

Interview with **John Lewis**

May 14, 1979

Production Team: E

Camera Rolls: 1-5

Sound Roll: 1-3

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.

### **Preferred Citation**

Interview with John Lewis, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on May 14, 1979, for *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*. 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*.

00:00:02:00

[camera roll 1]

[sound roll 1]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: SPEED.

[hand slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: TAKE ONE.

INTERVIEWER 1: SO, WHERE ARE YOU FROM AND HOW DID YOU GET INVOLVED IN THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT?

Lewis: I grew up in rural Alabama about fifty miles south of Montgomery and the third child in a family of ten. The little place where I grew up is so small it's very difficult to locate it on the map, on the Alabama map. Martin Luther King Jr. used to refer to this place as being Four Corners, Alabama. It's near a little place called Troy. My father was a share cropper and later, I was four years old in 1944, he had saved something like three hundred dollars and with those three hundred dollars we moved from the plantation and he bought an hundred and ten acres of land where my family was able to raise cotton, corn, peanuts, chickens. So it's part of my growing up permanently in rural Alabama.

00:01:26:00

INTERVIEWER 1: HOW DID YOU GET INVOLVED IN CIVIL RIGHTS ACTIVITY?

Lewis: Well, as a young child growing up in rural Alabama, I saw the system of segregation and racial discrimination. We had to attend school in a one room church from the first through the sixth grade and we had the books that were handed down from white students by the county—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: CUT.

[cut]

00:02:02:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: SPEED.

[hand slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: TWO.

INTERVIEWER 1: OK, I GUESS, WE'RE, WE'RE TALKING ABOUT HOW YOU GET—GOT INVOLVED IN CIVIL RIGHTS AND YOU WERE SAYING YOU STARTED OUT IN—GROWING UP. YOU TALKED ABOUT HOW—WHAT HAPPENED TO YOU WHEN YOU WERE GROWING UP.

Lewis: Well, as I was growing up in, in rural Alabama, I saw all around me the system of segregation and racial discrimination. The visible signs in the little town of Troy, the population of about seven thousand, we saw the sign that said colored only. White only. Colored waiting. Water fountain. In a little 5&10 store was a civil fountain, a clean fountain for white people to come and drink water, but in another corner of the store there was a little spigot, a rusty spigot said, colored drinking. And I became resentful of the signs and all the visible evidence of segregation and racial discrimination. My father and my uncles and my grandfather and great grandfathers on my mother's side and my father's side, all of my relatives, have I listened to their discussions about what had happened to them. And so, I grew up in that environment where I had to face and live with the system everyday and I don't think I had much of a choice, but to, but to resent it. And I grew up with a feeling that I had to find a way to oppose this system of segregation, racial discrimination. And my responsibility on the farm was to raise the chicken [sic]. We had a lot of chickens. And I grew up with this idea, somehow, I don't know where it came from, I wanted to, to be a minister and, somehow, I transferred my desire to be a minister and my responsibility of raising the chicken, somehow, it got together. And I literally started preaching to the chickens. They became members of this sort of invisible church or maybe you want to call it a real church. And I tried out some ideas on the, on the chicken. Later I tested same ideas on my younger brothers or sisters and first cousins. And I remember my first act of, maybe, a nonviolent protest was when my parent would kill the chicken and I would refuse to eat the chicken and it went for two or three days refusing to speak to my mother, father, because they killed a chicken. I thought that it was so wrong. And the one thing I did as a young child, when I was about five or six years old, I wanted to save the soul of a chicken and

baptize this particular chicken and the chicken drown and in the process of trying to save this chicken, you know, I lost the chicken. But as, I guess, my sort of childhood way of dealing with protest and getting involved in later the civil rights movement. I was fifteen years old in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade in 1955 when I first heard of the Montgomery bus boycott. Now Montgomery is only fifty miles from where I grew up. And I heard about Martin Luther King because he came on a local radio station from Montgomery and he was preaching sermons like most black Baptist ministers, but I heard of this man and the sermons, eloquent. But one sermon he had was very special one Sunday morning at eleven o'clock on this radio station. It was something called Paul's message to the church at Corinth. But he took this sermon around and made it something like, Paul letter or Paul's message to the Christians of America. And he kept preaching about—he was not concerned about the streets of heaven and the pearly gates and the streets paved with milk and honey. He was more concerned about the streets of Montgomery and the way that black people and poor people were being treated in Montgomery. And this was before December 1955 when the Montgomery bus boycott occurred. And I think, listen to Martin Luther King Jr., and listen to my grandmother and grandfather about some of the things that had happened to them became messages, became the necessary ingredients to encourage me to identify with whatever movement or organization or cause that would rock the, the whole system of segregation and racial discrimination. We were bussed to school after I left the sixth grade. We rode in old broken down buses that white children had used. We didn't have any new buses. And the roads, even the roads in the black community, where black people owned land, were unpaved. They were left literally, deliberately, unpaved. Even skip places on—in the road. And during the winter months we would run in ditches on the way to school, because of the rain. The red mud and the clay in that part of Alabama. And during evenings, returning from school, we would be late returning home because the bus would break down, we'd get stuck in the mud, and that type of thing. So all of these things came together and by the time I went away to college in 1957 and I was away from home and the Montgomery bus boycott had occurred in Montgomery, where we had witnessed and I saw it on television, I read about it in the newspaper—we didn't even have a subscription as a matter of fact, cause we were too poor, I guess, to the local daily newspaper, something called the *Montgomery Advertiser*. But my grandfather had a subscription to that paper and each day after he read the paper we would get the paper and we kept up with what was happening in Montgomery. And we listened to the radio and, and what happened in Montgomery to watch fifty thousand black people walk the streets for over a year rather than ride segregated buses became a source of inspiration. It, it created a sense of hope, a sense of optimism. And by going to school in Nashville, Tennessee many, many miles away from my parents and from rural Alabama I was—I felt freer to find a way to, to get involved. And one of the first thing I did, I became a member of the youth chapter of the NACP [sic] in Nashville. As a matter of fact, I tried to organize a campus chapter on the campus of the American Baptist Theological Seminary, where I was a student. We didn't succeed in that effort because this little school was gently supported by the Southern Baptist Convention which was, for the most part during that period, was all white and the National Baptist Convention. And the president of the school said we couldn't organize a chapter there, but I continued to be involved in the, in the local chapter.

00:10:14:00

INTERVIEWER 1: HOW DID, HOW DID, HOW DID YOU GET INVOLVED IN THE, IN THE SIT-INS IN NASHVILLE?

Lewis: Well—

INTERVIEWER 1: AND HOW DID, HOW DID THOSE SIT-INS START IN NASHVILLE?

Lewis: In—during the school year of '59/'60—well, even before then there was a group of students in Nashville who had attended a, a summer workshop—

00:10:40:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

Lewis: —at Harlem Folk School, outside of Nashville and looked—

INTERVIEWER 1: OK.

00:10:49:00

[cut]

[change to camera roll 2]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: CAMERA ROLL TWO, SPEED.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: OK, I AM—MOVE YOUR HAND OUT A LITTLE BIT MORE. I MEAN, OUT FORWARD. RIGHT THERE.

[hand slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: OK, HENRY, I'M FINE.

INTERVIEWER 1: OK. SO, SO WHAT YOU'RE SAYING IS THAT YOU WERE PREPARED FOR THE SIT—FOR, THE SIT-INS?

Lewis: Yes. I think we were prepared in, in Nashville. No, Nashville, at the time, was considered a sort of the citadel of education in the, in the South with all of the colleges and all of the universities there and many, many churches. Sort of progressive and liberal. There was a very active social action committee at one of the local black Baptist churches. And at the same time, the pastor of this church, the Reverend Kelly Miller Smith, was the local president of the Nashville Christian Leadership Council, an arm of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference—had an effort going. So every Tuesday night for an entire semester

in 1959 we had what we call, nonviolent workshop, direct action workshop, where we discussed and debated the theory the philosophy of Gandhi. The teaching of Gandhi. The whole question of civil disobedience. The whole history of the struggle in India and the attempt on the part of Gandhi to bring about some resolution of the problems in, in South Africa. But the point came, rather I guess, halfway through the workshop in late November and early December of '59, to have a few test sit-in. So we organized a delegation of, of young people, primarily student: white students, black student, international students from, primarily, from Africa and from some of the Latin American country [sic]. We went down to two of the large department stores and occupied the lunch counter seats, went into restaurants, occupied seats at tables and we were told that we could not be served, because there were blacks in the group. This established a case that the City of Nashville was segregated. That they refused to serve black people. We continued the, the workshop, but when we returned during the early part of 1960 we did receive a call from a young minister by the name of Douglas Moore, this was after the Greensboro sit-ins of February 1st, 1960, saying, what can the students in Nashville do to support the students of North Carolina? And, I guess, that's was the message. That was the question that we needed and we were ready. We had—ready to be involved, to organize mass sit-ins or sit-down demonstration in Nashville. So in a matter of two or three days we organized, during the month of February, what we call "T" days and Saturday, a sit-in. On most of the college campuses in, in Nashville Tuesdays and Thursdays were light days for classes and Saturday, for the most part, was a free day. We had on that first day over five hundred student together in front of Fisk University chapel, to be transported downtown to the First Baptist Church, to be organized into small groups to go down to sit-in at the lunch counters. We went in—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: CUT.

[cut]

00:14:57:00

[hand slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: THREE.

Lewis: *We went into the local stores* for the most part. The 5&10, Woolworth, Kreske's, McClellans', *these stores were known all across the South, and, for the most part, all across the country. We took our seats in a very orderly, peaceful fashion. The students were dressed like they were on the way to, to church* or going to a big social affair. But they had their books and *we stayed there at the lunch counter studying and preparing our homework, because we were denied service. The manager ordered that the lunch counters be closed, that the restaurants be closed, and we'd just sit there and we continued to sit all day long. The first day, nothing, in term of violence or any disorder, nothing happened.* This continued for a few more days and it continued day in and day out. And, finally, on one Saturday when we had about an hundred students prepare to go down, it was a very beautiful day in Nashville, very beautiful day, we got a call from a local white minister who had been a real supporter of the movement. He said that if we go down on this particular day he

understand that the police would stand to the side and let a group of white hoodlums and thugs come in and beat people up and then we would be arrested. And we should make a decision of whether we wanted to go or not and some people tried to discourage us from going on that particular Saturday. We made a decision to go and we all went to the same store. It was Woolworth in downtown Nashville, in the heart of the downtown area, and occupied every seat at the lunch counter, every seat in the restaurant, and it did happen. A group of young white men came in and they start pulling and, and beating, primarily, the young women. Putting lighted cigarettes down their backs, in their hair and really beating people and, in a short time, police officials came in and placed all of us under arrest and not a single member of the white group. The people that were opposing our sit-in down at the lunch counter were arrested. We all left out of that store singing "We Shall Overcome." This was the first arrest in the, in the Nashville sit-in. It was the first mass arrest, I think, anyplace in the South. I believe it was February the 27th, 1960. And—

00:17:53:00

INTERVIEWER 1: WAS THAT THE FIRST TIME YOU WERE ARRESTED?

Lewis: Was the first time that I was arrested, and *growing up in the rural South it was not the thing to do, not to go to jail. It was a, it was, it would bring shame and disgrace on the family. But for me, I tell you, it was like being involved in a holy crusade. It was, became a badge of, of honor.*

00:18:12:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

Lewis: I felt good about it. And I think it was in keeping with what we had been taught, in the workshops, so I felt very good in, in a sense of righteous indignation about being arrested, but at the same time the commitment and dedication on the part of the students.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: IT'S RUN OUT, TWO.

00:18:40:00

[cut]

[hand slate]

[change to camera roll 3]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: SPEED.

[hand slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: SECOND PICTURE.

INTERVIEWER 1: OK, MAYBE YOU CAN TELL ME ABOUT THE DAY THAT ALEXANDER LOOBY'S HOUSE WAS BOMBED.

Lewis: Well, it was early one morning, about six o'clock, Z. Alexander Looby, who had been a strong supporter and defender of civil rights, a member of the City Council, the first black member of the City Council in the City of Nashville, was a NAACP legal defense fund lawyer. He had been the legal counsel for all of the students that had participated in the sit-in, had brought some of the original school desegregation cases, had worked with Thurgood Marshall. We heard that his house had been bombed and all across the city on the different college campuses, we had a similar reaction, to call a meeting of the Nashville Central Committee. The Central Committee was the executive committee of the Nashville student nonviolent movement. By—I would say, between six-thirty and seven o'clock we were meeting. Shortly after seven we had sent the Mayor a telegram saying to the Mayor that we would have a march on City Hall and the Mayor was, Ben West, was the Mayor's name, to protest the bombing of Attorney Looby's house. By noon we had more than five thousand student from Tennessee State, Fisk University, American Baptist Theological Seminary, Meharry, and Vanderbilt and people from the community with a sense of righteous indignation. It was not a noisy march. It was very orderly and people marched in two's. It was a long march, but it was, was one of the most beautiful effort on the part of the, the student community and the people of Nashville to say to the, to the Mayor, say to the business community that we wanted to protest the bombing, but we wanted to see the City of Nashville become a desegregated city; an open city. And I'll never forget that day when we met at, at City Hall, Diane Nash, as the chairperson of the Nashville student movement met the Mayor when he walked out to greet all of us. And she said something like, Mr. Mayor, do you favor desegregation of the lunch counters? And he said something like, yes, yes, young lady. I favor desegregation of the lunch counter. It's left up to the businessmen. And the *Nashville Tennessean* which is, I guess a progressive, moderate newspaper in, in Nashville in, in the South, carried a banner headline the next day saying something to the effect, "Mayor Favor Desegregation of the Lunch Counters." And from that day on, it was down road, I guess you, if it, it was an easy task for us to, to negotiate with the merchants, with the Chamber of Commerce to end segregation at all of the lunch counters. In drugstores and variety stores, the 5&10, and most of the restaurants in downtown Nashville. But it was not—

00:22:23:00

INTERVIEWER 1: SO WAS IT, WAS IT A NATURAL THING, THEN, FOR YOU TO GET INVOLVED IN THE FREEDOM RIDES?

Lewis: Yeah, it—I think it was natural. It, it was part of—it was natural for me, personally, because I had traveled almost, well, almost three-and-a-half years from Alabama, from southeast Alabama through Montgomery, through Birmingham, through—to Nashville, to attend school, by bus. And I had seen the sign saying white only, colored only, waiting. In

Troy we didn't have a bus station, but we had an area where colored people—where they had for colored people—were supposed to wait. Where they had colored waiting, that people, black people had to stand in a line saying “Colored Waiting” to buy a ticket. And then come back around and get in at the front of the bus and go to the back of the bus. That was on the Greyhound bus. So the Freedom Ride was an attempt to end segregation, to end racial discrimination on the buses throughout the South. It was CORE, the Congress of Racial Equality, that had issued a call for the Freedom Ride and I was one of the person, as a member of the Nashville student movement, to volunteer to become a participant on the Freedom Ride. And I remember very well this was my, well, early spring of 1961, but in the meantime we were involved in another effort in Nashville to desegregate the lunch counters—not the lunch counter, but the theatres. See, all of the theatres in Nashville were segregated. Still segregated in, in ‘61. We had thirteen stand-in. Thirteen consecutive days of stand-in, where we literally stood in, kept other people, kept white people from going into the theatre because black people had to buy their ticket in a separate window, go in a separate door, and go upstairs and sit in something we refer to as “the buzzard roost.” We couldn't sit on the main floor. So we had these standing-in and after thirteen days of standing-in these—the theatres in Nashville desegregated. But while that was all going on, while the stand-in was taking place there was this appeal to go on the Freedom Ride. And *I believe the Freedom Rides started in the first week in May, 1961, in Washington DC. As a matter of fact, on the night of May 3rd, 1961, this group of thirteen Freedom Rider [sic]—seven whites and six black—had a dinner at a Chinese restaurant in Washington DC. It was my first time having Chinese food, you know, for someone growing up in the South and going to school in Nashville, never had Chinese food.*

00:25:23:00

[cut]

[missing frames]

00:25:24:00

[cut]

Lewis: But we had attended a few days of workshops, had some discussion with, then, Attorney General Robert Kennedy. We met at something called the Fellowship House in Washington.

00:25:39:00

[cut]

[missing frames]

00:25:40:00



[cut]

Lewis: *And this meal was like the, to me, it was like the Last Supper because you didn't know what to expect going on the Freedom Ride.* We had been told to expect same things in parts of Georgia, same things in parts of Alabama, in Mississippi, in Louisiana. And I remember getting on a bus coming to Washington, I guess by plane, and getting on, on the bus at the Greyhound bus station in Washington DC on May 4<sup>th</sup> and I had a—for my seat mate, was an elderly white gentleman named Abbot Bigelow. Abbot Bigelow was from Cos Cob, Connecticut. He was a pacifists. He had been the skipper on a little ship called the “Golden Rule” out in the South Pacific protesting against the testing atomic bomb. He was a very committed guy to the philosophy and, and the discipline of nonviolent [sic]. So we got on this ride through the South. And we went in to parts of Virginia, to Lynchburg, Petersburg, and other places and without any problems. And through North Carolina one of the riders attempted to get a shoe shine and a hair cut in a so-called white barber shop in Charlotte, North Carolina. He was arrested and went to Court the next day and the judge threw the case out. We went on to Rock Hill, South Carolina and Abbot Bigelow and myself got off the bus and we started in a so-called white waiting room. The doors of the waiting room was marked “White Waiting.” And we started in the door and we were met by a group of white young men that beat us and hit us, knocked us out, left us lying on the sidewalk there in front of the entrance to the, the waiting room. And, in a matter of a few minutes, a group of Rock Hill police officials came up and wanted to know whether we wanted, wanted to press charges and we said, no. I left a ride the next day and I had to fly to Philadelphia for an interview with the American Friends Service Committee cause I had applied to go abroad as a, a volunteer in an international program in what then was Tanganyika, Tanzania now, and I had planned to rejoin the ride in Birmingham on Mother’s Day. I don't remember the date, but it was the second Sunday in May. But the riders never really made it to Birmingham because one of the bus that I would have been on, after it made it through Georgia, it arrived in Anniston, Alabama and on the outside of Anniston, Alabama this bus was bur—burned. The tires were deflated and the riders were beaten and other riders that made it to Birmingham on a Trailway bus were beaten there in Birmingham. And so, I went back to Nashville and CORE decided to drop the Freedom Ride to end the ride in, in Birmingham. And it was Bobby Kennedy, as the Attorney General of the United States, who said that there should be a cooling off period and the rides shouldn't continue. Those of us in Nashville as, as a student from Nashville—

00:29:35:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

Lewis: —who had been a participant in the early ride, felt that the ride should continue, that—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: RUN OUT.

00:29:45:00

[cut]

[change to camera roll 4]

INTERVIEWER 1: OK, SO WHAT HAPPENED IN ANNISTON?

Lewis: Well, in Anniston, Alabama—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: YOU WANT A SLATE?

INTERVIEWER 1: OH.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: PUSH YOUR HAND OUT. OK.

[hand slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: SECOND STICKS.

INTERVIEWER 1: WHAT HAPPENED IN ANNISTON?

Lewis: In Anniston, Alabama the Greyhound bus carried a group of the Freedom Riders was burned. The tires was deflated and the bus just couldn't, couldn't roll and hoodlums, members of the Klan, came on the bus pulling people out, beating people, and all of the people had to leave the burning bus and people were left lying on the highway from being beaten by members of the Klan. And in Birmingham, when the Trailway group arrived, they were beaten and one gentleman needed something like fifty-three stitches to close up the wound on his head from the beating that occurred there. After the Birmingham incident Senator, well then, Attorney General Robert Kennedy said, there must be a cooling off period. And he tried to discourage any more so called Freedom Rides into the South. Well, as one of the participant in the original effort and as someone who had been involved in the Nashville student movement, I felt and others felt, that the rides should continue. We got the necessary resources to continue the ride from Nashville. We went from Nashville to, to Birmingham and outside of Birmingham two other riders that were sitting near the front of the bus, I think on maybe the, the very first seat behind the bus driver, were arrested and taken to jail. The other riders, we were taken into the city and later into a waiting room and later the Commissioner of Public Safety, Bull Connor told us, at least, informed us that we were being taken to jail. We were not being arrested, but we were being placed in protective custody for our own safety, for our own well-being. We went to jail that Wednesday night, May 17<sup>th</sup>, 1961. We stayed in jail Thursday night. We went on a hunger strike, a fast. We refused to eat anything, refused to drink any water. And early Friday morning, I would say about two o'clock Friday morning, Bull Connor, several members of the Birmingham police force, came to our cell took us out of the jail and said, in effect, that they were taking us back to the college campuses in Nashville. And we got in the car. We didn't go in a, in a voluntary way. We went limp, so they literally picked us up and put us in the car, and we started back up the

highway to—toward the Tennessee state line. It was about one hundred and twenty miles from Birmingham and maybe about the same distance from, from Nashville—that they literally dropped us out on the highway near a railroad crossing and said—a bus will be coming along or a train will be coming along and you can make your way back to the city of Nashville. We were frightened. We didn't know anyone in out more [sic] Alabama or out more Tennessee and we went across the railroad tracks with our baggage and came upon the house of an elderly black couple. They had to be, at least, seventies, in their early seventies. And they were afraid to let us in, but they did. And they—when daylight came the man went and bought food from several different places because he didn't want to indicate in any way that he had some unwanted guests in this small town. And the people had heard on the radio about the Freedom Riders from Nashville going to Birmingham. In the meantime, we made a telephone call to the headquarters of the Nashville student movement and spoke to Diane Nash, who was the leader of the effort there, and told her what had happened. And she said, what do you want to do? Do you want to come back to Nashville or do you want to go back to Birmingham and continue the ride? And we told her that we wanted to continue the ride. She sent a car to pick us up and she informed us that ten other packages had been shipped by other means. She was suggesting or telling us through a code that ten other Freedom Riders had left by train to join us in Birmingham. See, the people in Nashville and around the country thought we were still in jail. And other people were going to come to Birmingham and go from Birmingham to continue the ride. We got in this car, when the car arrived, seven of us and the driver, got back to Birmingham, and met with Fred Shuttlesworth and some local people and student, particularly, one student, Ruby Doris Smith, who made it from Atlanta and Spelman College to join the ride. And we attempted to get on the bus about five thirty p.m. and this bus driver said, I cannot—I will not drive. And he said something like, I will never forget what this bus driver said, he said, I have only one life to give, it was a classic statement. I have only one life to give, and I'm not going to give it to the NAACP, not to CORE. This was a white bus driver in Birmingham, Alabama. Didn't have any black bus drivers at that time. In the meantime, we understood from some of the reporters that Robert Kennedy was negotiating with the officials of Greyhound to get the bus, at least, to get us out of Birmingham during that night. And Robert Kennedy kept asking Greyhound officials, did they have any, then, Negro bus drivers, and they kept saying, no. We tried at eight-thirty throughout the night to get a bus and we, we didn't get a bus. No bus driver would drive, because the bus drivers were literally afraid of what could happen, because the Klan had surrounded the, the bus station. They were throwing stink bomb. There were police officials there trying to keep the Klan from getting to us inside of this so-called white waiting room. They had the police dogs. But it was not until *eight-thirty Saturday morning* May 21st that *we understood that an arrangement had been worked out where—between the Justice Department and the officials of Greyhound and the officials of the state of Alabama—where we would board the bus with other customers or passengers and there would be two officials of Greyhound. A private plane would fly over the bus, there would be a state patrol car every fifteen or twenty miles along the highway between Birmingham and Montgomery, about ninety miles. We got on the bus and a great many of the riders really, literally, took a nap. They went to sleep. I took a seat on the front seat right behind the driver with a young man by the name of Jim Spur, a young white guy. I was a spokesman for this particular group of riders, and we did see the plane. But I would say about forty miles or less from the city of Montgomery all sign of protection disappeared. There was no*

*plane, no patrol car, and when we arrived at the bus station it was just like eerie, just a strange feeling. It was so quiet, so peaceful, nothing.* And the moment, literally, the moment we started down the steps off of that bus, an angry mob, they grew into about two to three thousand people came out of nowhere: men, women, children with baseball bats, clubs, chains and they literally—there was no police official around—they just started beating people. And we tried to get all of the women on the ride into a taxi cab. There was one cab there and this driver said he couldn't, he couldn't take the group because it was an interracial group. We had black and white women in this particular group. And one of the Freedom Riders, was a young black female student, said something like, well, I will drive myself. I will drive the cab. And the driver said, no, but, finally, the driver did drive off with all of the black women and the white women start running down the street and then the mob literally turned on the media, on members of the press. There was one cameraman, I believe from NBC, had one of these heavy old pieces of camera equipment on his shoulder. This member of the mob took this equipment, bashed this guy, literally knocked him down, bashed his face in. So they beat up all of the reporters. Then they turned on the, the black male members and, and white male members of, of the group. I was beaten. I think I was hit with a, a sort of crate thing that hold soda bottles and left lying in the street unconscious there in the streets of Montgomery. And I, I literally, thought it was the last march. It was the last Freedom Ride. It was a, it was a very bloody event. It was a very nasty mob. There were other people that was beaten. An aide to President Kennedy—

00:40:50:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

Lewis: —who tried to intervene or get between the—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: RUN OUT ON FOUR.

[change to camera roll 5]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: SP—SPEED ROLLING ON FOUR.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: OK.

INTERVIEWER 2: FIVE.

[hand slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: FIVE.

INTERVIEWER 1: OK. SO, SO HOW DID PEOPLE GET AWAY THAT NIGHT?

Lewis: Well, after the dust settled from, from the violence that had occurred in, in

Montgomery there was no—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: I'M SORRY.

Lewis: OK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: I'M SORRY. I FORGOT ABOUT THAT. THAT'S NOT HOW IT WORK—SPEED.

00:41:31:00

[cut]

INTERVIEWER 1: FIVE. OK. WHY, WHY DIDN'T YOU WANT TO TALK TO THE FBI?

Lewis: Well, we had some real reservations about communicating with the FBI. We had heard in—from, really, from what I had seen, that for the most part, they spent most of their time taking pictures, taking notes, and we felt that they were somehow part of the local police establishment. That they were friends of the local police chief, of the police commissioner, the public safety commissioner and we didn't trust the local FBI. Most of the FBI agents in Montgomery, on that particular day, apparently, were from Birmingham, Mobile, and other parts of the South. And we had received a, a suggestion from, I guess, John Doar, who then was the assistant Attorney General in charge of civil rights and he had suggested to us that we shouldn't talk to anyone before we were interviewed by him.

00:42:45:00

INTERVIEWER 1: WAS—THERE WAS AN EARLY PLANNING SESSION WITH— THAT BAYARD RUSTIN AND A. PHILIP RANDOLPH CALLED IN PLANNING THE MARCH ON WASHINGTON OF JUST ACTIVIST GROUPS. COULD YOU TELL ME WHY WAS IT JUST ACTIVIST GROUPS AND, AND JUST TELL ME THAT THE CONFERENCE HAPPENED AND WHY WAS IT JUST ACTIVIST GROUPS?

Lewis: Well, Bayard Rusty—Bayard Rustin and A. Philip Randolph called together the leadership, I guess, of the, of the civil rights movement, primarily SNCC, CORE and the representative of SCLC. In the early, early days this was after Birmingham, this was after the mass arrests at jail and the fire hoses and the beating in Birmingham, this was after Medgar Evers has been shot and two young people had enrolled at the University of Alabama. And there was some problem with going to the NAACP or to the Urban League, but—

INTERVIEWER 1: WHAT WAS THE PROBLEM?

Lewis: Well, SNCC, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee; CORE, the Congress of Racial Equality; and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and, I think, Bayard Rustin and Mr. Randolph, I think we represented something somewhat different. We

represented a, more of a mass movement. The NAACP had played a tremendous role in the movement. Played a, a, a, a superb role, but it had a long history of taking most of the efforts to the Courts and they were not really ready, in my estimation, to support a mass march. Some of the people felt that it would be embarrassing to the Kennedy Administration and were very cautious about identifying with any idea of having a March on Washington. I remember the first meeting that we had in Washington in, in June of 1963 with President Kennedy. Was at that meeting that Mr. Randolph said something like, Mr. President, the masses are restless and we're gonna march. We're gonna march on Washington. President Kennedy didn't understand that and he was a little frightened by it and he was troubled. And, I think, some of the other participants, some of the other leaders there that represented, say, the Urban League, the NACP [sic], and one or two of the officials of the administration didn't understand what Mr. Randolph was saying. But he said it and, and, and restated the case like only A. Phillip Randolph could do and he did it well. He was highly and well respected, I think, particularly by this—the people in SNCC, the people in CORE, and, and the people in SCLC, because of his early leadership as a, you know, he was looked upon as a, as a militant, as a radical of a, of another period. In spite of his age, he was very young and ready to go and demand all of the things that black people needed and wanted at that time.

00:46:21:00

INTERVIEWER 1: WHO PAID THE BILLS FOR THE MARCH ON WASHINGTON?

Lewis: Well, I would say a different organizations, different community people throughout the country raised money. But first of all, you had to get certain people to buy into, to the, to supporting the march. Little thing happened, one story that the people probably never know. In a, in a meeting in July, the first meeting, July 1963 at the Roosevelt Hotel in New York a leader meeting took place on July 2nd, 1963. There were some people didn't want Bayard Rustin as the director, some black people, some black leaders. They thought he was too radical, he was too militant, he had been identified with the left. And there was one leader of the NACP and a leader of the Urban League insisted that Mr. Randolph ask Mr. Rustin to leave the meeting. And, at one point, Mr. Randolph had to ask Bayard Rustin to leave the meeting, because of the insistence on the part of Mr. Wilkin [sic], on the part of Whitney Young. Fred Shuttlesworth, and Reverend Abernathy was asked to leave James Foreman of, of SNCC was asked to leave and Mr. Wilkins kept insisting that only the head of the organization, but for a period Mr. Wilkin had today—and it's not to say anything bad about the man, but he had a problem dealing with young people. He had a problem dealing with people that didn't share his ideas. But in the end, Mr. Randolph carried the day, because we suggested in that meeting, in that discussion, particularly, James Farmer, Martin King, and myself, that Mr. Randolph be the chairperson of the March on Washington and that he be free to select the person of, of his choice to be the director, to be the deputy director, whatever, and he selected Bayard Rustin to direct the march.

00:48:46:00

INTERVIEWER 1: WERE THERE ANY WHITE FOLKS INVOLVED IN THE PLANNING OF THE MARCH?

Lewis: Not until, till later when—you had here the traditional civil rights organizations then we reached out after that meeting in New York and got the National Council of Churches, the AFL—not the AFL-CIO because George Meany never supported the march. Organized labor, per se, did not support the march. The AFL-CIO and Mr. Meany did not support the March on Washington. Was against the march as a matter of fact. But Walter Reuther, as representative and head of the UAW, supported the march. The National Catholic Interracial Council supported the march and the American Jewish Committee came in. So this brought in the white liberals, moderate, and a white element of, of organized labor under the gospel seed of UAW, and Walter Reuther.

00:49:44:00

INTERVIEWER 1: WHO—WHOSE—WHO WAS BEHIND THE MOVEMENT TO CHANGE YOUR SPEECH?

Lewis: Well, from, from the outset it was, it was strange the way that happened and to this day I don't know all what went to make that possible. We had, and when I say “we” I would say the representative of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, had assisted me in preparing what I thought was a very simple, very elementary statement for the March on Washington. Julian Bond was then the communication director of SNCC, had to make copies of the speech available in advance. The Tuesday night before the march, we all were staying at a hotel in Washington DC, and that night I was in my hotel room. I got a call from Bayard Rustin who suggested that there was some problem with my speech and there would be a meeting to discuss the speech and other arrangements for the March on Washington and I should come down for the meeting. And at this meeting, there was representatives from SCLC, the NAACP, all of the organization, the Catholic Church, everybody. And we really argued about, about the speech.

INTERVIEWER 1: WELL, WHO WANTED YOU TO CHANGE THE SPEECH?

Lewis: Well, one suggestion was from a representative of the Archbishop—

00:51:25:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

Lewis: —of the Diocese of Washington. Archbishop Aubar [sic]—

INTERVIEWER 1: RIGHT.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: RUN OUT.

Lewis: —of the speech. See, during the early discussion with representatives of SNCC,

SCLC, all of the organizations, it was never—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: OH.

INTERVIEWER 1: CUT.

Lewis: —it was never our design to come to Washington to support any particular piece of civil right legislation. But before the march—by the time we got to Washington, some of the people, particularly, the representative of the Urban League, the NAACP, and maybe organized labor that segment of organized labor, wanted the march to support a piece of legislation, a proposed legislation of President Kennedy. And we took exception to that. In one part of the speech, I suggested that we could not support the Kennedy legislation because it did not guarantee the right of black people to vote. Kennedy had suggested that a person with a sixth grade education should be considered literate and any literate person should be able to register to vote. And SNCC and I think the southern wing of the movement took the position that the only qualification for being able to register to vote should be that of age and residence. And during the time leading up to the preparation of my speech, there was an article in the *New York Times* with a group of women in, in Rhodesia and they had signs saying, one man, one vote. And in my speech I said something like, one man, one vote is the African cry. It is ours too, it must be ours. Some of the people objected to that. And another part of the speech where we suggested that, well, that there was very little difference between the major political parties. That the party of Javits is the party of Goldwater. That the party of Kennedy is the party of Eastland. Then I raised the question, where is our party? And another part of the speech raised the question—

00:53:49:00

INTERVIEWER 1: HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT THAT NOW?

Lewis: Well, I still—somebody asked me about that just a day or so ago out in, in Compton, California. What about our party? It's—well, I still feel about the same way. Where's the party of the people? When you lo—well, that's a whole other discussion. But I suggested that as a movement that we could not wait on the President or members of the Congress. We had to take matters into our own hand and went on to say that that the day might come when we would not confine our marching on Washington. Where we might be forced to march through the South the way Sherman did, nonviolently. And some of the people suggested that was inflammatory. That would call people to riot and you shouldn't use that type of language. And Mr. Randolph, really, came to my defense not that night, he was not present on that Tuesday night, but even after we got, after we arrived at the Lincoln Memorial people had problems with some of the changes. The use of the word “revolution.” I used “revolution” in it. The word revolution in the speech, at least, once. The word “masses.” Mr. Randolph said, you know, I don't have any problem with revolution. I don't have any problem with the word. I use them. I use those words myself sometimes. I said in, in one part of the speech, we are involved in a serious revolution. I remember that very well. The revolution is at, is at hand. The masses are on the march or something like that. I don't—people, they couldn't deal with that. And it was, you know, it's nothing, you look back on it. And, and in 1965, all of that,



what we tried to suggest in that speech on the concern of voting rights came to pass. The people in Selma, the people in Mississippi made it real through the Voting Rights Act. And, you know, all of the things that SNCC predicted and projected during that period came to pass in the Voter Rights Act of 1965. And—but for that, you know, day, it was, tended to be looked upon as being radical and extreme.

00:56:12:00

INTERVIEWER 1: WHEN DID YOU BECOME AWARE THAT, THAT THE MARCH HAD—WAS SHAPING UP TO BE KIND OF A LOBBY EFFORT, SPECIFICALLY, FOR KENNEDY'S CIVIL RIGHTS LEGISLATION?

Lewis: I would say maybe a week or so before the march. Maybe two weeks before the march, yeah. See we, we had a, a short time to plan it. It was like from the first week in July to August 28th. And when the Kennedy Administration became so cooperative, when the, the people within the government became so helpful in providing logistic—the only thing they wanted, they wanted people to come in to Washington and to get out before sundown. They wanted all of the black folks out of Washington before sundown and that's what—exactly what happened. People came in and they got out. And the, the afternoon, after the march, we went, went over to meet with President Kennedy. He congratulated the people, said, you know, I heard that someplace a few days ago that, as a matter of fact, that he really wanted to come by and speak, yeah.

00:57:26:00

INTERVIEWER 1: DO YOU KNOW WHY THEY—WHY HE DIDN'T SPEAK?

Lewis: No, I guess, that I don't, I don't kn—I don't know why. But several members of the Congress came and they took their seat right on the on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. Several. Over, over an hundred members of the Senate and the House came.

INTERVIEWER 1: DO YOU REMEMBER WHAT PERSUADED THE NAACP AND THE URBAN LEAGUE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE MARCH?

Lewis: I think, perhaps, more than anything, I think, more than anything the NAACP its membership. The youth membership and people at the, the base, local people, people in the South wanted to chart buses, get on trains and come. I think more than anything started putting pressure on the national office. With the Urban League, I think, Whitney Young happened to be sensitive to the mood and they saw the march—I think people had, they had a problem with SNCC, true enough, but they had problem also, real problems, with SCLC and, particularly, Dr. King. If I could tell you some stories and some mee—meetings that—unbelievable. Leading up to the march in, in 1963. Another meeting in New York, I guess, this was called the, the Unity, Civil Rights Unity Council, where—I have never before in my life seen a group of people—Dr. King hadn't made it to the meeting, but it was Mr. Wilkin who, you know, who's a good man, decent human being and, and Whitney. I think, James Farmer was there and, I think, our Jim, Jim Forman was there and maybe Floyd McKissick.

But it was almost—it was the worst kind of red baiting I ever heard. I ever witnessed of, of Dr. King. It was like a conversation going on between Whitney and, and Mr. Wilkin about Martin. Saying, in the sense, that he was naïve, politically, and that he kept all of these sort of left people around him and they thought that was bad, bad for the movement. And he was not politically in tune or sophisticated in it. But they had some problems with him. And, apparently, during that whole period and when I look back on it, I didn't know it at the time, but seeing what I've seen today in the Freedom of Information file and my own file and other thing, I'm sure, I'm convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt, that there was a great deal of sharing of information between the FBI, people within the Justice Department, between certain committees in the Congress, and people within the hierarchy of some of the old established civil rights organization. And they got information and—on different people and then whether they used it or said, well, we understand that maybe you should get rid of a certain person. What—representatives of the NAACP and Urban League were saying to Dr. King that you had to cut some people, cut certain staff people, cut some of your friends, some of your associates, because you're being tainted.

01:01:14

INTERVIEWER 2: [pause] JOHN, WERE YOU AT THAT MEETING WITH, WHAT WAS THE GUY'S NAME, HE HAD LIKE A—HE HAD A WHOLE THING ABOUT GRASSROOTS BEING, BEING STARTED—

INTERVIEWER 1: GLOUCESTER KERNS?

Lewis: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER 2: GLOUCESTER KERN, RIGHT. WERE YOU AT THAT MEETING IN NEW YORK?

Lewis: I don't recall.

INTERVIEWER 1: THAT WAS AFTER—

INTERVIEWER 2: YEAH IT WAS.

INTERVIEWER 1: —ATLANTIC CITY.

INTERVIEWER 2: I THOUGHT IT WAS BEFORE—

[cut]

[end of interview]

01:01:33:00

© Copyright Washington University Libraries 2016