

RESPONDENT: Rev. Blair  
INTERVIEWER: Ron Horn  
DATE: March 6, 1969

TAPED INTERVIEW

- R.H. The events that you took part in during the week of the riot, like meetings that were called, by ministers or any other parties that had plans formulated that more or less subdued the situation, like taking the kids to the dance or what ever -
- R.B. Well, my role in this began on the night that King was assassinated. I called together the ministers to determine what we would do - that was April 4th
- R.H. Who were they
- R.B. Well, Rev. Shipley, Rev. Harrison, Rev. Lowe, Rev. Briscoe, Rev. Fleming and John Preciphs and Herman Johnson of the NAACP came. We met that night and then met again at 7 am the next morning at PASEO Baptist Church, which was the 5th and there we decided on the march- the civil ceremony and the religious ceremony that was held that Sunday
- R.H. At the Memorial Mall
- I see . Now the meeting you held April 4th, and the meeting you held the 5th, were they primarily concerned about the same thing, the same goals in mind, thats formulating plans for the march
- R.B. Yes, basically an expression of the grief that was felt by the community over the assassination of Dr. King and with a great deal of concern about it being an outlet. We thought that that would give people an opportunity to express themselves and thereby release some of the tension. Then, I guess it was Monday, the 9th or the 8th, when the kids came out of school, I think that Monday I had been contacted by Bruce Watkins to come to the County Court to hold a memorial service for King there and I think when I woke up, I guess about 8 or 8:30, I got a call that the kids had come out of



R.B. Lincoln and I called Lincoln and they said only about 200 kids were out and that kids who wanted to learn were in school, and that they had planned a ceremony for them in honor of Dr. King. I went down to the Gas station on the corner and the kids came down Linwood Blvd.. I stood there and they came past, I stood in the midst as they went by, and spoke to those I recognized and they seemed to be in a well - not a hostile mood at all. There was a great deal of control being exercised at that time by students and Lee Swinton, with the- he had a car with a mike attached and Herman Johnson was with them also.

R.H. Right Did you recognize any of the students by name

R.B. Oh, I don't know ~~the~~ their names, I've seen them in the CUA and - you know, knew them enough to speak

R.H. They were all High School age

R.B. Oh yes, students - mostly Lincoln at this point. I don't know if Manual students had caught up with them or not, but - I watched them go around the corner here at Linwood and Indiana, they turned and went up that corner and they then - I got in my car and went on downtown, feeling that nothing was really out of line

R.H. At this point, you were satisfied with the progress of the march that the students had themselves pretty well organized. Okay, now, when you got downtown, were the students there yet or did you wait for their arrival.

R.B. No, I got downtown and went in the County building and looked out the window at the police on top of the library and over on the City Hall grounds, and they had the dogs and I understood that they were already on the high buildings. At this point, I called the MICA office that had set up a kind of a well- Center clearing information and keeping in contact the way that we had done during the march and they said the police had already gone into Phase I of their riot strategy



R.B. and they were trying to keep track of where the kids were. When Bruce Watkins did come, and I found out that there had been some tear gassing on Indiana, which was a surprize to me, after seeing what I thought I had seen, when the kids came back and this kind of upset Bruce and myself and I cut the presentation down there very short and then I got in Bruce's car and we came out trying to locate the kids and we went to 31st and Troost and we could see evidences of where something had occured there. Basically litter on the street and tear gas canisters, this kind of thing. Then we went on down 31st street and saw some breakage of windows and then particularly in the M and M market, and we went down to 31st and Indiana and then the police had kind of a garrison over here in the Hardware parking lot, and we went up to ask the Col. where the kids were and what and so forth. He indicated that they were all over the place and there was a group out at 47th and Paseo,

R.H. Is that what he told you

R.B. Yes

and another group was - well as he indicated. moving from Paseo and Southeast and then they were going downtown. At that point, Lena Rivers Smith was there and she had a tape and Rev. Woody Hall was there, trying to find out where the kids were and we finally decided that we'd go where the helicopter was. We caught up with the group down at

R.H. This is you and Bruce Watkins

R.B. Yes. Down at the - at Truman Road and Paseo and when we arrived, the Mayor was there and he climbed up on top of a car, trying to talk to the kids. That was kind of unsteady, and he came back down - trying to talk through the megaphone that they had, but it was ineffectual, you couldn't hear more than 10 feet back and there were ministers in the crowd by this time because, I think before I left the court house - I indicated that they should get



R.B. everybody out there that they could in the midst of the kids so that it would hold down, both kids and any retaliation that might occur. So there were I don't know how many ministers in the group at this time, quite a number. From the Mayor, who started to go downtown - at 15th and Truman Road, this was the first confrontation with the police. He and Curtis McClinton and some ministers were in the front line and they stopped in front of the police but the crowd behind them didn't, so it surged them into the police line and the line broke and the Mayor and Curtis went through, and then the line closed behind them and the kids reacted to this, and this is when they took out and went up on the freeway. Some of us then, ran up to see what we could do about it, about stopping traffic and we came on down into the downtown area, and it was at this point that I got -or I either went to phone or at least some one brought me a message that I should call the MICA office and they sent over a page boy system, so that I could be in contact and I - this was when we decided that the kids had walked all this distance and were tired and probably could convince them to go someplace and that the same strategy that we used in the march, might work here cause in the march, we determined that if we got all those people over there, that there might be a blow-up on the way back, so that we needed to organize a way for them to get back as well as to the march so- that with this march downtown, we figured that what we needed to do was to organize an orderly way for them to proceed out of there and that's when we decided to get the busses. I went into the police station, and called the MICA office and - to see what they could do about getting busses and then the word that came back on the page boys was that the busses were on the way and I started up the stairs to where the Mayor and I guess LeeBohannan and some of the rest were up there making speeches, I was going to convey this word to them - but -



R.B. I got to about the third step and "Boom" behind me

R.H. The tear gas

R.B. I looked around and I could see the tear gas curling up and I ran on in and the policemen were running out with dogs through the door at that time. Well, inside, they brought Herman Johnson in

R.H. He was almost prostrate with gas

R.B. Yeah, he had been tear gassed three times that day and those of us there drew up what we thought would be some suggestions to the mayor and the police chief in order to convey what had happened to the Black community. One thing we felt - that some assurance of an investigation of who ever it was that shot off the first tear gas- cause all of us who were there were convinced that it was an unnecessary action.

R.H. Now back to the bus business, you had already had plans - or did you just think of it spontaneously to get these busses

R.B. Well, it fits so much in to what we had done that Sunday. You see, that Sunday, we had busses to convey a lot of people back, and we had marshalls. Most of the people marched down and they marched back, which gave it order al the way

R.H. I see, and when you ordered the busses, you had no knowledge of KPRS disc jockey John L's suggestion to go to Holy Name for a dance at that point

R.B. No, but I knew that this was a part of the idea

R.H. To get them out of there - somewhere

R.B. Yeah

R.H. I see. Now, how long was it after the first canister of gas was thrown that the busses did arrive. Were they already there when the gas started?



R.B. Yes, I think they had arrived. It's very foggy. I think there were some busses already there

R.H. Were those the busses you had called for or others

R.B. It gets vague. I know- I don't know how long it took, when I called MICA office I guess it might have been 15 -20- minutes before the canister was shot, and I think they were there.

R.H. Now, the first time you went downtown you were observing the crowd of students in front of Central High School, and you took off downtown to the courthouse. Why was that?

R.B. I had this 9 oclock appointment to speak to The County Court who was holding a memorial to Dr. Martin Luther King

R.H. Right

R.B. And this is when I saw the preparation that had been made downtown

R.H. How did you feel at that point

R.B. Well, the kind of thing I felt was that if the kids came down there they'd be walking into a trap because atthat time I guess I have a suspicious nature, but I wondered if someone somewhere was behind this- if there wasn't some desire on the part of someone somewhere to have a confrontation early in April so that they could demonstrate the kind of force and capability that they had and prevent anything from occuring alter on in the summer.

R.H. I see

R.B. Thats just a suspicion

R.H. You may be correct. Let me ask you, after the tear gassing at City Hall, and the kids got on the busses and went to Holy Name, that evening after the Holy Name gassin, did you and other ministers get together for maybe a gripe session tothe authorities that were responsible for this gassing. Did you have any other meetings that Monday night - that Tuesday night or that



R.H. Wednesday morning

R.B. Well, yes, we met almost constantly, and I decided to work on the phone- to maintain contact. Most of the ministers did come here to try to have information about what was occurring and of course, the next day- there were some kids out also and men were coming here and we were trying to send them out. Now, we had a meeting about 7 am, I guess it was Tuesday morning and we --

R.H. Where was this held

R.B. Here

R.H. Oh, I see

R.B. And we had a breakfast, really, well - coffee and doughnuts, and at that meeting, John Williams was here, Wheeler

R.H. Robert Wheeler?

R.B. Robert Wheeler, Moten

R.H. Was Robert Roane here that morning

R.B. Robert Roane was here, yes, now, there was another meeting held in City Hall, in the City <sup>thurs?</sup> Manager's office, the - right after the <sup>feet passing</sup> well, we had a little meeting downstairs and we drew up some resolutions and handed them to the mayor and had the mayor get the police chief over, because we found out that they were going to appear on TV, and see, that's what got us thinking - now, if they say the wrong thing on TV and have gassed these kids, no telling what might happen. So, we presented this to the mayor and the mayor understood it and the chief - I don't think- we didn't feel we had established communication, and when they were going down, they asked him about his commitment and he never said. So, we went up to the City Manager's office to watch the TV broadcast- of the mayor and the chief - and I don't know if you can get a copy of what the mayor said, but he



R.B. didn't go verbatim, but he used the suggestions that we had given him as the background for his speech, and the chief of police didn't. We felt the chief did not address the Black community, but addressed the white community. That - we'll-

R.H. We'll protect you from these heathen hoardes, huh

R.B. Yes, something like that , yes and even in this, there was always the fear that people in the white community might get excited and not only excited, but might come in with their weapons and shoot us as a community, and I think this was one of the fears - so he spoke to them, we've got everything under control, we contacted the national guard, etc, which we thought was just daring these kids to do anything and felt they'd take the dare.

R.H. Now, I'm interested in the meeting that you and Roane and Moten, and Wheeler were they here at 7 oclock Tuesday morning ?

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R.B. Yes. The idea here was we gathered that there would be something happeneing in the schools. The fact, the incident that had ocured in Kansas, we felt was transferred to the Missouri kids with some indication that the kids had contacted each other and that they were in touch with what was going on in both places. So, we had sent persons to each of the schools, Central, Lincoln, Manual, Paseo and Southeast and we did this before school began to that the men left here and went to the schools.

R.H. In other words, you had assigned different people here to certian schools to look over- watch out for

R.B. Yes

R.H. I see

R.B. It was just a matter of coordination, more than anyting elss, so that there was someone at each of the schools trying to consult with the principals as to what ---



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R.B. I think we had another meeting on - yeah - on that afternoon

R.H. Who called this one

R.B. This same group

R.H. No particular person called it, you all agreed to meet

R.B. We agreed to come back. I was in the Chair, but his was just to have a

R.B. Chair, just to have coordination.

R.H. I see, now the first meeting, who called this one, who was instrumental in getting all these people together to attend this meeting. Do you know

R.B. Yeah, well, those of us who were in City Hall- Roane was there and Johnson of the NAACP, lets see, Brooks was involved in that too. I know, there were about 15 or 20.

R.H. Okay, now back to that afternoon meeting

R.B. Well, the subject there was - should we let the schools out on what was that- Wednesday - or not and at that time we had the principal Fields and I think the principal of Central Sr. both came in and we asked them about the condition in the school, and were they in control and they felt that they were, they felt they could take care of school the next day, very adequately, and they convinced us and so this was the meeting that I've heard some referring to - but those present - at least nobody knew whether we should or we shouldn't. I think someone talked to Mr. Hazlett at one point in the day, and I indicated to them that there was no consensus and that he could use his own judgement

R.H. Oh, boy- that was a mistake

R.B. There was no consensus - and there were those saying that the kids had said that there was going to come out os school and so the best thing was that we not have school. Well, the administrator felt that they could handle it and they - basing it on the majority of the students-they could have



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Thursday?

R.B. But, what happened was something else all together again and that next morning and again the men centered around here, and I don't know who all was in here that day. That was a wild day. Fair Housing office was centered here, this was another fact and they had two phones back there and I had 2 phones up here, and so we were using all these phones to try to coordinate activities and determine what was occurring - so - I guess it was that Wednesday, the kids did come out of school and there was a - as I recall - I think someone said there was a fire bomb thrown into Central Library, and somebody threw it back out and Mr. Fields indicated that people had come and ran through the school and I - as I understood him, the kids in the school - the Jr. High, did not totally respond to what was going on, but then the order to dismiss came

R.H. I see

R.B. He thought he had everything pretty much under control

Later on during the week were there any other -

R.H. Meetings?

R.B. Umm humm

Well, the school was out on Thursday and that Wednesday night was when I looked out the window and saw ---

R.H. The flames

R.B. We were coming back from the TV thing, we were involved in that TV show in which we gathered together some of the youth and some of the people that were in the crowd and some of the ministers were on camera and the rest of us were in the background, but I was down ther in the control room

R.H. Was that Wednesday

R.B. Yeah, that Wednesday afternoon and the Mayor came down, I think, and



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R.B. announced the curfew so we struck out from there at about 6, and we were trying to get home before 7 and Rev. Lowe and Harrison, I think, I was riding with them and we were coming down 31st Street and got down to about 31st and Benton where that Tire Place is and we saw people just all out in the street - milling - so we turned and took off and came on home and Rev. Lowe stayed at my house all night, cause he didn't want - to go out.

When I got reports, - say about the two explosions in Kansas City, Kansas I made a call to a member I have who lives at 13 and Georgia and then she made tow calls to friends out in that area and they say if it had happened, nobody around there knew anything about it, and Rev. Beverly had called some people <sup>also</sup> to check- so we broke this down as a rumor.

R.H. Now, did you have any rumors that were sort of like car loads of Blacks or Whites, coming into theneighborhoods to reek havoc and destruction, did you get anything that was real wild like that

R.B. There was continual reports about the plaza and this seemed to be a real concern- I noted that in the news, Charles Gray, reported that there had been three arrest out there and I don't know if this was Ollie Gates <sup>when</sup> was arrested out there

R.H. Oh, I don't remember that

Did you ever meet at 7 oclock in the morning with anybody. Robert Roane, in an interview with us had mentioned that there was a meeting at 5 in the morning. I can't remember the principals involved but they were discussing plans - in the event of further trouble that Tuesday morning later on and that Tuesday afternoon, and it was at this time that the schools were assigned to certain people



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R.H. I noticed that you said that the second time the meeting was held here

R.B. I think that's the same meeting. He may have got up at 5 to get here at 7

R.H. OkayRight

R.H. But it was called for 7, and that I think is the meeting. Now, what role did Robert Wheeler play here- did he give you consent to do this or what -Was it in his power to give consent

R.B. No, this is where we began to struggle with the problem of communication that existed between the institution. Police, the city hall and the school were totally - everybody was operating independent and we had hoped that he would be able - I forget what it was- but at any rate- to get clearance from the school board for the men who were trying who were being sent to the schools and to try to organize the students so that we could hear from them and it was this plan, it just came back to me- but we did have a plan for trying to get the kids organized so that they could give voice to whatever gripes they might have and we felt that the principals needed clearance from downtown in order to call such meetings- but out of these meetings were - we had hoped to pull together a group that would be able then to speak to the student bodies in general and then so doing create a voice for the voiceless student and thereby establish rapport and hopefully bring calm

R.H. I see, was Mr. Wheeler in on the meeting later on Tuesday afternoon

R.B. No - this was I don't know, I don't have minutes, I don't recall who all was here even, I do know that the two principals of the schools here were present

R.H. I guess that about does it, unless you can think of anything else that can be of help



R.B. No, I just - No - thats about it

R.H. Okay, thanks

NOTES taken by Ron:

Rev. Blair feels that too many of the public figures ( ministers, councilmen, etc;) who were active in the meetings of April 4 - 15- fell into the habit of trying to improve their image in the public's eye. These attempts often proved to be detrimental to the "cause", that is, being that Blacks got fair treatment and assurances of retribution and protection during the darker hours of the riots.

Many of them became less and less concerned with the safety of the students and were more and more concerned with the role they played in quelling or preventing a possible riot situation

On the night of Wednesday, April 10, Rev. Blair maintained contact with MICA's Riot Control Center and verified or disproved rumors that were brought to his attention. ( He kept a log of all his activities during the disturbances)

He also stated that there is a general consensus of opinion in the Black community that the Methodist I.P. is funding the Black Panther group in KansasCity. He further believes that the property in which the Black Panthers have their headquarters located is owned by the MethodistIP