

SS243.mp3

David Yellin- One two, one two, testing one two, testing one two. This is July 8th, July 8th 1970 and we are about to conduct another interview with reverend James Lawson at his office, this is David Yellin and together with Joan Beifuss July 8th 1970. (Tape Break)

David Yellin- Ok well that is a familiar sound. Ok Joan you want to make the part.

Joan Beifuss- I don't even know what day it is.

David Yellin- No I have already said that. Now we are ready to start.

James Lawson- Where were we?

Joan Beifuss- Last year? What I want is Martin King in Memphis that last week starting before the march (Muffled).

David Yellin- You have got to talk louder.

Joan Beifuss- Starting before the march (muffled). Where is the microphone?

James Lawson- Starting before the march?

Joan Beifuss- Yeah getting ready for that March 28th march and through the assassination if you can remember.

James Lawson- Well let me see.

Joan Beifuss- It has been so long and so disjointed I think maybe if you just start talking...

James Lawson- You mean up to the assassination?

Joan Beifuss- Up through the assassination.

David Yellin- Yes did we determine what the resolution and evolution of the 28th march?

Joan Beifuss- No we didn't, we never even got to the 28th march.

David Yellin- How that came about.

Joan Beifuss- What we are missing is that whole last week before Dr. King was killed.

David Yellin- Maybe it might help...

Joan Beifuss- It might help to ask a couple of questions.

David Yellin- Wasn't it when....

James Lawson- Well I was thinking, well go ahead and ask your question.

David Yellin- He was here earlier the 18th and made that speech and then it was determined to ask him to come back and he said I'll do it. We went over that pretty much how he was talking to you and several others.

James Lawson- Alright, and then did we go into that Friday when it snowed?

David Yellin- Well not too much no, when it was called off? Yeah, maybe you can start there that he was supposed to come. And then that Friday that it snowed.

James Lawson- Let's see it was the Monday the 18th that the march was supposed to have been the 19th, 20th...

David Yellin- 22nd?

James Lawson- 22nd.

David Yellin- Or 21st?

James Lawson- Well Friday, Friday is. Friday that would be the 22nd.

David Yellin- 22nd because it was a Thursday the 28th.

Joan Beifuss- Are we on?

David Yellin- Yes.

James Lawson- And the weekend we worked out a date again and decided it would be that following week.

David Yellin- Thursday.

James Lawson- I think so whatever that date would be. What would that date be?

David Yellin- That would be the 28th. 29th is Friday the 30th is Saturday and the 31st is

James Lawson- Oh that's right, that's right.

David Yellin- So that the 22nd Friday that is when it snowed.

James Lawson- That is right. Have you all gotten on tape David Caywood's involvement in all of this?

David Yellin- Yes in fact, that would be a good place to start as I remember Mr., there was some question about he route of the march.

Joan Beifuss- Yeah that's right.

David Yellin- And they couldn't locate anybody or you wouldn't tell them?

Joan Beifuss- Was anybody in contact with the policemen about march routes and all that?

James Lawson- No there was somebody in touch with them all the time.

Joan Beifuss- Was it Baxton?

James Lawson- Baxton, David Caywood....

Joan Beifuss- And the police didn't know the route of that march?

James Lawson- Of which one?

Joan Beifuss- That March 28th, the one that broke up.

James Lawson- Yes sure they did.

David Yellin- Well, let's go back a little bit because I recall they didn't know. You told them, this maybe be fresh and we may be wrong that's why....you told them as far as I understood that it was going to be the same route that had been planned before and then Holloman could not get in touch with you or someone and that is when he called David Caywood?

James Lawson- Well I don't know that.

David Yellin- To find out what the route was and David Caywood was either the intermediary with you or whoever about the route and then he finally told him it would be the same one.

Joan Beifuss- Will you clear away from me. Jim at the beginning when the strike started when you met with Holloman early on and it was some kind of actual contact, then later on was there kind of pressure within the community not to have such close relations with the police?

James Lawson- (muffled) There may have been some, but I am sure some youths that had problems with the police but generally speaking we never had any falling out over it. I am sure there were some who said we (muffled). But we tend to let the police know what way we were going even in those days. And Holloman says he doesn't know what the route was it may be true, that we may not have informed him that he route would follow the same route of that we had planned on the 22nd, that is possible. I am not going to....No I will not.

Joan Beifuss- Just go ahead and tell it.

David Yellin- Yeah that is not significant very much at all except in a way it was significant it seems. Certainly with the new administration and Mr. Holloman not knowing many people in Memphis anyway certainly not the black community. He did not have what you might call it seems at least as we are able to tell the right communication with people in the black community.

James Lawson- Yeah he had lots of contact.

David Yellin- Yeah he had indirect.

James Lawson- Because on, no he had direct too. February 23rd, February 23rd when we were first gassed and all Baxton got into a hotel room and I was there and who else was there? (Muffled) directly by what went on that day. Then on another occasion I forgotten what the date was a group of us met down at First Methodist Church. He and Lutz met with Maxine Smith, myself, maybe Vasco, maybe Ralph Jackson, perhaps Zeke Bell, this was (Muffled) this is after March the 28th maybe. After the first incidents. I am sure it was because we got passes from him to go home, because we met after dark. We met until 8:30 or 9:00 that night.

David Yellin- Yeah at that time Lutz was not chief of police?

James Lawson- Yeah but he was the assistant chief, he had walked with us you see. He was assistant chief I guess he was in the attachment, he was in charge with the attachment that was following the march around. He was (Muffled). Yeah Lux was there that night, assistant chief Lux was with us that night. You see he walked in the march with us you know.

David Yellin- That is the 23rd?

James Lawson- 28th.

David Yellin- The 28th.

James Lawson- He walked and he was in front and when I asked him to get me a bullhorn he got me that bullhorn.

David Yellin- He got you that.

James Lawson- He is the one who gave me that bullhorn. I asked for it. I said get it for me, he was right in front.

Joan Beifuss- By himself?

James Lawson- No with a police officer.

Joan Beifuss- Just two of them in front?

David Yellin- Was he then as far as you know the police officer in charge?

James Lawson- Yeah I think he was in charge of that detail at that time, at that point. Well ok, we got there. We agreed then to, Dr. King rather and a group of us agreed that he would return March the 22nd for a general work stoppage and a major march. On the 18th after his major address and after he sat down and after we made these agreements, he got back up again and announced I will come back on March the 22nd on Friday and it will be a work stoppage, we want everyone to stay away from work. And of course there was great general hysteria when he made this announcement. So essentially during that week we were in the process of making our preparations for the march. (muffled) regular mass meetings each night. Planning the strategy for the march. Talking to people about it, getting the word

around and continuing the daily marches and economic boycott and the selected boycott that was going on at that time. I remember on Thursday the 21st a group of us were sitting in the minimum salary building on the third floor of the conference room. An evening after a march. After the regular march and again looking over our work and the plans for the next day when we first began to see scattered flakes of snow and it was a cold day anyway and we laughed among ourselves. I for one thing said well it can't last. It will probably hinder shortly. But by the time we had finished that meeting and separated it was coming down in fairly big flakes. We had scheduled that night a mass meeting, a meeting of teachers...(Tape Break)

James Lawson- We scheduled that night a meeting, we had a meeting of teachers and we have been after teachers because of course we have been trying to get their, enlist their support for the school for the work stoppage, on that Friday. Well it continued snowing that evening and it begin to become real thick by about 5:30 or 6:00 as I recall and began to collect. So that we had by about 7:30 or 8:00 we had several inches of snow, 4 or 5 inches of snow already. At first I thought well this will shoot the meeting for tonight so what is the value of going, but I went anyway to Mt. Olive Cathedral where the teachers meeting was scheduled and to my great surprise found about 150 people there.

Joan Beifuss- Where?

James Lawson- Mt. Olive Cathedral. Waiting for us to begin to brief them about their role in the next day. And of course that was a very enthusiastic meeting there was a number of testimonials from teachers. (yawn) Excuse me. And we knew at that time that the movement had reached a real zenith in the minds of people because here for the first time we were getting over a hundred teachers, black teachers in the system concerned about staying away from school the very next day and concerned about encouraging their children to stay away from school that day and for the work stoppage and be in for the movement. Well the mass meeting that night had about 5 or 6 hundred people in it and it also I understand, I did not get over there because I stayed with the teachers throughout that evening and throughout that night. But I understand it was also equally a very strong meeting in every way. Well it continued snowing, I guess I left that particular session maybe at 11:00 and we did some last minute checking with different people and then I headed on home. It of course snowed all night and I got up at about 6:00 the next morning, and when I then saw the amount of snow and the radio was saying it was then what, I don't know 20 inches or something or 18 inches. I got a phone call in to Martin King and he said that the airport report was that the field was fogged in and they couldn't take off.

Joan Beifuss- In Atlanta?

James Lawson- In Atlanta and they couldn't take off and I said well we have got 20 inches of snow here and it is still snowing and chances are I think we need to cancel this. I need to make some spot checks with other people before I definitely say we will call it off. So he said you do so and am sitting here at home and I am waiting because we are fogged in. So you let me know, and I told him I will call you back

probably around 7:00 or 7:30 or something. He said ok. So I called around to a number of people and I called down to our office down at the minimum salary building. I was told there that the first people had come in for the march already. It was about 6:30 or 7:00 by that time. But it was agreed that we should not try to have the march in light of the kind of day that it was. So I called Dr. King back then and said well this is the feeling of the people I have talked to and I would tend to agree. We have a perfect work stoppage today though because I am sure everything is dead. Well his point was he said well I am going to be in and out how can we make the decision of when we will do it and I said well let me suggest that you sort of make the decision and I will work with you on it and we will try to do it when is most convenient and I will have a feeling for the people here and we will let you know their judgment. So we talked some time then about the possibility about it being the following Thursday or Friday but we agreed that we would not push ourselves on this decision that we would check back with each other the next day and try to firm it up and in time for us to make an announcement and what not by Sunday Monday. And so that is what happened. As I recall we did not have a regular march that day, we did on Saturday however.

David Yellin- There was never any doubt in Dr. King's mind he was going to come?

James Lawson- No, no, there was no hesitation he was committed. I think we have to remember and this is something I noticed in a number of his reports, I think we have to remember that he was at that time and some months prior very much concerned with somehow dealing with the question of poverty. This is behind his thinking on the poor people's campaign. He may not have been personally completely satisfied with that kind of an effort. But what he was wrestling for was to develop some way by which we could begin to move in terms of direct action on the poverty question. This is what he was concerned for. One of the things he said to me at this time was that you are doing in Memphis what I want to do. Mainly, tie up this question of economic justice with racism. I think this is where a lot of people miss the whole meaning of his last days. Entirely the movie does this incidentally. The movie Montgomery to Memphis does not show the development of a man where he (muffled).

David Yellin- Can you talk about this a little bit? So that the meaning of the Memphis movement here because it is not isolated.

James Lawson- This is correct and his, the one criticism I had of the movie was that it left out the meaning of his life at the point of his death when he died what it was he was doing. What he was concerned about.

David Yellin- I wonder if this is the time to ask a question and I can't remember the source, whether it was told to me or whether I read it in one of the books. But there was some talk that Dr. King had he lived would have called off the poor people's march do you know anything about that?

James Lawson- No and I doubt that is seriously.....I doubt this. There is a whole lot of speculation about Martin King and I have noticed that much of that speculation comes from those who did not really know him nor did not really work with him intimately. There for example I was reading one by Paula Marshall today. I was reading a comment that she had made that when King died it was more a assertive whatever that means. And the young black historian who has written a biography of King in which he says that King really tied with a small militant.

Joan Beifuss- Did you read the day is loose biography?

James Lawson- That is the one I am talking about.

David Yellin- Yes I guess that is the one and maybe...well would he have called it off, just again I don't know if there is anything to it but the speculation at least my interpretation of why he might have was that it was not going as well as he had hoped it would and he was afraid that it would fail? Would that be why he would call it off, it wouldn't be for any logical reason.

James Lawson- No, no, after all a man like Dr. King was wasn't afraid of failing because he was just failing, even his failures tended to be rather magnificent. I mean any person who is engaged in direct action as he was, why he is haunted by the responsibility and the audacity that is his when he launches on something like this. You know like that kind of a life and work. Unless you know the, he gets over the fear of failure and if you, he had in his lifetime many many dark moments where the thought that things were all lost but he kept pressing on, the Birmingham campaign for example when he was in jail with 10's of hundreds of people in jail, there was no bail bond money and everyone was very much disturbed by what they thought was jail treatment. King spent some very anxious moments in jail. But he didn't give up.

Joan Beifuss- You (muffled) the day the poor people's campaign was originally supposed to be? Was it the middle of April? April 15th?

James Lawson- Well in actually fact you see, the beginning of the poor people's campaign in preporatorial, in its sort of preparatory role was approximately March 18th. Because March 18th was the, March 18th was a executive committee meeting and then he and Ralph Abernathy and a number of other people were going to begin their poor people's tour in Mississippi. That is how he managed to put the meeting here, and that is how he managed to come here and have his executive staff meet the 18th and 19th and then go on to Mississippi and make his tour in Marks and elsewhere you see. And then Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina. So those were the preliminary, the opening, the opening kinds of events on the poor people's campaign took place in March.

Joan Beifuss- Was there a date for the actual arrival in Washington, do you recall?

James Lawson- Yes there was but I can't recall what that was. He had a date, he did have some dates in mind.

Joan Beifuss- What I was trying to pinpoint was how far, because it seems to me that it was supposed to be in April originally which was very close to Memphis? But I was wondering if maybe it was really supposed to be in May and he really had a couple more months?

James Lawson- Well certainly March and part of April were committed to preparatory stages to getting to Washington, including the whole mule train march and what not from Marx Mississippi. The campaign itself of course was supposed to be in part a summer campaign. He did not anticipate main events in Washington taking place only in the Spring. He did anticipate the Washington Campaign being a summer campaign.

David Yellin- Probably early summer when congress would be sure to be in session.

James Lawson- He expected to be there by that time. But I don't remember these dates, I will have to go back and look at literature.

David Yellin- We can go back, Joe Lowe started his trailing game, either December or early....

Joan Beifuss- January.

David Yellin- And early January.

James Lawson- Who is Joe Lowe?

David Yellin- He is the photographer.

James Lawson- Oh yes right.

Joan Beifuss- (muffled).

David Yellin- Well PBL at the time who later took the pictures and he did a film, he released the film. But now you want to get back to eh 22nd?

James Lawson- So over the weekend we agreed upon coming back on the 28th of March for the big march.

David Yellin- Was Dr. King in Atlanta all this time?

James Lawson- I was trying to remember and I am not certain. I think he was.

Joan Beifuss- Excuse me when you initial contacted him about coming here I believe you told us you talked to him in Los Angeles.

James Lawson- Well that was one of the times.

Joan Beifuss- Would that have been correct for the poor people's campaign also?

James Lawson- Well I don't remember now what that was, Andy had told me why he was there. I may have told you why?

David Yellin- I may be jumping the gun but didn't he go into a retreat before he came here, he went away for a couple of days?

James Lawson- He was in a number of meetings about the poor people's campaign, he went on a brief vacation in March at Dr.'s orders to rest.

David Yellin- Yes.

James Lawson- I think I said he went to Mexico.

David Yellin- Yes was this after the 28th or before?

James Lawson- NO no this was before, before the march (muffled).

Joan Beifuss- We are coming in (muffled).

James Lawson- This is maybe the first week of March. Well any case he, so we then proceeded to move towards the 28th that Thursday for the work stoppage in March and of course we had leaflets out and we were doing all the various kinds of work. Then I (muffled) a call on Monday or Tuesday the city took an injunction out on us ordering us not to march. Specifically mentioned in the injunction was Martin King, SCLC, maybe Ralph Abernathy, maybe Andy Young and myself And other parties of (muffled). The kind of a catch all document. And of course we had our lawyers respond I got in touch immediately with Lucius Birch and Mike Cody and had them start working to take the injunction to the federal court.

David Yellin- Now are we talking, aren't we talking after he 28th?

James Lawson- No we are not.

David Yellin- That's alright, because they didn't do that for the 28th.

James Lawson- Oh that's right.

Joan Beifuss- It was after just go ahead it will sort out.

James Lawson- It was April the 3rd, April the 4th rather.

Joan Beifuss- Yeah that is when we have the court hearing.

James Lawson- Yeah that's right...

David Yellin- The 28th went ahead sort of without incident.

James Lawson- Yeah right we had the regular weekly, daily marches all that week we kept the boycott going, we had a number of youth marches during that period as I recall, where the police were very much uptight because they would run from one street to the next street. We had the double marches, we had the regular marches about 2:00 and then we had chiefly a youth march at 4:00 or 4:30.

Joan Beifuss- Well Jim that is why I was asking about the police thing, because it seems to me there is a claim here that the police suddenly started yelling that they weren't getting adequate information.

James Lawson- Oh they were very complaint about the youth marches, because the youth marches were changing the young people could not (muffled) and sometimes they hit them back and sometimes they run....

David Yellin- And they had signs?

James Lawson- They had signs and they were yelling chants.

David Yellin- And this was Harold Middlebrooke?

James Lawson- Yeah Harold Middlebrooke and I don't know all the others. You know the hard core group of (muffled). And so many of them the police were getting uptight with that and they, Holloman and others were getting word to us sometimes over the phone, Holloman called me direct at you know we don't mind the regular marches but these youth marches upsetting.

Joan Beifuss- What did you tell him?

James Lawson- Hmmmm?

Joan Beifuss- What did you tell him?

James Lawson- Well we hold him off and simply say we ain't going to break windows or anything like that but the youth marches are a part of the effort and some (muffled) I don't remember what kind of response is but essentially we were protective of these marches. (Tape Break) Alright we had set the route of the march this was in some of the leaflets. We put the route of the march into the leaflets. On the leaflet we also had instructions of people where they would gather. We had also on there some matters about following the discipline of nonviolence. The route of the march was the one we had been taking in our regular daily ones, down the street of Hernando to Beal and Beal to Main St., Main St. to city hall where we planned to have the meeting and then essentially back the same way. Well Thursday is a very beautiful day as I remember. Warm, bright, and as I made my way down towards the minimum salary building around 8:30 or 9:00, I knew that it would be quite a great event because people were already beginning to gather. Marshals were being trained then by Harold Middlebrooke as I recall and Malcolm Blackburn and one or two others. But as the morning progressed people kept gathering. We had staked out in such a fashion so that people could gather on different streets and then we would lead them, move them down Hernando. We tried to reserve the front of the church in Hernando and Pontotoc for the workers, for the ministers and then to be joined by Dr. King and his party. We had been informed by either Andy or Hosea Williams someone, that they would get there about 11:00 and we would come immediately to the scene of the march and be ready to go when they got there.

David Yellin- Nobody from Atlanta was here before the march?

James Lawson- No, not as such.

Joan Beifuss- Jim wasn't the march scheduled for 10:00 or something like that?

James Lawson- 11:00.

Joan Beifuss- It was scheduled always for 11:00?

James Lawson- Yes as I recall 11:00.

David Yellin- Or do we recall it was for ten and Martin Luther King's plane was late?

Joan Beifuss- I don't recall anything I was just...

James Lawson- I think it was scheduled for 11:00 but we really didn't get going until after. It was clear from the very beginning that all kinds of people were milling in every which way and all kinds of directions. The sidewalks stayed filled and in spite of my various efforts to get the, the marshals to function, to clear the sidewalks and to make it, get people to march in the street. The sidewalk stayed pretty full but especially Hernando from Linden into the Hernando intersection and on, especially there the sidewalks were just completely filled with people all the way up and down. Well when they knew King was in the city and on his way we brought the front line up to about the intersection and when King joined, when the car from the airport got there at the Hernando Linden intersection, well pandemonium broke out. I mean, by that I mean everyone was excited and hysteria reigned when my initial response, was to tell Dr. King to go on to a certain point I have forgotten what point I know said to go to until we got the march moving properly and then I would tell him to come and join us. But I said that I felt that we shouldn't get going until the people on the sidewalks either move back and got out of the way, or until they, until we were certain that things would go along smoothly.

Joan Beifuss- Excuse me, his car, he moved over to the side or his car backed off?

James Lawson- No his car was in the center of the intersection at this time. Hernando and Linden.

Joan Beifuss- Yeah I mean when you told him to hold back?

James Lawson- Yeah no, what I told him to do was to go on.

David Yellin- To a certain point.

James Lawson- Yeah and then join us after we got the march pretty well under way in better shape.

David Yellin- But go on, not in the route of the march but go on down Linden (muffled). Well he initially agreed but then after consulting with people in the car and with one or two of our folks from Memphis it was suggested that he, a couple of

the SCLC staff people came out and said you know, I think that we have been in this kind of situation before and we know that there is a lot of excitement at the beginning but if we hold on and go on we will, if we go on the march will get itself straightened out and everything will be alright. As a consequence that, as a consequence of that I then yielded my own position and that is what happened Ralph and he got out of the car and I noticed then that a large group of fellows charged from where they were towards the back and got immediately behind him forcing the ministers who were there and some of the workers out of the way. Well as the...

Joan Beifuss- Would you hold just a minute before the march goes. The Hamilton High School incident when did you hear about that? What was your reaction to that when you heard about it?

James Lawson- Well the Hamilton, the Hamilton high school thing, you know I have forgotten when I actually heard about it but it was clear to me at least that was partially (muffled) provocation by the, that was partially provocation by the police. The, there was no indication on the part of the students that the, there was no indication by the students at Hamilton that they were anything else except a part of the movement at that moment.

David Yellin- We are coming to the end of the tape Jim you want to kind of stop here and organize your forces.

Joan Beifuss- Is that your, that is not your notebook...

James Lawson- That is part of my file. I ain't letting this out of my sight.

David Yellin- NO we want you to have it in your sight, Joan didn't say we were trying to get , we are trying to get you (muffled). Ok we will turn this off and we will come back tot his and that is ok. (Tape End)