

Interview with **Josephine Mayes**

Date: October 19, 1998

Interviewer:

Camera Rolls: 1016

Sound Rolls: 107

Team: A

Interview gathered as part of ***Eyes on the Prize II: America at the Racial Crossroads, 1965-mid 1980s***. Produced by Blackside, Inc. Housed at the Washington University Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.

Preferred Citation

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Note: These transcripts contain material that did not appear in the final program. Only text appearing in ***bold italics*** was used in the final version of *Eyes on the Prize II*.

[camera roll #1016]

[sound roll #107]

[slate]

00:00:15:00

Camera crew member #1:

Two-sixteen head. Slate.

00:00:18:00

Interviewer:

Miss Mayes—

00:00:19:00

Camera crew member #1:

Ten-sixteen head, I'm sorry.

00:00:21:00

Josephine Mayes:

Yes.

00:00:22:00

Interviewer:

Miss Mayes, I'd like you to talk to me about the Robinson plantation, what it was like for you before you were moved off. The kinda duties you had, the kind of life you lived there.

00:00:36:00

Josephine Mayes:

Oh. Well, OK. We lived on the plantation. I don't know why. I have to do my hand like, to help me out. OK.

00:00:43:00

Interviewer:

Go on.

00:00:44:00

Josephine Mayes:

We lived on the Robinson plantation, and after my brothers had to leave, and then we left. We all left. So, I moved to Tent City with my husband who I got married at, and we lived in the tent for about three or four years. And after that, we built this house, and we bought the land, and so it was something that, you know, it was a great experiment for us after we left home, where my mama, she felt like if, you know, that, if she was to leave, she wouldn't have anywhere else to go. She couldn't raise the kids, so, without the White man. So, after we left, she moved.

00:01:47:00

Camera crew member #2:

Hold it.

00:01:54:00

Interviewer:

What's going on here?

[cut]

00:01:52:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:01:54:00

Interviewer:

OK, Miss Mayes, I'm gonna get back to the plantation in a minute, but I wanted you to talk about your brother and going down to register. And, I want you to tell me what happened. He came back home, and what went on?

00:02:08:00

Josephine Mayes:

OK, my brother, he came back home, and the man told him that, you know, that—

00:02:14:00

Interviewer:

Now, where did he go before?

00:02:16:00

Josephine Mayes:

Where did he go?

00:02:16:00

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm.

00:02:17:00

Josephine Mayes:

He went to register to vote, and the man said, the White man, the Robinson said that, that you know, if they register to vote, that they didn't want them on their plantation, because they didn't want 'em with those hoodlums. I don't know that you want me to [inaudible] part in that, but anyway, and after they'd gotten back, he got back, and they had to leave.

00:02:44:00

Interviewer:

Now, wait just a minute. Let's start all over again, because I wanna make sure I get this story straight. Now, your brother, did, what's his name?

00:02:53:00

Josephine Mayes:

Willy.

00:02:53:00

Interviewer:

OK, so I want you to start telling me about at that point. Your brother, Willy.

00:02:58:00

Josephine Mayes:

My brother Willy had registered to vote, and the man told him that they had to, to leave after they become registered votes. So, he left. My brother moved to Montgomery. And then, afterward, we, hm, left. And after that, my mother, she moved to Montgomery, and I moved to Tent City with my husband. After I moved to Tent City, I become a registered voter.

00:03:32:00

Interviewer:

Now, tell me, what was it like in Tent City for you?

00:03:36:00

Josephine Mayes:

In Tent City, well, it was a great experiment for me in Tent City, because it was something that, you know, the Blacks had been hidden behind the Whites for so long, and that was something that we could, I'd say, make a start for ourselves. And, get out, and register to

vote, and help others become registered voters. And, to find the world for themselves. I put it like that, because it was so much going, you know, so many things that the, the Blacks didn't know about, especially when we become registered voters. We got involved with lots of activities to help Black peoples to get jobs, and learn how to do things for themselves, like we bought land, and then after we got the land, we built the house, something that we had never had before, of our own, and we didn't, the house was something that, you wouldn't have to ever be worried about the White man telling you that you got to move or you have to leave.

00:04:53:00

Interviewer:

Now, now, what did SNCC do? How did SNCC help you all?

00:04:57:00

Josephine Mayes:

Well, SNCC, he helped us by help getting the peoples out to register to vote and finding places for them to live, which was Tent City. And, he helped the peoples get jobs, those that they could find jobs for.

00:05:18:00

Interviewer:

Mm-hm.

00:05:21:00

Josephine Mayes:

And so, after they got jobs, and move us, the families, into Tent City, like Miss Glover and—

00:05:32:00

Interviewer:

What was, what was she like?

00:05:34:00

Josephine Mayes:

Miss May, well, Miss Glover? She was like the family. She was the mother for the whole family. She was always the one that had plenty of energy, ready to go, and whatever to be done, she was like, she was the mother for everybody, because she would just always, it rain or shine, cold or hot, she was just ready to move, you know, it didn't get too hot, it didn't get too cold. And, it didn't rain to her. She would put on her boots, and she would put on her raincoat, and she'd put on her hat and tie up her head, and we would laugh at her. We would call her the old lady in the shoe, and she said, "And I got so many children, I don't know what to do." [laughs]

00:06:14:00

Interviewer:

Well, listen, now. What about the Whites? Did, did they come around—

00:06:19:00

Josephine Mayes:

Well—

00:06:20:00

Interviewer:

—and was it a danger?

00:06:21:00

Josephine Mayes:

Yeah, they would come around like, they would pull to the side of the road, and they would call us hoodlums, and—

00:06:27:00

Interviewer:

Now, who would this be?

00:06:28:00

Josephine Mayes:

The White peoples, they would be meddlin' us in Tent City, and calling us niggers, and things like that. They would shoot out, and tried to scare us, but we wouldn't let that bother.

We hung in there anyways. So, you know, like I said, it was just a great experience for me. I'd say for myself, because like I tell my kids now, that they got it made. You know, they don't have to do— they have— do anything but get up, go to school, come back home. They got a place to live, don't have to worry about [coughs] the White man telling them to get off their place.

00:07:11:00

Interviewer:

Hold up. Can we stop for a minute?

[cut]

00:07:13:00

Camera crew member #1:

Take two.

00:07:17:00

Interviewer:

Now, I wanted you to talk to me about those mass meetings that you used to go to.

00:07:20:00

Josephine Mayes:

OK. The mass meeting, we went to Trick—, the mass meeting, out to Trickem or went to Mosses, and down to a little church down here, we called it "by the schoolhouse." And, we went to the mass meeting.

00:07:41:00

Interviewer:

What went on in those meetings?

00:07:43:00

Josephine Mayes:

Well, in the meetings, OK, in the mass meeting they would tell the people, try to encourage everybody to get out and vote, and reg— and become a registered voter. And, you know, learn how to do things for themselves, to get off the White man place. And—

00:08:07:00

Interviewer:

Were you ever scared?

00:08:09:00

Josephine Mayes:

Not really.

00:08:11:00

Interviewer:

Why not?

00:08:11:00

Josephine Mayes:

Well, because like I said, I, I believe in God. And, I always try to put God first, first in whatever I go to do. And, everything, and when you put God first, everything will go smooth. And, we, like, we believe. We believed in God, and I just wasn't afraid. You know, once we got out, you know, into the mass meeting, and went to the mass meeting, and learned different things for ourselves, and each time we went, we learned something different, you know, for the Black—

00:08:46:00

Interviewer:

What'd you learn?

00:08:47:00

Josephine Mayes:

Like, like I say, we learned how to do for ourselves, and become our own boss, and, we got jobs where we wouldn't be afraid, and we, also we went to— and the peoples in Tuskegee would come down, and we would, they set up school, and for the people, you know, we went

to school. Like I said, we had classes down here at the, the little road, you had the little schoolhouse. We had sewing classes. We had cooking classes. And, we had school and math, arithmetic, and we went to Tuskegee. We, I didn't, couldn't get into the ballet, but, [laughs] had ballet, teaching us ballet dance, and we, a lot of them were—

00:09:42:00

Interviewer:

One thing I wanna know about, though, is your mother. You were telling me something about your mother.

00:09:47:00

Josephine Mayes:

Oh, OK, like, my mother, when she was on the farm, when she was on the farm, we would have to work for a bale of cotton, a load of coal, and at the end of the year, like, December. November-December, they would sell the cotton, and most of the time, they would get, like, \$75, \$60. All depends on what the price, and the White man would tell her that the cotton was, the price was lower at that time, you know, and, that's what she would get, would have for, to have for Christmas.

00:10:34:00

Interviewer:

Now, wait a minute, you're crying. Why are you crying? Tell me.

00:10:42:00

Josephine Mayes:

Because [pause] It is painful to think, when my mother had to work so hard, that we didn't have anything.

00:11:08:00

Interviewer:

Is that what you were fighting for?

00:11:10:00

Josephine Mayes:

Yes. [blows nose]

[cut]

[wild sound]

00:11:20:00

Interviewer:

Do you think that you've achieved something?

00:11:21:00

Josephine Mayes:

Yes. I have achieved a lot, because my kids don't have to go through what we went through.

00:11:35:00

Interviewer:

OK. Thank you.

00:11:36:00

[end of interview]

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