It hurt Peewee more than it hurt me. I still wouldn't turn my mattress loose, so they had these things they put on our wrists, and they started tightening them, they were like handcuffs, and they started twisting and tightening them up-my, my bones start crack, crack, cracking and going on and my hands stood out. Turned my mattress loose. Is that good? [laughs]*

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:15:07:00

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