Interview with **Ruby Sales**
Date: November 14, 1988
Interviewer: Jim DeVinney
Camera Rolls: 1046-1048
Sound Rolls: 119
Team: A

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.

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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 II*.

[camera roll #1047]
[sound roll #119]

[slate]

00:00:13:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it. Any time.

00:00:18:00

Interviewer:

OK, to begin tell me about the connection between Tuskegee and your experience in Lowndes County.

00:00:24:00

Ruby Sales:

OK, Tuskegee played an important role in my experience at Lowndes County. When I came to Tuskegee, Tuskegee Institute and the faculty members at Tuskegee Institute had been very much themselves involved in challenging the segregation of Tuskegee and Montgomery, Alabama. So, in some real ways, the climate was there for that kind of participation, and we were very fortunate when I was at Tuskegee to have a dean of the college there who, who

was very much committed to, to social change and encouraged the students and created an atmosphere that nurtured the kind of participation and involvement that later became very important at Tuskegee.

00:01:06:00

Interviewer:

Tell me how you came to go to Lowndes County.

00:01:08:00

Ruby Sales:

Well, I was taught in English by Jean Wiley, who herself had begun to become involved in the movement. And she knew that I was very interested because I had expressed that I wanted to do something to get involved. And she suggested that I might want, might volunteer to go to one of the counties. And I did go, I, I decided to go to Lowndes County, Alabama. And the first day that I was in Lowndes County, Stokely Carmichael met us and introduced us, and took us around to the county. And then we went down to the courthouse to try to get people, try to register people to vote. And Stokely, at that point, was met by the sheriff, who told him, Nigger, I've told you once, and I'm not going to tell you another time that if you come down here again, I will blow your brains out. And then he proceeded to take out his gun and put it to Stokely's head and say, If you don't leave right now, I'll blow you away. And Stokely turned to him and said, Well, one thing, if you blow me away, hell will be integrated tonight. So, I was quite impressed with that. And it was at that point that I knew that I was really committed, and I wanted to be involved.

00:02:25:00

Interviewer:

Alright, thank you very much. Let's stop down for just a moment and make sure all the systems are work—

[cut]

[slate]

00:02:32:00

Camera crew member #1:

Any time.

00:02:32:00

Interviewer:

OK, Ruby, you have something you wanted to tell me. Go ahead.

00:02:34:00

Ruby Sales:

I also think Tuskegee was very important, too, because when I came to Tuskegee, I had come from a background of nonviolence where I did not have a clear understanding that there was a possibility that people would hurt each other. And when I came to Tuskegee before I went to Lowndes County, Alabama, I participated in the first demonstration. And on that demonstration, what was very significant about that demonstration was that not only was I in the demonstration with my friends and my peers, but I was also on the demonstration with people who taught me in class. So, I went to that demonstration with a great deal of naiveté and a sense of what peoples' limits were. So, when we got to the capital in Montgomery and were surrounded by police, and dogs, and horses, and we were singing "Come by here, Lord, come by here," well, coming from a Baptist background and a, and a religious background, and this whole sense that we were bred on that, that right would ultimately win out, and bad would be punished, when we were singing "Come by here, Lord, come by here," part of me expected at that point that the sky would literally open up, and we would be rescued from the, from the dogs and from the, from the horses, and, and from the violence. And when that didn't happen, I think I went through a religious crisis at that point. I began to understand that there were things that existed in the world that I had not been prepared for, and I began to understand that people would in fact kill you, that I had not been prepared for that reality, that there were people in the world who would kill you simply because you were Black, that they didn't know you but that they would hurt you simply because of how you looked.

00:04:24:00

Interviewer:

I wanna take you into Lowndes County now with that same sense of fear. Because Lowndes County had a terrible reputation. You were 16. Tell me how you responded—

00:04:31:00

Camera crew member #2:

Cut.

00:04:32:00

Camera crew member #1:

Cut please.

[cut]

[slate]

00:04:36:00

Interviewer:

OK, I want you to talk to me about that sense of fear going into Lowndes County and how you had to meet that, face that.

00:04:42:00

Ruby Sales:

OK, when I went into Lowndes County, I was afraid. But there was a sense of optimism at that point that sort of over-rode all of the fear. And when I went into Lowndes County the first day, I began to hear these terrible stories about Lowndes County being called Bloody Lowndes and that some of the local people who lived there told me that there was a gully that if you were to go and look in the gully, you could see the bones of Black people bleached white from years of violence and lynchin'. So, I had a real sense that I was in the midst of, of a very violent environment and that, that, that reality was driven home to me when a couple of days later, Mary, Mary Moseley, who was my best friend, we had gone into the county together, we went out and were trying to register people. And we asked some White men how to get to this little, small town where we had been assu—, assigned, Letohatchee. And they sent us to a graveyard. The directions that they gave us led us to a graveyard. And so there we were surrounded by graves on the one hand, and there was this car of White men on the other hand. And Mary Nell Moseley, Mary Nell was not a seasoned driver. And we literally absolutely panicked, and so she turned around very fast. And we drove out of there with our lives. And al—, and I was always conscious as we were driving away that, God, I might never see my parents again. I might never see my friends again, and, and, and just really trying to sort of push Mary so that she wouldn't panic because I was aware that she was not accustomed to driving. So, that was a reality for me, that we were in potentially a very dangerous situation.

00:06:30:00

Interviewer:

When you're 16 years old. How bad can your fear get?

00:06:32:00

Ruby Sales:

It can get very bad.

00:06:35:00

Interviewer:

Start again.

00:06:35:00

Ruby Sales:

It, it can get very bad. I mean the fear can get very bad. I mean one of the things that always happened in those situations when you became very afraid is that there would be absolute silence. In the car, there would be absolute silence. And the only thing that you could hear would almost be your own heart beating. But when you recognized that you had passed the danger then people would burst out laughing and talking as a way of releasing the kind of fear that they had gone through. So, fear was something that we lived with on a day to day basis in the county.

00:07:10:00

Interviewer:

OK, let's stop down here. I just wanna check where we are—

00:07:11:00

Camera crew member #2:

Sorry—

[cut]

[slate]

00:07:17:00

Camera crew member #1:

OK.

00:07:18:00

Interviewer:

OK. Can you tell us, I assume this is your first arrest now, so tell us a little bit about that.

00:07:22:00

Ruby Sales:

Well, we were at the demonstration that day in Fort Deposit because we had had a, a mass meeting the night before. And the local people in Lowndes County decided that they wanted to demonstrate to, to bring to public attention the issues around voters' registration and the violence of the county there. So, we went down to Fort Deposit, which was another county seat. And ostensibly— we, we thought that we were just going to go to a demonstration, we had no idea what would meet us when we got there. And when we got there, m—, we meaning SNCC people; Stokely Carmichael, Bob Mants, myself, Jean Wiley, who came to report and to write up what was happening. And when we got there, suddenly out of nowhere, there were, there were White men with guns, with baseball bats, with the tops of garbage cans. And they surrounded us. And, and literally there was no place to go. You were sort of hemmed in by all of this. And I was on the tail end of the line when that happened, so I had an opportunity. I was faced with a choice at that point. I could have easily slipped away and pretended that I was a part of the crowd that was standing there, or I could have continued to march around in the circle with the demonstrators. Well, I decided that I would— I was really very afraid, but I decided that I would continue to march around in the circles with the, in the circle with the demonstrators. And I kept watching Jean Wiley because she had been my teacher at Tuskegee, and I cou—, I looked up to her, so I kept watching to make sure that she was OK. Because she was outside of the circle. And I looked up, and I saw her moving away from the crowd, moving away from the circle, backing away with her front towards us but backing back. And later on, I asked her what had happened, and she told me that some of the men there with guns had told her that she should leave, or they were going to kill her. And she decided that she, she would leave, but she would not walk with her back to them. Because if they shot her, she didn't want her parents or her family to think that she had been shot running. So, she, that's why she was moving that way. And so they began to snatch and pull us, and, and threaten us, and told us that we were under arrest. And one of the guys, there, I don't remember who he was, said that if we didn't come with him he couldn't be responsible for what might happen. So, we were all put on this truck, and we were taken to jail. And we didn't know where we were going. So, of course there was a tremendous sense that something horrible was going to happen. We were, didn't know where we were going. We didn't know what jail we were going. But in some weird ways, I think we felt some degree of relief because at least we had gotten away from that kind of mob scene that, that was happening there.

00:10:30:00

Interviewer:

OK, let's just stop down. I think we must be getting close.

[cut]

00:10:33:00

[camera roll #1048]

[slate]

00:10:34:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it.

00:10:36:00

Camera crew member #1:

OK.

00:10:36:00

Interviewer:

Ruby, the night before that demonstration happened, you've just described, I think there was also some discussion of that meeting about the role, or using, including White people in that demonstration. Now, could you talk to us about that a little bit, and you know, what, what the issues were, and how you felt about it?

00:10:51:00

Ruby Sales:

Well, I think the issue was a very complex issue. One of the things that we were very conscious of is that sometimes in that kind of situation White presence will incite local White people to violence. So, there was some concern about what that meant to jeopardize the local Black people by having a White presence there and whether or not we would be best creating a situation where there was the least chance of violence so that there was some real concern about not wanting to put people in proximity to, to, to violence. And the other question was who should be, in some real sense, I think the other question was who should be in the forefront of the movement. And it was our sense, and when I say our sense, I think people like myself who really thought that it should be the local people themselves in Lowndes County, the local Black people who really should be in the forefront of the movement. And I had some real serious concerns about what it meant to allow White people to come into the county and what kind of relationship that set up in an area where Black people had historically deferred to White people, and whether or not that was in some real ways creating

the very situation that we were struggling very hard to change. So, I had some deep reservations about that. But I think more fundamentally I was very afraid of, of unleashing uncontrolled violence because of Lowndes County's history and the fact that since I had been in the county, I had encountered more than one violent incident. I mean, there was a, a, a day that we were just driving along in the county, Willie Vaughn, Mary Moseley, and myself, and suddenly out of nowhere there were a carload of White men who began to chase us. And we were going down this dirt road, and suddenly out of nowhere came this school bus. And we were going so fast trying to get away from them until we hit the school bus, and literally the wheels came from on the car, and peoples' heads sort of— some people went out the front door, and some people—you know, my head got banged, and I kinda, like, went up, went against the ceiling. So, always I was very aware of, of, of the possibilities of real violence. And so that played a great important part in why I was very reluctant to have White people in the county. And oftentimes I felt that people were not sensitive to the kind of emotions that they were setting off just, and, and that one needed to, in some real ways, tailor how one responded in a public situation with Black people that you were working with. So, that's pretty much how the discussion went. But ultimately what was decided is that the movement was an open place and was an opportunity to, and should provide an opportunity for anyone who wanted to come and struggle against racism to be a part of that struggle. And that's ultimately what happened. And, and that's how come Jonathan Daniels and Fa—, Father Morrisroe came into the county.

00:14:14:00

Interviewer:

Tell me what it was like to be in, in the jail.

00:14:17:00

Ruby Sales:

Well, when I was on the way to jail, I was very, very aware that I was sixteen years old because I had heard incredible stories about if they found out that you were a minor, they would send you to a delinquent home and that your parents couldn't get you out even if they wanted to. And that that had happened to, to some people in Mississippi and that had happened to some people in Albany, Georgia. So, I was very aware of needing to create a lie about my age so that I wouldn't be found out and wouldn't be separated from the group. So, a great deal of my time on the way to jail was spent thinking about and really being afraid that somehow they would check and find out that I was a minor, and then I would, you know, be in serious trouble. So, I, I was really very, very, very afraid going to jail. Also very concerned about what had happened to everyone, worrying about what had happened to Stokely, worrying about the fact that we would all go to jail together, the sense that if we were together then that would add prot—, that that would be protection. So, there was a sense to, to, to wanna worry about people and to wonder what had happened to Jean Wiley.

00:15:32:00

Interviewer:

I wanna stop. Just a very quick check on time.

[cut]

00:15:35:00

Interviewer:

You're doing very well. You're doing really well.

00:15:37:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:15:39:00

Camera crew member #1:

OK.

00:15:40:00

Interviewer:

OK, Ruby, I want you to take a nice deep breath now. And I wanna tell, I want you to tell me about August 20th when you were released from Hayneville Jail.

00:15:48:00

Ruby Sales:

We were released from jail after about a week or so of having been in jail. And the, suddenly there was this announcement from the jailer that we were all free to go home. And I was very suspicious of that. I wanted to know why were we being released. I just did not trust that suddenly without penalty we would be allowed to go free, and I questioned that. And the jailer told me that we were being released on our recognizance. Well, of course that then began to red flag me because it was just very incongruent with the blindness of their racism that they would release us in our recognizance, on our, on our word when they didn't think we even had a word. So, I was a little concerned about that. The other thing that bothered me

tremendously, and I tried to raise some questions, was that there was no one to meet us. Because I knew enough about Stokely Carmichael and how we had worked together that if there was any—and, and also the local people, the Jacksons—that if we were being released from jail, their commitment was such that they would be there to meet us. So, that was also another red flag for me. But the, the deputy and the sheriff told us that, to stop asking questions and that we had to get out. And so finally someone said, Well, I guess we should go. And so we left. And it was becoming even more apparent that, that—well, we just didn't feel comfortable because there was no one around. And there was a kind of eerie feeling as if suddenly the streets had been— were deserted, and we could not locate a Black face anywhere on the street. And we, we were very hot, and, and, and very tired. And someone decided that perhaps while we were waiting to be picked up, it would be a good idea to go and get something to drink because it was one of those hot summer days that the South, where you could literally feel the heat coming out of the pavement. And we had not been very comfortable drinking the water in jail. And so the group designated Jonathan Daniels, Father Morrisroe, Joyce Bailey, and myself to go and get the sodas. And so as we were walking, my, my, my anxiety was beginning to increase, and I kinda turned to people. And I said, I don't really feel, I feel very uncomfortable. Something is dreadfully wrong. Well, in that kinda situation—I mean, the people said, No, it's OK. Let's go and get a soda, and people will show up. And so when we got to the, to the store, as we approached the store and began to go up the steps, suddenly standing there was Tom Coleman. At, at that time, I didn't know his name. I found that out later. And I recognized that he had a shotgun, and I recognized that he was yelling something about Black bitches. But in some real ways with that confrontation, my mind kinda blanked, and I wasn't processing all that was happening. And so as I was trying to process the meaning of this, suddenly I felt a tug. 'Cause I was in front, and Jonathan was behind me. And I felt a tug, and someone, and the next thing I knew there was this blast. And I had fallen down. And I, and I remember thinking, God, this is what it feels like to be dead. I, I thought I was dead. I, I, and just as I was trying to sort of deal with being dead, I hea—, I heard another shot go off. And I, and, and, and then I heard, and I looked down, and I was covered with blood. And I just knew I had been shot, and, and I didn't realize that Jonathan had been shot at that point. I thought I was the one that had been shot. And then I heard, when the second shot went off, I heard Father Morrisroe crying for water. And I re—, realized that he had been shot, and I also thought that, that Joyce Bailey had also been shot. And I kinda said—made a decision, when I realized that I really—that I would just lie there. And maybe if I lie there then he would really think that I was dead, and then I could get help for the other people. That I could sorta somehow get up. And he walked over me and kicked me, and, and, you know, in his blind rage, he thought I was dead. And Joyce Bailey has escaped. And in running, she ran back around the, the store to the side near a car, an old abandoned car, and she was calling out our names. She was calling, Ruby, Jonathan, Ruby, Jonathan. And I heard her. And I got up, and I, I didn't get up, stand up, I crawled. Literally on my knees to, to the side of the car where she was. And when, when I got to her, she picked me up, and we began to run across the street. And he realized that I wasn't dead. And at that point, he started shooting and saying, and, and yelling things that I was not sure what he had said. And we were—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Ruby Sales:

—Joyce and I were running across the street for dear life. And we were screaming and yelling. And, and there was nobody. And—

00:21:42:00

Camera crew member #1:

Sorry, I just have to stop, just ran out of film.

[cut]

[camera roll #1046]

00:21:45:00

Camera crew member #1:

This is a return to camera roll 1046, sound roll 119.

00:21:51:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:21:53:00

Camera crew member #1:

OK.

00:21:53:00

Interviewer:

Alright, Ruby, tell me how this incident with Jonathan Daniels affected your future work in Lowndes County.

00:21:58:00

Ruby Sales:

Well, I went through a period of, of, of won— of trying to decide whether or not I would stay in the county. Because after the shooting happened, I was receiving constant death threats. A lot of the anger and a lot of the focus was on me. And I think partly that was true because I was very out front in getting people to register to vote and easily identified because I had a very outgoing personality. So, and, so a lot, a, a large part of my time was spent trying to decide what to do, whether I should leave or whether I should stay. And on the other hand trying to deal with the fact that my family was under extreme pressure, that White people had come to my parent's home in Columbus, Georgia looking for me. And when they had come, the day my mother was hanging out clothes, they had, they had asked for her— And she was there by herself. And so of course she was terrified, not only what were the implications of that for our family, but also she was terrified for me. So, I decided that I would leave the county, and go to Atlanta, and do some work there.

00:23:13:00

Interviewer:

OK, let's stop down.

[cut]

00:23:16:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:23:17:00

Camera crew member #1:

OK.

00:23:18:00

Interviewer:

OK, Ruby, tell us about May 3rd.

00:23:20:00

Ruby Sales:

Well, when I came into the county, I had a real sense of coming home. That the county had been for me one of the most important parts of my development and a real sense of community. And the fact that we had all struggled together, and we had all lived together. And in some real ways that day represented the coming forward of all that we had in some real ways hoped for. And just to see the kind of happiness and the kind of jubilation that people felt when they were able to go and, and vote, and particularly people who had lived there, who were 70 and 60 who had never been allowed to vote, and the kind of happiness that they felt, and, and the sense of a victory, a real victory, a tangible victory really meant a lot to me. And it sort of meant to me that some part of all of that had really meant a whole lot and that I could literally and visibly see some, some tangible proof of change. And it didn't take away all that had happened, but it certainly allowed, you know, one to feel better about—

00:24:33:00

[cut]

[wild sound]

Ruby Sales:

—the other bad things that had happened.

00:24:38:00

Interviewer:
Thank you very much, Ruby. I think that we have a very fine inter—

[cut]

[end of interview]