Interview with **Johnny Jackson**
Date: October 18, 1988
Interviewer: Jim DeVinney
Camera Rolls: 1007
Sound Rolls: 103
Team: A

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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 #1007]
[sound roll #103]

[slate]

00:00:12:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Camera roll 1,007. Sound roll 1-0-3. Take one.

00:00:16:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it.

00:00:17:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Just a second.

00:00:19:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Jim now.

00:00:21:00

Interviewer:

First of all, I've heard that Lowndes County was a very violent place for Black people. You were a young boy growing up here, a teenager, and did that give you any kind of a special attitude toward White people? Did you see them as evil or anything?

00:00:33:00
Johnny Jackson: Of course we had an attitude, because she didn't feel like they were treating—

00:00:38:00

Interviewer:

Now let me just stop you right there, because nobody knows, so—

00:00:40:00

Johnny Jackson:

OK. So I need to answer the question.

00:00:41:00

Interviewer:

—to get that.

00:00:42:00

Johnny Jackson:

OK.

00:00:43:00

Interviewer:

Anytime, sir.

00:00:44:00

Johnny Jackson:

OK [pause]. Yes, Lowndes County was a violent place, and of course, growing up as a youngster, we were afraid of White people, because what they had done to Black people.

00:00:54:00

Interviewer:

Can you add, add to that a little bit more? Any particular experience that you remember as a child?

00:00:59:00

Johnny Jackson:

Well, I remember when I was young, and we would used to go places, and into town. I used to go to certain fountains, and my daddy would tell me, "You can't go to that fountain, because it's for Whites," and it was colored. We had different water fountains, so we used to ask why. And, we were very concerned about that.

00:01:19:00

Interviewer:

OK, what, when the Selma To Montgomery March came through Lowndes County, what effect did that have on you?

00:01:25:00

Johnny Jackson:

Everybody was afraid. I was afraid. I didn't know what was gonna happen. We had saw what happened in Selma on Bloody Sunday. And, of course, I did not go to Selma, because I was afraid, but we all was concerned, and wanted to know what could we do to help if in fact a march did come through. Finally, it came through. We saw the National Guards guarding Dr. King and other civil right workers, John Lewis, and other people coming though. And, we felt that we did have some ray of, of hope.

00:01:52:00

Interviewer:

OK, let's just stop down here for a moment, fellas.

[cut]

00:01:55:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

We're rolling, and speed. Mark it. Take two.

[slate]

00:01:58:00

Interviewer:

OK. Just going back to the Selma To Montgomery March, as it walked through, or as the march passed, I'd like you to describe for me something that you saw that day.

00:02:07:00

Johnny Jackson:

Immediately, we saw state troopers, National Guards, and policemans, and of course we were trying to see the famous civil right leaders, Dr. King and the others, and when we saw those, I felt kinda confident. But, before that, very devastated, because I was afraid. I didn't know what was gonna happen to Black people. We were trying to get the right to vote. We were trying to get registered to vote, and trying to, there was rumors going around that civil right workers were gonna be coming in. People were afraid, and when they came through, I was kinda still afraid, but that, that was a little ray of hope. I figured that, that we, there where possibilities that we could, that could be some protection for us, if in fact we tried to improve our conditions, and some people immediately joined the march. Of course, I still stood by and watched, because I was amazed, because I was always kinda afraid of being nonviolent, and I really was not a nonviolent person, and then at that age, I just didn't know what I could do. I wanted— we were concerned. I was concerned about, what could I do to help? And, and, it was really just an amazing situation to see that we, finally, after people were beat up in Selma, that we did have some protection, and the right to continue to march to Selma and Mont—, to Montgomery.

00:03:22:00

Interviewer:

All right. It was right after that march that some people from SNCC started coming in, here, and helping out the county. Now, if you can describe what that was like.

00:03:29:00

Johnny Jackson:

People were kind of standing, watching, and discussing what we could do now. The march had went through. People had a ray of hope, and civil right workers came in. We were afraid of them. Some people wouldn't talk with them. I was a student, of course, in school, and they would come to the schools to see what was happening in the educational level, to begin to talk to students, and I had an opportunity to meet some. And, I got kinda excited. They were risking their lives coming in, and I wanted to know what I could do, and we began to discuss some things that we could do as students. And, I found out that they were students from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, so I got a little courage, and I got involved with them, and began to meet with them to, to see what we could do as students, and began to talk to older people that I knew. My parents, my father got actively involved right after we began to talk to him, and they began to visit homes throughout the community. And, folk, I believe some of our leaders were ready for some type of leadership to come in to give them the encouragement to take a stand.

00:04:29:00

Interviewer:

All right, and you had mentioned your father. Your father, of course, took kind of a shine to some of the, the fellows from SNCC, and especially Stokely Carmichael, tell us how your father was about them.

00:04:38:00

Johnny Jackson:

He kinda took a like to Stokely, and, and Bob Mants, and Scotty B., the other fellows. And, I believe there was more of that destiny of love for them, because they were risking their lives coming in here, because his statement was, "If we're not for ourselves, then who can be for us?" And, I mentioned a house that we had available, vacant, because they were being shot at and run out of the county. Every afternoon, they had to leave before sundown, because they were afraid that they were gonna be killed. And, he finally gave them permission to start staying overnight.

00:05:09:00

Interviewer:

So, this is the Freedom House?

00:05:09:00

Johnny Jackson:

That's the Freedom House.

00:05:11:00

Interviewer:

Did you ever hang around at the Freedom House with—

00:05:12:00

Johnny Jackson:

All the time, really.

00:05:14:00

Interviewer:

Tell us what it was like. You, you, by the way, you're giving me some nice energy now, and I really appreciate it, just keep it up, and tell me what it was like.

00:05:20:00

Johnny Jackson:

Well, meeting different people coming in to meet the civil right workers, and you'd meet all kinds of different students coming in, both Black people and White people were coming in, to assist in different projects. They would sit up and discuss the importance of us having the right to vote, and educating us to the point, and at the same time, trying to find out what we really wanted to do, and that's what's most important about SNCC. They wasn't the kinda students who, that organization, that civil rights organization wasn't the kind of organization that would go into a community and impose things on people. They were one, they would tell us what was happening, try to educate us of what was going on, and then talk to us about things that we wanted to do, that we think we should have the right to vote, that we think we should fight in the Army. Do we, did we, think we should have better schools or better buses, and that type of thing, and of course folks started responded. We'd do that at night. We'd sit around the Freedom House, half of the night, talking. Most of the time, we were afraid, and watching for the Ku Klux Klan. So we would be woke, we wouldn't be asleep. So we'd sit there, twelve, one o'clock at night, talk about issues. And, those times, kinds of things.

00:06:22:00

Interviewer:

High school boys are often looking for role models. Did you find one there?

00:06:26:00

Johnny Jackson:

Stokely was a, a good role model—

00:06:27:00

Interviewer:

Could you say—

00:06:28:00

Johnny Jackson:

—Stokely Carmichael was a good role model. He was a very educated person, articulate, and smart, and we, I really admired him wholeheartedly.

00:06:38:00

Interviewer:

OK, but, you know, even after the Voting Rights Act is passed, there's still some violence that happened to many people who tried to, to help out here. And, of course, Jonathan Daniels was killed, and there were moments like that. You told us yesterday that you had been shot at 17 times. And, you told us about a story, when you were on the porch. I wonder if you can tell that story to us right now.

00:06:58:00

Johnny Jackson:

We had began to send people down to get them registered to vote, and people had began to come together to meet. I talked about the five men who met, seven men who met and decided to work with the civil right workers, see what they could do to change the situation. There were certain groups had moved against Blacks in terms of sharecropping, funding. People—, so those people made up their minds to, to take some kind of stand, and of course my father was one of those people, and those who went down to get registered were evicted, and so people came together to see what they could do about that, because they didn't have places to stay, and they created what you call a poor people land farm. And, they began to buy property, and Miss Viola Smith gave a place for them to camp, and they put out tents for those people. And, what they were going was organizing themselves so they could build them homes, so they could be, become self-sustained, they could own their own home, because a lot of people were afraid to get registered or afraid to go down and vote, because they would be evicted from the plantations, and those few who stayed on places where their father or their people owned their own land, they were still afraid that they wouldn't be

financed. So, at that particular weekend, they had set tents, and they had agreed to put them on, put it on Highway 80, where everybody could see it, right where the march went through, and somehow or another, they, we had Uncle Toms during that time, too, and they went back and told them that it was, gonna put the tents on my father's place, so I figured the, that was the reason, at night, we would always, we were always trained to try to protect ourselves, and of course, along with being educated politically, and getting the right to vote, SNCC also taught us self-protection, because a lot of people had died across the country. And, that night, we, we used to pick cotton during the day, and we're leave the cotton. It was in August, middle of September, on the porch until you get a full bail, and then you take it in. But, the, I was lying on watch that night, because there were other people were up to the tents. We had pitched tents for more than 38 families that had been evicted off plantations just because they went down to register to vote. And, those people didn't have anywhere to stay, so we got tents that were donated from Michigan to put those people in until we could find homes for them, because we didn't have any houses around here, and this is, so I was lying there that night, and there has been threats on burning my father's house and other people who were actively involved in the civil right movement, and I happened to be there on guard that night with a little rifle in my hand, at 16. And, a flashlight came on the porch where I was, and a shot went off. They shot two or three times, and of course, I fired back, because I was scared, and they ran on down the road. And, my sister was in the house next door, who taught in this county, and by herself, so I got in the car to go down to see if I could assist her or get the tag number. And, before I could get close enough to get the tag number, they fired on the car, and they shot the car up. There was about 17 bullets in the car, and of course the civil right workers came, and people came to see what had happened, and the next day, the FBIs came, and they said said they— I managed to get just part of the tag number. They said they found the truck, and that they were hunting. And, you know there's a law against hunting at night, but they were hunting, so I guess they were hunting Black people, and they were getting ready to burn some of the people's houses, and burn crosses in front of people's houses that were actively involved in the civil right movement. It was really devastating.

00:10:23:00

Interviewer:

As a kid, what were some of the—

00:10:25:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Wait, we have thirty feet left, I think we should change.

00:10:26:00

Interviewer:

OK. We'll change the roll now. We're almost done, we just have a couple more questions.

[cut]

[camera roll #1008]

00:10:29:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Camera roll 1-0-0-8.

00:10:34:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Camera 1008, take three.

00:10:35:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Wait a minute. Don't do anything. OK now.

[slate]

00:10:39:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

OK.

00:10:41:00

Interviewer:

OK. Mr. Mayor, I wondered if you could just recall the very first time you ever heard of the Black Panther Party, and what, what your reaction was to that.

00:10:50:00

Johnny Jackson:

We were kind of excited about the Black Panther Party, because we had tried everything. We had had so much problem getting registered to vote, so much part, so much problem trying to get our people encouraged and to run for political positions, and then all of a sudden, they'd raise the fees, and wouldn't allow us to participate in the democratic process. So, we, when

they brought up the, I think the way it was presented, ***everybody was excited, because they said, "Well! They have the rooster, which represents the democratic party, the elephant which represents the republican party, why can't we have a black cat to represent us?" Everybody knows how a cat look, and we were excited, because we knew that if a person couldn't read and write, they sure knew the difference between a cat, an elephant, and a rooster.***

00:11:40:00

Interviewer:

Well, when that primary finally took place, May 3rd, 1966, I gather that was a very exciting occasion. I just wonder if you could tell us a little bit, from your perspective as a young boy, what it was like that day.

00:11:51:00

Johnny Jackson:

Even though we didn't win a single position, but we were so excited, because we all—

00:11:54:00

Interviewer:

Now let me just stop you down because at that point, this is just a primary in May. This isn't the general election, so you weren't going for positions so I just want you to kind of remember the occasion.

00:12:04:00

Johnny Jackson:

People came out and were able to mark the X onto the cat, and we were just excited. We were just excited that our people had the courage to run for those positions, and we were gearing up to go into the general election, and a lot of people turned out in support of the party, and that's what really gave us momentum. I think more than 1,600 people voted.

00:12:28:00

Interviewer:

Do you remember something that happened? Just give me some flavor of the day. Was there anything special that stands out in your mind?

00:12:33:00

Johnny Jackson:

Well, we were afraid in the very beginning, again. I don't know. It looked like every time we start a process, we were always afraid, because we knew how Whites felt about Blacks, and how they had tried to stop us from gaining our equal rights. Of course, we would set up people to watch and protect, 'cause we thought they were going to come in, and disrupt it, but there were people prepared to try to protect our women and children that day, and it was kind of, I was afraid in the very beginning, but we had people set up to let us know if they were coming, and they would ride by, and look, and we had the FBIs there and that type of thing. But, by the number of people that turned out, gave us another ray of hope that it could be done, and people were just excited.

00:13:21:00

Interviewer:

I've seen some film of it. I know that there was music that day—

00:13:23:00

Johnny Jackson:

Mm-hmm.

00:13:24:00

Interviewer:

—and seen people standing around singing that—

00:13:25:00

Johnny Jackson:

Mm-hmm.

00:13:26:00

Interviewer:

—I just wonder if you can remember some particular occasion, somebody who came that day, that you never thought would show up, or something like, some real sense—

00:13:31:00

Johnny Jackson:

Well, there were a lot of citizens came that I thought wouldn't show up, because, you know, they, a lot of them were saying, "I don't wanna be involved in that mess." And, finally, some of them turned out. But, I was mostly going, picking up people a lot that day. I didn't have an opportunity to stay, and stand around and watch everything that day, but the, just to see them come out and exercise their right that day was just, just exciting.

00:13:57:00

Interviewer:

You said you were picking up people that day. You must've had people on, on the bus, car, whatever it was?

00:14:01:00

Johnny Jackson:

We had cars.

00:14:02:00

Interviewer:

But, what, what did people talk about?

00:14:04:00

Johnny Jackson:

Well, people would say, "Well, if I get kicked off my place, I just, we just have to find me a place to go." They were talking about what they were gonna do if certain things should happen. If they come up here, we're just gonna have to defend ourselves. "I'm not afraid of the White man no more." And that'd make you feel good, you know? They were saying all kinds of things, because they were talking about what had happened in Selma, and during Bloody Sunday, and how the march was successful, and they had the National Guard to protect us. You think we can get them to protect us if something should happen? All kinds of things running through our minds, and I think I had one old lady, Miss Mary Jane Jackson, would always say, "I got my guns," say, "Boy, we ain't gonna let them bother y'all!" And the civil right workers was risking their lives, so it made them all kind of get a ray of hope that, that something was gonna happen. People started thinking something was really gonna happen.

00:14:59:00

Interviewer:

Hearing you talk about guns reminded me that you were talking about one of the first times you met Stokely, and he was nonviolent, and you had a comment for him. Tell us that little story.

00:15:07:00

Johnny Jackson:

[laughs] I told him—

00:15:15:00

Interviewer:

They don't know—

00:15:17:00

Johnny Jackson:

—I was not really nonviolent.

00:15:15:00

Interviewer:

Start over again, please.

00:15:17:00

Johnny Jackson:

OK. Repeat your question, yeah.

00:15:20:00

Interviewer:

Just talk about Stokely. I just wanna make sure you don't say, "Him," because nobody knows.

00:15:23:00

Johnny Jackson:

OK. Hmm. Stokely always was, say that he was going to, he had a gun, but we'd really never seen it, you know? So, we were always saying, "If you really wanna make it here in Lowndes County, you're gonna have to get you a gun, protect yourself." I think that was either my father told him that or it came up in one of the discussions, but they would always, in our discussion, they talked and talked about self-protection. And so, people would always, especially in our meetings, we were afraid of the Klans. They would, some of the fellows who were trained, local people not civil right workers, would bring their shotgun or their pistol to church.

00:16:07:00

Interviewer:

I was remembering, though, a time when you said that you'd informed Stokely that you weren't nonviolent. I wonder if you can just tell us about that.

00:16:13:00

Johnny Jackson:

I believe that was the second time I had met him at the high school, and he was saying that we gotta be nonviolent, and saying that we're discussing the Bible, where it said somebody hits you in one cheek, you turn the other one around. And we were saying, the young people were saying, "Well, we're not gonna let them just walk up and hit us, and kill us, and that type of thing." I think we discussed it on several occasions.

00:16:38:00

Interviewer:

OK, let's just stop down here for a moment. I think we—

[cut]

00:16:41:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Speed. Mark it down here.

00:16:43:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Sound take four

00:16:44:00

Interviewer:

OK, and give me that same kind of energy. And all set Bobby?

00:16:47:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Yes.

00:16:48:00

Interviewer:

OK, so, tell me, why did your father give Freedom House to the, the SNCC people?

00:16:52:00

Johnny Jackson:

He had decided to take a stand.

00:16:54:00

Interviewer:

Don't say he.

00:16:55:00

Johnny Jackson:

OK. My father was concerned about the su, su, survival of the civil rights—

00:17:01:00

Interviewer:

Start over again. Start again.

00:17:02:00

Johnny Jackson:

OK. My father was concerned about the civil right workers, Stokely Carmichael, Bob Mants, and those fellows, who were coming in and out. They were afraid. They were being shot at. They were being chased off plantations. They were being run out of Lowndes County, and the threat was out that they were gonna kill them, and I'm, and I'm, that's the Ku Klux Klan. And, and then the White racists were gonna, gonna kill the civil right workers, because they were coming in, stirring up mess, that's, that's what they called it. And, he, we had that property, the only vacant house in this area. And so, I said to him, I said, "Nobody is using the house." And then, they would waste. Well, they used to come and stay in late at night, and talk to some people, but they were afraid to go back to Selma, because it was so dangerous on Highway 80, and finally, one day he said to them, "Y'all can stay over there, if you can, you can make it." And then, finally, they started moving in, and they stayed at the, he opened up the Freedom House for them.

00:17:56:00

Interviewer:

Talk about the violence. I mean, there was a lot of violence toward Black people at that time. Talk about that.

00:18:01:00

Johnny Jackson:

Yes, there was a lot of violence toward Black people in Lowndes County. I think when they first started talking about trying to make in, make some changes, a man that they thought was actively involved in going to the meetings in Selma was shot at over in Gordonville, I believe, and that got them going. The word got around that there were people actively involved, and they would do all kinds of things to intimidate you and harass you. They would, like I said, they would stop financing, advancing farmers. They would intimidate you. They would hit you up over the head. The Sheriff was, name was Otto Moorer at that time, and Sheriff Rowells or Deputy, and they would just, they would, they would be violent on you as well as the Ku Klux Klans. So, there, there was really a situation where we were struggling for life and death. And, if you were caught in the wrong situation, you probably would be killed.

00:18:56:00

Interviewer:

I heard about a place called Skull Hill. Do you know what that is?

00:18:59:00

Johnny Jackson:

I've heard talk of Skull Hill, but I'm not too familiar with it.

00:19:03:00

Interviewer:

OK. Tell me how you got active in the, how you first became active in organizing work.

00:19:08:00

Johnny Jackson:

Well, I was at Lowndes Central High School, and I was a junior there going into my senior year. And, as I said, the sit—, I was, we were watching what was happening in Selma and Montgomery, and I got, I was curious, and after meeting the civil right workers, and they were young students, too, I wanted to see what I could do. So, we talked about the issues, and then we talked about things that we did not have at our school, and I got concerned. We started raising questions about that. There was no heat, even, in our schools. There was no cafeteria. There was no library. There was, we didn't have heat on our buses. There were overcrowded classrooms. There was 42 in my classroom at that time with one teacher. Just substandard schools. We just, and, and we got concerned, and start asking. Why did the White children have better schools? Why? And, we couldn't get an answer for any questions, so we started organizing, and we finally organized one of the first boycotts in this county, probably, because all the students, after they found out that I was doing the organizing, they fired me on the bus, and all the students walked out. And of course, then I had a meeting with the superintendent, and they began to try to do some of those things to quiet us down.

00:20:19:00

Interviewer:

OK. Stopping now, and I think, I, I think—

00:20:24:00

[cut]

[end of interview]