

SS158.mp3

Bill Thomas- This is Tape 3 and interview with Mr. John Fisher. Now do you where we got off?

David Yellin- You can start right there, that card before.

John T. Fisher- Alright well, we were going back to Crump Stadium and now we are there and I really didn't know whether Lawson's would be there until I walked it he stadium and he was there. I suspected that he would because I thought that he would tell me if he wasn't and he wouldn't tell me that he wasn't and I was not going to ask him at 3:00 in he morning.

David Yellin- Who made the line up of when each one was to speak.

John T. Fisher- I really don't know, I do not know the answer to that question. I really don't.

Bill Thomas- Program Committee?

John T. Fisher- Yeah somebody did and the program committee, or speakers committee. So anyway I went through that and the rotary club speech and I discussed the fact and I went with a kind of a noble purpose, kind of a white charter thing and I found it difficult to stay myself in this. I heard people tell the truth. I had to listen to other people share their thought and they weren't the same thoughts that I had and in some respects became frightened not in the violent sense or the physical sense and not for myself or my safety and not for the safety of my wife and child in the stands. But for the fact that my world was changing without me in a sense. That someone else was going to change it and here sitting there I became convinced that they were because they had more resolve than I had. They had more resolve to do something and they are working. While people are sitting and talking why they are working. And the second factor was that they told me they didn't really care whether I liked it or not, it didn't make any difference any more. If I didn't like it I was going to help anyway, if I want any help get in there and work with them that was fine but if I didn't like it, it was immaterial. They weren't going to try and stop and try to persuade me to come along, They were going to go anyway, they were going. The third thing was that I had to face the reality that they were going to go without me if I didn't do anything,. If I got into the fray and wanted to do something about it that I had to be honest, that I couldn't lock them up in jail if I just didn't like what I said. That I would have to respond with something different, I had to create a program of my own to go in there. So that if I want a place to walk in the world then I better set about creating that place to walk. Because if I just sit down on Saturday afternoon and play golf and do something else and don't take part in things, then somebody else is going to create it and I will walk on their terms, which I will end up doing anyway. So, I just don't underestimate their resolve. One of my reflections was that nobody there said they were going to tackle anything I had. I thought that was a significant point, that they wanted what I had but not from me. They weren't going to take what I had they wanted to share in the same things that

made me. I went there to be inspired, but I didn't get inspired, it was a somber mood, but these are somber times and I needed it. I went out of my house to walk around the block and Crump Stadium and all of a sudden I had to run and I ran all the way around the block. It was much more effort than I had left. And the key to our way out is involvement, (muffled). Reaction to what happened to the, I mentioned mayor Lobe lives here, he live sin Memphis Tennessee and (muffled). Until one of them decides to leave they are both going to live here and neither can ignite the reality of the other no matter how distasteful he becomes. I mentioned what happened about how things that you start off to do get sidetracked like our memorial to Martin Luther King which was never intended by anybody white or black in the group. In the negros backed off then because they went going to attend a white man's show and that was a question that NBC set up that was a white man's show they weren't allowed to come too. The big question what do they want? Well they don't want us to destroy what they want, that is one thing but hey are not going to do without it and let us have it without doing some thing,. Now they want to share what the good things in life and if it gets torn down in the process why that is going to be one of the resulting actions that will take place. I say my opinions don't need to deal from weakness, because when you deal from weakness in dealing with this problem, why you find many many more problems. You must deal from strength but form the strength of honestly and the strength of truth and not the strength of you obey the law that I like. I want peace and order, I want peace and you produce the order. That is not what they want. So if you take a position of strength with honesty and truth in it, why you can be. And I would have to say and this is just a little diversion and I don't think I said this in the speech, one of the things that become apparent to me that I was very weary about reverend Lawson because of what people would say to me about him. I would often mention that I had been to see him for this could be misinterpreted. It is a very emotional thing, selling everybody out. I suspect he is a savvy little guy and it made me understand more why deals are broken, because good deals are rarely broken. But when I assume the whole world in my conversation and it is all my conversation anyway, and I do all the talking and outline all the deals. And Jim Lawson is a smart fellow and if you have laid all the conditions out and you say what about you know indicated approval and then you think you have a deal. He has got the deal, because you did all the commitment and if you go even through a little variance from him he will send away from it and you are out, you are hung out here and you say Jim Lawson breaks the deal, his word is no good and all when in fact he made a better deal.

David Yellin- That is very interesting.

John T. Fisher- What he did was he negotiated a better deal than he did and I suspect that when somebody with a black face goes out and outsmarts a white man that he may be something, he may be described in terms other than an intelligent negro, he may be a wise you know what. That this could apply easily in this case, if he gets the better deal I might say that some white businessman outsmarted me in this proposition but I am not likely to say that some negro minister outsmarted me on that proposition. I went in and made all the deal myself and then wonder why he

didn't live up to it. Because I am convinced that the reason he was in Crump Stadium after the press got through with him because he set there and he tried to make us outline all about it you see. I said no, you and Bishop Vandross decide what you are going to do and you tell us what you are going to do and we will work to create it, isn't that right Audry Parker, Audry Parker said yeah that is right. So we physically withdrew, physically stepped back from the group, both Dr. Parker and myself. And watched them make (muffled) to each other. So he was in on the front end. Now that was a deal well made. And it was not it was broken and there was a great deal of momentum for him breaking. Ezekiel Bell didn't come, he was supposed to be the indication but he didn't show, he wouldn't come because of the mayor. The mayor speaking to us and so I think it is significant that Lawson and Hooks came.

David Yellin- It is interesting I called about 3 or 4 people who said, of the several people that I called, who said that I am not coming it is mayor Lobe's party.

John T. Fisher- But it never was, but that rumor got out. So I at this point used a letter that I have, which I think is beautiful. As I said one of the things that I can better explain this is if someone asked to produce an insurance company in Newark New Jersey why they became involved it he life of Newark and New Jersey and impoverished people an all. One of their executives answered at one of the events and I really think this was perhaps the major event that led this particular insurance company to help Newark was a 4 page letter laboriously written to Orgill Beal president by William Teal a negro youth. And the letter went, the people and he houses and the environment William then 19 wrote last summer. He explained that a household of 6 including a grandmother an aunt and three cousins lived largely on the 210 dollars a month his mother earned as an attendant at a mental hospital. If I eat breakfast it consists of grits and bread and sometimes a piece of bacon. I hardly ever eat lunch and my dinner last night consisted of one hot dog potato chips and a glass of water. But William had a bigger problem, he wasn't going to be able to continue at Shaw University a negro school in Raleigh North Carolina where he had completed 2 years. He hadn't been able to find a summer job, sir my luck has run out I need 1,800 dollars to go back to college and September. Sir I beg of you if it is possible for you to get me a job in your personal informant. I will work as a Porter as a dishwasher floor cleaner, personal valet, anything that you can do will help. William declared that I do not uphold the riots but I understand the reason for them. Sire the white man has the power and therefore he must grant he justice. The only power that the black man has is the power to disrupt. That one really got us the prudential executive said. The company arranged a summer job for William as a night porter and got him a loan from one of he New York banks so that he can return to school. To me this is very revealing. In Memphis Tennessee the white people have the power and the black people have the power to disrupt. And anybody who doesn't think our Main St. was disrupted yesterday is just not aware of the realities of the world. Walk the Main St and see the bayonets and Gulf Miss and ask the guy how much he did in sales that day. So the power to disrupt is now a known quantity and one that can be exercised and perhaps it will be exercised again who knows. But

we got to work together without paternalism, there is going to be frustration, you have got to put good ideas to work. We have got to involve leadership of groups that have things that we don't like. In the shaping of things to come, pin them down as to what they are going to do with publicity and other things, get them on the record for how they are going to do. Put the heat on them to put out constructive leadership and not destructive leadership. Show them how difficult it is and get them so involved in putting people in jobs and putting people in schools that they don't have time to go around and disrupting the town. If you do that those of good leadership and of good quality will respond to that. And they will get so busy they won't have time to do anything else. But don't tell them everything, how to do it. The strength to disrupt comes from despair. How much despair does a man have to have when he signs he picks to put on his chest as he walked down the street doesn't go into a lot of detailed conversation about conditions he didn't like and this and all. He just says I am a man. That is the one thing that he chooses to tell you when he walks down Main St. and that indicates how he feels like he is getting to live in our society. That is what he wants to tell you on the television set, getting his picture taken. I said we can only stop it by involving in the hope of this community to go ahead (muffled) So that is (MUFFLED). And when I say this...I didn't know whether I had been too strong, or not strong enough. I didn't have any great sense of accomplishment at this time, uneasy, very much uneasy about what I said. I am not a rotary club member, and I thought that was an advantage not having to face the group again. And I was motivated by the television (muffled) and that television encounter to speak and to put my flag up high. And I got the nicest comments that I had ever gotten in my life after that rotary meeting, I must have had 200 people come up and stay at the bottom of the platform to say remarks about it. I got about 40 letters I suppose as a result of that. I got one unsigned that was a derogatory letter and the other 39 or so were all nice, and the nicest letters I have ever gotten from anybody. I have never gotten mail that nice except from that.

David Yellin- So what do you conclude from that?

John T. Fisher- Well I think that it shows an awareness that is not being taken advantage of, I think that the people there well having leadership capabilities of large measure in areas for which they are knowledgeable there is not much knowledge here. And with somebody that can come to some understanding with it why they would find a response.

David Yellin- Now who is that somebody?

John T. Fisher- I don't know, I don't think that somebody really exists at the present time and I don't know that they ever will as an individual. If it could, I think it could be done but I think that probably the criteria of what they would find would be so diverse that one person couldn't fill that role. But if people in general start, people in some leadership start to do things then people will respond to it I think. I have found that to be true. Well just looking through this mail would indicate that. Most some of this is just (muffled) up to this point, but there was no reason for those

people to say that, there is the thing from O.Z. Evers. Did you know that the Memphis cares was written up, I have got a, this was from the New York Times on Monday April the 8th, had a story on the front page.

David Yellin- Yes we do have it.

John T. Fisher- This is a clipping form that year.

Bill Thomas- Yeah I have never seen this one.

David Yellin- No.

John T. Fisher- That came out of the newspaper. Here is one of the rough drafts of the Memphis cares. That was the (muffled).

David Yellin- That would be the April 10th.

John T. Fisher- You can have that.

David Yellin- Yes, in fact , what we want to do is go through this whole thing...

John T. Fisher- But these letters and it is not the, it is not just the number of letters buy and who wrote them, what they said. It is a combination of all these things, it is fantastic to me. Edward Lamasta, What you said and the way you said it at rotary club Tuesday could not have failed to make a profound impression and all have heard you. Some few with closed minds who have not and will not involve themselves doubtless will wonder how you could have gone so far astray. The great thing about it though was you showed what courage and personal concern on the part of one individual, yourself in this instance could mean to the whole community. I will remember this occasion as one of Memphis' finest and with many others will always feel the deepest appreciation to you for your leadership at this time, of great trouble and intense feeling in our country. Sincerely Yours, Edward Leemaster. Now that is a nice letter.

Bill Thomas- Handwritten too which is unusual.

John T. Fisher- And Hollis Price was there as a guest and I was told by someone be that was the first time that a negro had been at the (muffled) meeting of rotary as a guest, but never the less there and he wrote me a very nice letter back. But it just goes through that a comment from (muffled) Turner at 1st National Bank. And he was very much, it must have been apparent how concerned I was prior to yesterday's meeting about the reception of the program and received. Because I asked to come in a little bit early and they are really having second thoughts about even doing it, that they might be better off not too, and the fat was in the fire so we went on. As you know the reception was overwhelming and at least three Rotarians told me it was the best program that we had ever had. So...

David Yellin- Did you..

John T. Fisher- There are people, and you are welcome to go through this and copy that. There are people that will respond. They are out there in vast numbers and after that speech why, I really wanted to make certain, I wanted to do my very best not to get myself in some position of expectation of results because it is far too difficult for that. And I really tried to withdraw from that type of approach and appearance and what have you because that is not going to, that can be destructive to the extent of raising people's hopes and this (muffled) he is not going, he is going to (muffled). Nobody is without a great deal of help and...

David Yellin- Concerted effort. You know it is like any organization you got to ID your chairmen's and then you go ahead and do it all. In looking back now and this is so difficult to do and this is why we wish we would have been able to get everybody you know 5 weeks ago and so. But in looking back now how did you at the point even before, particularly before you became involved kind of assess the climate here. What would you have described Memphis...

John T. Fisher- I would describe Memphis as one of pretty unanimous agreement that there was a problem. But at this point the unanimous agreement goes to the dogs. You can't get an agreement from that point on anything else. There is my, I wrote my speech at Memphis Keras sitting on the platform.

David Yellin- Oh did you? Of course you had the most difficult one you had the first one.

John T. Fisher- First one.

David Yellin- Oh that is going to be wonderful.

John T. Fisher- There is the program and I don't know whether you all have those speeches or not, if not WDIA had them on tape.

David Yellin- Yes.

Bill Thomas- I think we have got them.

David Yellin- I hope we have all of them.

John T. Fisher- They replayed all of them about 3 times.

David Yellin- Yeah I talked to Bert Ferguson the other day and he gave me the whole set of tapes which we are going to copy.

John T. Fisher- Well there is my speech it was written sitting on the platform.

David Yellin- I really thing you have done wonderfully here and what I would like to do, I would like to even put on tape this request, well not necessarily, that sounds like.....well is there anything else you want to say?

John T. Fisher- Well as a recap from there to now where I have been as a result that I went to meetings for golly mose I went to every kind of meeting known to man.

Worked through a chamber of commerce group and I was very much concerned and I still am about working inside of structured groups. I think that if people want to do something there are plenty of organizations doing them. And that is mainly why there is no need for Memphis Cares to go into another organization. There is not organization necessary that is going to solve the whole problem. The boy's club can make its part and the urban league can do its part and they need more people. The civil service commission here, needs better leadership on it, well not better leadership in the sense that those that are there are not but the....

David Yellin- Civil rights, the civil rights...

John T. Fisher- Doesn't have the whole community represented. Now the minority on it is well represented. Therefore, the business leadership owners won't get represented you see, you get the chamber of commerce they are represented with a minority on them.

David Yellin- I see.

John T. Fisher- With John Smith he is trying to get some more people to join that commission and no one wants to do it. But we need to, we need to get more leadership there. Myself at the present moment, the chamber of commerce was a task force, which was dismissed. After the chamber integrated its own board then there was a need to keep this task force to keep going. So we just entered a deal and I was really just as glad because I am not anti- against the chamber of commerce but I just went to St. Mary's school and other things which I already have given my time I just can't take on the chamber of commerce directorship and make any contribution to it so I took it on a interim basis and it has been disbanded. I have been in conversation with some just people in the community and the mayor who wants to form a manpower commission and I have a, this whole folder here is devoted to the manpower commission. Work today, which is mostly trying to draw men of understanding at this point it is almost a whole new story. But I anticipate that a man power commission will be appointed in the next month or so, I think so.

David Yellin- That is to create jobs?

John T. Fisher- Well to coordinate activity is primarily, it's primary purpose is to increase the effectiveness of the Tennessee department of public security and the chamber of commerce and their relationship to each other you see. Not just what the chamber does but its relationship to each other.

David Yellin- I see making the most effective use, of the present man power as such.

John T. Fisher- Right because see the Tennessee department of employment security is only going to do what the business community will support. And you can change the staff all you want to but until the business community will accept people without discrimination based on race why they are not going to be able to get them in there without discriminating on a racial base. You can fire everybody down there and get the most liberal community in the lay in and get your whole new staff and bring

them down there and in a year it will be right back like it is I predict. Because if they re not going to take them and they re trying to just lay down on you hwy you are going to get laid down on.

David Yellin- I don't want to take you there but you have just made a wonderful statement. An article written right at this minute I forget about whom, about the state department and somebody he said, somebody asked secretary Stimson how the, own he can get the state department to operate and he said, here is what you do you get the best young men you can find and you put them there and you work them to death and when they tire or die then you get the best young men you can find and then you work them to death. So that they are there a year or two and they get old or tired. And essentially well...

John T. Fisher- That another nice editorial that WDIA wrote, they wrote on that, I was very flattered to have that.

David Yellin- Now we have 4:13, yes this is after, I think we got a collection from Bert.

John T. Fisher- That is in my papers, but I was very flattered to have that.

David Yellin- Well I think you deserve it and I think what we have heard today and if this is reflective of, and I think you said it in some way, somebody is changing the world and you want to be in on it, maybe they are right, maybe they are wrong.

John T. Fisher- I can't find it I my system of upbringing to suppress those I don't like, simply because I don't like them. If they are going to stay legal in their approach and yet stay tough then I am going to have to respond with strength not weakness. Don't get your morality out there because guys like Lawson eat morality for breakfast every morning. Replace that for the moment at any rate until I better understand it with truth and honesty. In if it something you are not going to do just say I am not going to do that. If he try to take some approach that he doesn't need us that is alright. If you don't need me then you truck on off and do your program but I am going to pick it so you do, because I do think he does. And if he doesn't think he does that's alright, he is going to discover that he does, because I have discovered that I need him and if he doesn't need me as much well we are not going to work together. So what I would like him to do is to go on by himself until he does. I don't mean him in a personal sense to any minority group leader who thinks he can do it by himself, I am all for him trying it because he is going to discover he needs me just as bad as I need him. He may have had to beat me on the head to tell me that.

David Yellin- But still the big answer to our, to the big question is how can you consider this as logically and as rationally as you do when this in essence a the base of it is an irrational situation, I mean it is an emotional one, I am talking about the racial situation. Her you are being as rational as you can be and keep your sanity.

John T. Fisher- Oh course t his is the part that has enabled me not to be really concerned in the frightened sense any longer about racial issues.

David Yellin- MY 14 year old son put it, he said that most of the kids at white station are frightened. And that is why they can't handle this.

John T. Fisher- That is exactly right, he has it right on the button. We had an experience here in a our dealership about employment opportunities and after the rotary club speech, and that story in the newspaper the atmosphere here was just electric. I called the 3rd company meeting in 10 years, the first was to sell (muffled) and the 2nd was when we bought this land and the 3rd was the Wednesday night after the rotary club meeting. I thought to myself well IU can tell a lot of you are talking about this and these have been difficult times and I am just not scared anymore about it and I don't want you to be and all of you give me the security and the comfort and the strength to be able to say that and so in essence trying to work this out for ourselves I would like to tell all of you that for the moment we are not going to change anything physically, it is not just right under these circumstances to make a bunch of physical changes. WI am going to tell you right now for the next few months we aren't going to change anything, I wanted to defend that against the world. I can't promise you the government doesn't come in and tell me you got to change something but I can make it buy that. But I am telling you I am going to try but in turn for that, you must open your mind. Because the world is changing and we are going to have to change whether we like it or not and what I am saying in return for give me a little period here for me to recollect my thoughts and you recollect yours, let's figure out where we are going to go because we are going to get shoved somewhere and let's not wait to get shoved off the cliff, let's find out how we are going to go and control it ourselves and so then about 2 months later, which was 2 weeks ago I brought in here the Memphis American (muffled) association, are you familiar with that?

David Yellin- No.

John T. Fisher- It is basically compliance with the civil rights act from voluntary terms and some help and education and this kind of thing, mutual support. We discussed it for some time and with the white mechanics and the negro supporters and the negro people that we have working on, about 40 people in this room. And I made everybody speak to it and I listened to everybody speaking and it was accepted on the basis of what you really mean, I said that if Wade our guys came in here before we were covered, before we got into good compliance why he would have given us debt. But he won't today, I am not afraid of him today because we are complying with that law. But if a man comes in on a civil rights law then he has got us. I will try to tell him that we don't discriminate but he has heard that before. It is not he fact that we don't have a negro girl in the office, it is the fact that we have never had one, and we aren't going to if somebody doesn't change something. You might as well face that, either we are going to change it or they are going to change it. If we don't do anything and he walks in here and makes a survey he is going to be back and he is going to have some prospects and some goals, and some deadlines., And when he does I am going to bring this prospect, I am going to bring him back here and give him a work bench and say ok you guys here he is. U.S. government

right there, he is going to be impossible to fire, all but impossible to fire, maybe qualified and maybe not but certainly we will have no control. We give up our right of control and as a manager that stresses me but we must comply with the law. Everybody preaches law and order so that riots against the law. But the civil rights act is a law and the civil rights act says that we should hire without discriminating. And that means to take 3 applicants per job two of which are white and one is negro and they are all three equally qualified you take their names out of the hat and you pull out a name, without any regard for if it is the black man's name he got it. He gets to work like anybody else, not in a special place or something. And so I had one mechanic that spoke, all of them spoke but this guy kind of summed it all up when he stood up and he said, well let me get this straight, what you are saying, he said that if we can come up with a plan of our own here that you will take issue with the government on quotas and deadlines and stuff because we are complying with the intent of the law. And that you will, get qualified people to come in and work, people who run responsible lives as well as know how to fix cars and do this and that and the other thing, keep our whole support process. The guy is from Mississippi, he says well alright, I just have to tell you this whole thing is foreign to me and it isn't like anything that I have grown up with and I don't like any part of it. But you are right, I do believe in law and order and as much as I dislike it that is the law and long as that is the law and you are going to stand up and see that we run our own place, without discrimination then you can put the first black mechanic in the stall next to me.

David Yellin- Wonderful.

John T. Fisher- Oh he was frightened and the service man wasn't frightened, and I wasn't frightened anymore, we are going to run it if you will let us and we are not going to find us a negro mechanic to soothe our own conscious, but when we call the Tennessee department of public security next time, I am going to tell them that we are an equal opportunity employer, because if everyone will call and tell them that then it will change in three months with the present staff, we don't need a new staff. If every business man would tell them that and mean it and hire them when they send them out here then they would have to change.

David Yellin- And the getting rid of the fear has to come from the top.

John T. Fisher- Right.

David Yellin- It has to come from the top.

John T. Fisher- By education and confidence and (muffled).

David Yellin- Yeah it really is and I now forget what they call it and it is done for instance in taste and literature, I mean styles are set from the top. You know Carrie Grant wears a long collar, everybody wears a long collar and if the leaders in this city would recognize that well, this is just fine.

John T. Fisher- I hope that is what you came to hear of.

David Yellin- Yes sir, we have kept you and kept ourselves but I think this is why we are here great, thank you very much.

(Tape End)