

3-31-93 Maya Miller on the Census Bureau in 1969-70

Last time we talked about League of Women Voters, National Board and your participation in that, and the beginnings of your involvement with the National Welfare Rights Organization, getting to know George Wiley. So basically it was the late 60s.

One of the tactics of people who were working in Civil Rights was try to make sure that the Census adequately represented the distribution, the numbers of Black people in particular. They felt they'd been under-counted in the big cities – that counters didn't go into the community, that counters were not Black people, that there weren't adequate numbers. So, when the Census was to be taken in Reno, those are usually political appointed jobs. And an older Black woman who had worked at one time in the Legislature actually as a secretary, applied and was turned down, and there were all these other ladies who were White and accepted and so the local Office of Economic Opportunity office where Nancy Gomes was working decided that they would like to make this an issue, and people in the community took them up on it, or thought so too. So that is what started the picket. In a way this is a subject probably that needs less of my oral explanation than anything else, but since I seem to have indefinite amounts of material on the subject, and one of which is some notes on the City of Reno vs. Beilds (?) Harris Miller on why we repealed it. That was in September, and it explains why I came to accept, all I did was to accept Nancy's request that I come up and join the Civil Picket Line in the name of the League of Women Voters. So I figured that we had a good position on it, on equality of opportunity for employment and that was a logical thing to do and as Whitney Young and Otis Julie learned more with one hour on the picket line that you do with ten hours of reading. So I thought that it would be constructive so I went up to Reno and was in a little shopping area up toward the University, and a little east. That was the headquarters of the Census, and they had glass walls going to the floor and behind those were these desks where these ladies were working at their census work, and where this Black woman was not.

Who had called the picket?

It was not the Economic Opportunity Board because they don't picket, but it was like the NAACP and the Inter-Tribal Council was in on it and the Race Relations Center. But the picket was made up of about 10-12 people when I arrived, and those were mainly a number of older women and a number of children, kids about 10 or 12.

Were they Black?

Uh huh. And a black minister. Not a very threatening group of people. And all we did was, since we weren't allowed to go to the parking area, we had to keep our picket going on the sidewalk. So we were a little removed from the Census Office, which was inside and the parking was around. So we just walked the way you do on a picket line, and long about noon, one of the soul food restaurants sent over food for us, and while we took a break for that, the young kid who was about ten or twelve, who had been picketing right in front of me, asked me if he could borrow my pen. And what he wrote on his picket

sign was, "White Can Die." (laughs) and I thought that this is sort of an entertaining, non-connection who was with what he was saying was kind of standard motto for those days.

Then after lunch, sometime in the early afternoon, other people came to join us, especially a group of young men and women who had been active on the University campus. One of them was Oddie Fields and another was Mary Harris, and some others. They were also mostly Black. And then we were conscious of a couple of police cars parked down a block and a half away on the other side.

Had you been able to talk with anybody from the Census?

Well there were people in the group, and Nancy and the Economic Opportunity Board people were kind of hovering around the outskirts and I didn't do any of the talking because I was just there to support. Somebody let it be known that they wanted to know who our leader was and have him talk to the Federal Attorney. And the group was into this thing of having no leaders, and saying that we would all meet with him. He wasn't willing to do that, and he was really pretty frightened of the group. So he stayed inside the Census office, and at one point the Census people locked the front door to the Census Office, so that nobody could go in. We were saying that we wanted to negotiate as a group, but then they would talk to their little Federal lawyer, who was hiding in the Census.

And was the demand to hire this one woman, or were they seeking a percentage?

I don't know – it was certainly to hire this woman. The interesting thing to me was how the tension built, because I had never been a close observer to a situation like this where you feel the tension. You could feel the tension the minute the police cars stationed themselves nearby. That heightened the tension considerably. And then the refusal to talk unless they could all talk. And then after quite a while of talking back and forth, one of the young men broke in the back door, on the alley side of the office where we couldn't see.

So all of a sudden there were several young Black men in the Census Office, and we could see where they were agitatedly talking to people there who were in charge, and also the US Attorney. And then more police cars came and they came in closer and the tension was building, and finally at some point, the Federal Attorney decided that he would come out and walk with the group by the parking lot. So he did that, and there was a lot of heckling. I stayed on the sidewalk and others went closer to where the US Attorney was coming out, and the police came and there was this sense of tension, and I don't know when it broke out into a kind of scuffle. Before I knew what was happening there was a young policeman with his billy club on Oddie Fields' throat, and Oddie was right beside me trying to back up to get away from the billy club which was on his throat. And then this young policeman somehow he stumbled, and then Oddie was down on the ground, and this young police officer put his billy club down on his throat, so he couldn't say anything. It was at that point I went over to the policeman, who had his club on him, and put my hand on his shoulder, and said, "YOU CAN'T DO THAT! YOU CAN'T DO

THAT!" Then the other policeman came and took hold of me. Meanwhile the escalation had been going on enough, so that by this time the news people were there, and there was a television camera playing on the scene, so you can hear that little bit of this sort of old lady in tennis shoes saying, "You can do this."

Did they release Oddie at that point?

I don't know, I was then in the hands of the policeman. No they didn't release him. They took him in the Paddy wagon, put James Harris in the paddy wagon too. But they didn't put me in. There was also a scuffle involving a women losing her purse, and their keeping her from picking it up, and my interceding in that. I can't remember clearly, except sticking up for her because she had the right to get her purse back.

Then these two policemen took me over to the waiting regular police car that had bars between the driver and the back seat. And they stuffed me into the back seat and slammed the door. And in the process of slamming the door, they slammed it on my foot. I wasn't altogether in. And later that showed up on television too. And very much later – after we had the whole case before the municipal court and the appeals court, we decided to sue the city. And we sued it for damages, and that piece of evidence was used in getting something like \$1200 we got out of the City. But one of the very good things that happened was in relation to all that film stuff, was that Bob Stitser went immediately to get footage from the station, because otherwise it would have been in the City's hands, and subject to their editing. At any rate, they took us down to the jail and fingerprinted us, and put me behind bars where the women's piece is.

Did you get your phone call?

I guess I must have. But I didn't really need it because nancy had been there all along and she and Bertha Woodard and some of the others who rated around town, came right over. They only arrested the three of us. So Nancy got in touch with Dick and I don't know who did what to get us out, but we were out. But Dick said he'd carry forward and feed the kids. But we didn't have to spend the night, so that was my brief time behind bars.

Where did the case go then?

Well the case was a whole other thing. I had immediately called Bob Stitser and he was great about getting the footage. But it turned out there was no Black lawyer up there, and I didn't want to just try my case – I wanted to have it hooked up with the other two who were arrested, so the case would say something definite. And they wouldn't let me out because I didn't know what I was doing. We combined our case so that it was Harris, Miller consolidated. When the City of Reno came up to court, it was at the Municipal Building, a menacing building. We had a lot of supporters, there hanging out. It was 10:00 in the morning and my mother and her friends had come the night before.

Did they come to the hearing?

Yes, after explanations. They came to the hearing, and you were there. And the judge was drunk. And Bob said he's always drunk.

And before he got to our case, he tried a couple of others. One of whom was an old Indian woman who had been in jail the night before, and she was charged with being drunk on the streets, and given 25 days in jail. And it was such a memorable example of the racism of the courts.

The thing that was most astonishing to me was how Bob and the other attorneys seemed to take it for granted, how he was in the court. But at any rate, he just immediately ruled against us.

The charge was disturbing the peace. And we appealed it. We had long, agonizing meetings. Reverend Gloyd? was head of the OEO where Nancy worked, and he worked for the power company.

Here it is. "Paul Fields was on the ground., defendant Maya Miller, a middle aged woman physically slight of build, stepped in and repeatedly tapped on of the officers on the shoulder, shouting, "You can't do that! You're killing him!" She observed three officers on top of Fields, and a billy club across his neck, feared serious injury was resulting in Fields. She at this time had not been advised of legal arrest that had taken place inside the office building."

So was this your attorney's defense?

Yes. "It should be noted that Mrs. Miller, a feminine lady, with a long and distinguished background devoting her life and financial resources to helping the underprivileged, of peaceful advocacy in groups such as the League of Women Voters, cpnservation groups, etc, was lawfully at the scene and participated in the picket." (laughs) "And MRs. Miller did not at any time constitute serious or any threat to the police officers in this instance from which they could not protect themselves. She simply in all good faith, unnecessarily exposed herself to danger, personal injury, or perhaps even loss of her life – accordnigly she should not be found guilty of all charges against her."

So the Appeals Court, the Second Judicial District Court of Nevada, ruled that I wasn't a serious danger. By this time they just dropped it for the two other men, and it was really hard keeping the case together.