Oral History
Interview with Earl Caldwell
By Stephen Clark

Stephen Clark: Okay, Mr. Caldwell –

Earl Caldwell: Yes.

Clark: So we're here at the civil rights symposium, and could you just tell me about your experiences as a reporter during the civil rights movement.

Caldwell: Ah, when you say the civil rights movement, you have to understand that, I always say this, in the traditional civil rights movement, people think of things that go back to the 40's and 50's, probably mainly in the 50's beginning with the Montgomery bus boycott. But surely and certainly events before then, and all those years there, was that struggle. But in the newspaper journalism, or even journalism, not just in newspapers, in the media, in the institution of the news media, you have to understand that it too was segregated, very segregated. And you mainly had in all those years, those early years, the black reporters who were covering these events, were reporters who were working for black publications because the white, mainstream, however they want to characterize their publications, those publications were largely, those newsrooms were occupied largely and almost entirely by white men.

Blacks did not really get into these major newsrooms until the mid 1960s when you had the movement change, focusing on the North, beginning in 1964 in Harlem. They had what they called the Harlem Riots. The Harlem Riots were virtually a turning point. I would say that a lot of what was to take place there during that period was prefaced by the last speech, or one of the last speeches, I would think it was maybe his last major speech of Malcolm X, speech that he made in Rochester, New York. The core of that speech, Malcolm, he had a blistering indictment of the press, the media, the news media. He was speaking of what we would call the white press. Malcolm X at that time was very, had a lot of influence.

A lot of the things that Malcolm X was to say then, they were things that black people, particularly the activist community, was grasping. If you were to look at, go back and examine the movement, you would notice that even Dr. King, Martin Luther King Jr., was, through those last years of his life, was trying to argue, constantly defending his ideas, his nonviolent philosophies where you had within the movement this young generation, the next generation, those who believed that the torch was being passed and that they were a group that said if you're going to hit me I'm going to hit you back. They did not really accept as, and they were resisting the strategies of King. Indeed, first was Stokely Carmichael and markedly with Rap Brown. Snick, (SNCC or Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) not only changed his philosophy, became an advocate to pick up your gun. It had more in its ideas that it embraced in common with the Black Panther Party that was rising in the west in the second part of the 60's, than with the ideas of Dr. King.

I say that to say this, in that riot of 1964, one of the telling events was The New York Times, they did have on their staff then I think one or two black journalists. One of the black journalists who covered those Harlem Riots was Ted Jones. This black reporter, I don't think he was arrested, but he was roughed up by the police. Ted Jones was roughed because he saw the police doing things that he thought they ought not be doing. And the way they were treating people, and he came through the police line wearing his press credential and he told the police, "You can't do this. You can't beat these people like this. You have no right." Well, the police knocked him to the ground. But Ted was a very, became an issue because he had press credentials on. He was one of those black journalists that had made his way into the newsroom at that time. There was also, in Harlem, a photographer, white, who was beaten severely by the crowd pounced upon him. I don't even know how, I don't know the last word in this but I know his, his eye, one of his eyes was almost knocked out of the socket. That beating of that photographer -- there was a direct line between that and the hiring of the first black photographer, I believe that it was Don Hogan Charles who is still on the staff at the New York Times.
The New York Times had never had, as late as 1964, when this white fellow was severely injured, had never had a black photographer. But these crowds, they would setting upon white people. People said it really wasn't that they were setting upon white people, they were attacking the press, people began to attack these white institutions. They were attacking, and, they were against the police, they were against the substandard housing, they were against some of these stores that they felt were gouging them.

But one of those institutions was the news media. And in those meetings, after the riots had subsided, there were all these rallies and meetings in the black community, one of the things people began, the crowd began to shout at the start of these meetings was "White reporters out, white reporters out." And they would make them leave these rooms, and that meant for the first time, really maybe in history, these newspapers found these big stories exploding in their communities, they couldn't cover it because they didn't have reporters who were black. And so, in the mid-1960's the search began far, people searching far and wide for journalists who were not white, who they needed to cover these stories.
My career really began in, like, 1960, at a small paper in the mountains of Pennsylvania, actually maybe a year before that, so, because I know in 1960 I had gone to Lancaster, Pennsylvania, to work for the Intelligencer Journal, which is the morning paper there. But I can go back to that later, I just want to say that I was in Lancaster, I was trying to pursue a career as a sports writer, I wanted to get to New York as a big league sports writer, but when I went to Harrisburg, the state capital, I applied for a job and I didn't get it. Actually I went for the interview and took my clippings and they hired me. I came back and gave notice, but I never heard from those people again. They never called me back, they didn't call back to say, we've changed our mind, or anything, they just never, there was never another word. To this day I believe what happened is I went there and the sports editor interviewed me, saw that I could do the job, that my writing showed that I would have been a valuable asset, but I think when he went to his superiors, I think somebody put the kibosh on it. I'm sure it was because of race, which made me

believe that I would forever be in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, as a sports writer and I didn't like the prospect of that, but I did love journalism, and so I decided that I would become a news writer. I would make more money, had more prestige on the paper, so I did.

One of the things in these papers is that, reporters in my era, it was like baseball, you go down to the minor leagues, learn the craft and you'd work your way up. And, one of the things, when one reporter would go to a paper, he would oftentimes would send back to you go to a larger paper, paying a little more money, one of the things people would often do is send back and tell some friends of theirs, "Geez, there's an opening here, or this and that," and on, and sometimes two, three, four paper reporters would leave a paper and go to another one where one of the previous reporters on that paper had gone. I'd seen that when I was in Lancaster.

A lot of paper reporters went down to Wilmington, Delaware, but no one ever sent back for me. We had two reporters that went to Rochester, New York, and sure enough they sent back for me. I wouldn't go because I felt that once I got there and they saw I was black, probably wouldn't get the job, although I should've known that these buddies of mine would tell them, "this guy is black." My buddies were not honest with me, they didn't tell me, they didn't say, "Earl, this paper is looking for a reporter who is black." I just thought, I'll just go up there for a visit because they were paying and I went and of course I got the job. Al Neuharth was the new general manager of the Rochester papers, was the driving force behind breaking the color line. He went on to become a legendary figure for creating USA Today, among other things. But also, in his early time, from the time in Rochester, he would have a lot of influence in helping change the complexion in the newsrooms.

When I came to Rochester, what I found was they wanted me there as a reporter who could cover this, these stirrings that were in their community then. People objecting to segregated housing and substandard housing, and joblessness and all of these things that are still problems in these communities. But they were beginning in that period, and I think I went to Rochester, probably in about 1964 actually, because one of the things that, one of the assignments that I had was my editor sent me to Harlem when that riot erupted there, and I was to write a series for Rochester, Can it Happen Here? And so I went down there to New York City, and I was there for about a week, and as it happened on the Sunday that my series was to start, that Saturday night a riot erupted in Rochester, so I had to rush back to Rochester.

But my point is this, from the moment I hit Rochester, I didn't realize it but I was on a, I was really in Lancaster, these, this search, these people that, these editors that were looking for black reporters, they found me, really, on the sports desk at Lancaster, Pennsylvania. I did have that period where I switched over and I wrote news, but that time I was a sports writer and I was very fortunate to have had that. I don't know how long it would have been, a year or two, to sharpen my skills as a news reporter where all these things would stand me in good stead.

One of the things I was always very fortunate all through my career from the first editor I had in Clearfield, Pennsylvania, was an extraordinary man, and on those small papers a part of the job of the editors was to train young people, you trained your people because you couldn't go out and hire experienced people. This guy was excellent. Things that he told me back at that small town in the middle of the mountains of

Pennsylvania stood me in good stead when I was a reporter at The New York Times. You know, what, about seven, eight years later, and I went to Lancaster, and again, I had the opportunity to work under really extraordinary, very good editors.

One of the things at that point in America yet the talent, the journalism talent, the brilliance, the genius was in the newspaper side of the business. Television was really just an idea then and had no impact whatsoever with regards to news, that would come later. So these newsrooms had a, an extraordinary talent in there and if these folks would work with you and teach you, which they were wonderful with me every step of the way, wonderful, absolutely wonderful. Although at the little paper in Pennsylvania and down in Lancaster, and even in Rochester, none of them ever, ever had any blacks, but you know, it's like how do you say, I came into the newsroom, it was almost like the reporters made you almost an honorary white, there was absolutely no hostility toward me in the newsroom because I wasn't white. As a matter of fact anybody, other people, we would go out to a café as the reporters do after work, anybody would ever say anything, other reporters would be jumping up wanting to fight them (chuckle) I never had to say anything.

I mean it was, people really looked out for you, they wanted me to be in the newsroom. I don't say that to toot my own horn, I guess you would say that that's what I'm doing, but all through this period, I was developing into a very good reporter and an excellent writer for one who was writing newspaper journalism. I had a very good sense of story and knew how to put stories together. It was something I was attracted to but I loved it, morning, noon, and night, when you're not done working you, in your head and in your mind and with your friendships were largely around the newspapers. It was something you did constantly, so I was in that generation. And when the riot broke out in Rochester, at that time, I was very into reading the city papers, I grew up in that thinking people said you always read, you get better by reading. People who are better than you, see how they do it, see how they write, study their styles and see, you develop your own. One of the reporters I was very attracted to, columnists, writers, was Jimmy Breslin, who was writing for the New York Herald Tribune, which was my favorite paper, and he came to Rochester to cover the riots, and of course I attached it with Breslin, I showed him around and everything, this and that, helped him, and he would read my stories and have me read his stories before he'd send them to New York and it was very heavy stuff.

At the end of the time, when he was going back to New York, he asked me, he said, "Well what are you looking to do in your career?" And I told him I wanted to get to the Herald Tribune and he said "Here's the editor's name, you call him, you tell him I told you to call. We're going to hire you." And I went down to New York in that summer and I worked at the Herald Tribune and indeed they hired me. My point is, is that from that moment, from that time before I even knew when these black editors, when these white editors and these all white newsrooms knew that they had to change, they couldn't deal effectively with the stories that were exploding on them, I didn't realize when I was on a rocketship to the top because I was already in, my foot was more than in the door, I had training from the best you could get. We didn't have the graduate school of journalism that they have now. What we had, though, were these great journalists who practiced their craft on these small papers where they can, these towns that they liked, they could

raise their families, and also, it was in that early stage of this, journalism was changing, the drunkards were being driven out of the newsrooms, the idea that yellow journalism was disappearing, standards were being raised, expectations were growing. And so I was able to come in on that new wave, and then, in the midst of all this, you had this first generation of black journalists, persons like Ed Bradley today, Charlayne Hunter-Gault, Gerald Frazer, Thomas Johnson, Wallace Terry, Hal Walker, Bernard Shaw, Bob Maynard. Bob Maynard was one of the brightest lights, Austin Scott, Holly West, and I could tell you name after name after name an extraordinary group of journalists, extraordinary, many of them now coming out the other end, like myself, had a big huge, full career, finding when we're coming out the other end because we were the first generation to go in, they don't know what to do with us when we come out the other end.

But America hasn't changed so much to say well you do them what you do with all the other journalists. They don't. That's why you don't see too many black journalists at these major universities having distinguished chairs. You don't see them in positions of leadership in these universities and these schools of training and learning. One of the reasons I don't believe that journalism is attracting the best and brightest as it ought to be among journalists of color is because the apparatus isn't as it ought to be yet. But that's getting ahead of things.

What I would go back to say is this, it was these combination of things, this black community that sent white reporters out, it also embraced the black reporters coming in. I was truly blessed because when people in the black community (sigh), and not just me, our generation, when the people in our communities found that we were honest, that we were committed to being the very best that we could be, that our goal was to try to tell the story of the struggle in these communities and to tell it as fairly and honestly as we could. People didn't, never demanded of us well just tell one thing, just tell the black side, they didn't ask us to bend or to change, they asked us, be fair, be honest, be true, and that's what we believed in. So it was a perfect fit. Those of us who were there had a wonderful, glorious time because it was the biggest story exploding in America, this story of race, this story that had come out of the South that had captured the world, indeed, the leader, Martin Luther King, Jr., had the Nobel Prize in his hand, and then the struggle took this other turn when America couldn't fully accommodate it, and you had the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., the most famous, internationally-known leader, figure, shot down in Memphis.

But I say that to say that, that then was the changing, the total turn in the movement. King was dead, the Black Panthers were rising and, you never know. It's like the Boy Scouts say, be prepared, because you don't know. And that was sort of like our motto then because you couldn't tell from one day to the next day where you would be, what incredible thing you would be, your story in your hand. As for me, I then probably had one of the most (chuckle) one of the, you know, a, a reporter, you know, your little silent prayers, you want to be there when important things happen. And, I probably got as big a dose of that as anybody. Beginning in 1967, I'm sorry, in 1968. Actually, even the year before that in the summer of '67 when the cities across America exploded, Gene

Roberts, who is here this weekend, went on to become the managing editor of the New York Times. He and I were teamed in my first year at the New York Times, and we went all across the country, and they said, let us try to find out why these riots are starting maybe there's some conspiracy, maybe there's this, that and the other thing. But I was fortunate because it was a paper of extraordinary resource, so you could do anything, and Gene Roberts and I went coast to coast. Actually the riots, so many of them were happening that we had to split up and he went here and I'm running there but, it allowed me to see and to know and to make relationships with black people all over America, unlike any other reporter.

In 1968, when King was in Memphis supporting these garbage workers he had on his plate, this idea of a poor people's campaign. He said that everybody ought to be entitled to either a job or an income. Mind you, here we are all these years later in New York City, and you have unemployment among black men that approaches 50%. Martin Luther King, Jr., said back in 1968 that to deny a man a job is to say that a man has no right to exist. I mean you have equated a job with life itself! One of the things that I was, at the time you would listen to these people making these extraordinary statements and articulating these ideas that were so incredible, and you were the reporter, you were carrying these words and these ideas and there was backing it up, always, always, these movements, and it wasn't only this movement, it was like, in a way it was more dramatic than theater – life itself is always the ultimate. This great movement, this, this explosion from black America was all so grounded in and carried by the music. Never, ever has there been a time when there was this music that captured the world for its creativeness, not only the words of it, but the power of it, and it was all a part of this movement. When Nina Simone sang in the nightclub, she also sang about Martin Luther King, Jr., and it wasn't just Nina Simone, it was Smokey Robinson, and Aretha Franklin and all of Motown because we were in, probably for the last time, we were one people tied together by race, the color of our skin, and we were in the midst of a mighty movement, led by, led by a man who was perhaps, you know, one of the dynamos. Well, he has a national holiday in his name in this country. Well, surely, he's surely one of the most dynamic people in our history. I had never met Martin Luther King, Jr. I had never, he had come to New York and made an anti-war speech after he came out against the war, and I had seen him. I was one of the New York Times, probably fifty people were covering him and I was so far back I could hardly even make him out of this crowd, but as it was to happen at the end of March of 1968, Claude said, who is here, he had an idea about Dr. King and sent me to Memphis to cover him, and as it would happen I would be the only reporter in America there when he was killed. Even just this last, even this weekend, before the last part of my series that I'm writing about Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination, I'm still wrestling with it. I still believe that we don't have the truth, but on that night, what it felt to me to do was to tell America that King is dead: where he died, how he died, what it was like, all the other significant detail. Of course it is something that will forever stick in my mind. You know, you say a big story, you can't get a story, and I had a clear exclusive on it. I had the biggest story in the world, and I had, on that night an exclusive on the biggest story. I was telling the New York Times what was going on fifteen, twenty minutes before anyone even knew, which meant that our paper, we could open these telephone lines to

the hospitals, we could get any officials on the phone, people that later you couldn't find. We could send reporters out into black communities and we did. Gerald Frazer went to Harlem. He said, "I was standing in the street," here's how much time we had, lead time on everybody else, he said, "I'm standing in the street. I know that King is dead." He didn't know he was dead, he knew he'd been shot, and I told him he was not going to live, I saw the wound, bigger than your fist in his neck and jaw. I'd never stood over, leaned over a person to see, look in his eyes and know he was dead, but I knew that night that he was going to die, you could just see it. Like a wound, blood runs out, but this was like, everything in was falling out. It was enormous. So I could tell my editors, so they could tell the reporters, so Gerald Frazer stood in the street, he said, "I didn't say anything to anybody, I just stood there," and he said, "I knew the minute the word had hit in Harlem," he said, "the people come spilling out in the streets," he said, "I was standing there, I watched the first window break, I watched," for the first time, reporters always, you go to a riot, people say, you should have been here an hour ago, you should have been here last night, you should have been, but that one night he was there to see it. It's because we had witnessed incredible thing, it's an incredible thing for a reporter to be there, too, to see it. It was, for me, in a way, you know, you go through things, I was going through school at the University of Buffalo not far up that road from here as a business student. I had no business being a business student, I didn't know, didn't know why I was in college, but I knew that my parents believed in education, but I didn't understand how that plugged into me, Earl, my mother wanted me to be a minister. We had often talked in the family about me being a teacher and a part of that was because they had these state, Pennsylvania state teacher's colleges and they're very inexpensive, you can go there for, like, buy your room and books, and, you know, you could go. I was in Buffalo, mainly because the town I grew up in in the mountains of Pennsylvania was an all-white town, I used to wonder, jeez, why, I thought, early in my life that was such a bad break for me to be way back in the mountains, you really only knew the white people. It wasn't so much, as it, why only the white people, it was just like, you didn't know the black people, but it turned out to be a blessing in disguise because the reason I went to school in Buffalo, I went up there to work in the summer of my senior year and I was up there and saw all these black people. It was just so fascinating and different. They were different people. I'm black, my parents were black, we had some couple of other black neighbors and weekends and Sundays and holidays, black people from all around the area would gravitate, sometimes, they'd come to our house, we may have ten or fifteen people there, black, have big Sunday dinner, go over to some other people's houses, but that was different. We used to have a Sunday school picnic and we'd go to one day and see a lot, but it was different. This, in Buffalo, was like, when you would go to bed at night and get up in the morning, you're living in a community that's all black people, and it, I had never experienced anything like that, and so I told my parents I wanted to go to school up there, and I wind up at this school that's far too expensive for my parents. But, I did understand, and it would have a great impact on my life because what my parents did is they took everything that they had and they gave it to me. I was the youngest of ten, six survived, the first four in a row died within a year of childbirth. After those first four died, they said the fifth child was going to die, that child didn't die, and for the next seventy-

five years nobody in our family ever got sick. I went through my whole life never knowing anybody in my family to even get seriously ill.

I wrote a piece in Ebony magazine. The editor of Ebony grew up a block from us, his parents were friends with mine, friends of our family, very fair-skinned black people, they could have, could have said they were white. Herbert Nipson was his name, and he was a long time editor of Ebony magazine, and he knew our family. Of course our families were very close, and he had me, I wrote an article, it was one of the most wonderful gifts I gave my parents. I wrote an article about them on the occasion of their seventy-fifth wedding anniversary and I got all these wonderful letters from people all over the world. John Johnson hired one of the most famous photographers, Pulitzer Prize-winner, Moneta Sleet, he came up to this small town and photographed my parents. It was truly a wonderful, it was the last wonderful thing that happened.

Clark: What year is this?

Caldwell: Oh, I don't remember. It was in the, it was in the '80s. I don't remember the year, but I do remember that my father was well into his 90s and he went on to live up to 104. My mom lived to 100 right on the button, but, what happened was, things began to age, time began to take its toll on them, it broke that remarkable run in our family. It began with a severe stroke that my mom had. She's got bad, bad doctors up there in the country, she didn't, she lived ten more years but, oh, God, it was hell for her. Now my father went to 100 years old, just, went up the great, beautiful side of the mountain, I never saw anyone go from being 90 to 100 in the grand style of my father's, wonderful. We had a wonderful time, we had a big house up in the country, we had, a lot of land around, so it was just really...it was really terrific, but it was the end of it.

The older I got, the more I could appreciate what my parents did for me. I listened to Hodding Carter down there talking about those guns in their home, and this. We grew up in the mountains of Pennsylvania, my father made all of us learn how to use a shotgun and a rifle. We had to learn how to use it, how to respect the weapons and everything because we lived up there in that, in that section of the woods, we never locked the door to our house. People used to say, you don't go into Caldwell's house. You go down there, you go in that house, they'll shoot you. Mr. Caldwell will shoot you. Our neighborhood was primarily an Italian neighborhood. I remember one day this Italian man across the street, sort of like the king of the Italians in our neighborhood.

And my brother, as the story was passed down to me, said he was going down the street with his hands out on the neighbors' hedges, and a white man ran off the street, out of his, off his porch and grabbed my brother. He was going to slap him or do something, but my father happened to be watching. My mom said she saw my father run across the street, and she said "I just threw up my hands and covered my eyes," she said, "I knew there was going to be a killing."

Well, in that confrontation that day, it changed our whole relationship with all of the Italians all over that town because my father grabbed that biggest Italian man, and when he turned him loose, those Italians, his family, they lived right across the street from us, they were our best friends. We would go away for something and they would always watch out for our house and everything. We never had any more trouble, but he let them know, you never touch one of the children. My father was an enormous, he was an extraordinary specimen. Once, a guy told me, he says, you know your father was the strongest man in Clearfield County. He was an extraordinary man, very disciplined. You know you, with parents, you don't have any choice, you get, whatever there is that's what you get. I got, had extraordinary parents.

Clark: How'd they feel about you as a reporter, and the Black Panthers –

Caldwell: At the height when things were at the worst, in a really scary time because I thought the government was trying to set me up, get me killed by making it first appear that I was going to, that I had information that could put a lot of Panthers in prison or something. And then I was going to get this information, I think they wanted the Panthers to do something to me. They were setting it up in a kind of way that I had this illegal information that they could either put me in jail or just – I'll never forget. I used to call my parents, oh, every couple of days and tell them, and I remember my mom, she said, "Earl, why don't you just come home. Come home. You don't have to be out there. You don't have to let these people do these things to you. Come on home." It's really wonderful to know that people stand with you. This little paper in the mountains where I started, everything that ever happened to me they'd put it on page one. Everything that happened to our family, as it happened to me in my career and all these things, they embraced my parents and our family and everything that happened to them, the Ebony article re-bought it and bought pictures from John Johnson and re-ran the article, and they would run everything that happened, or their birthdays and everything on page one. It was wonderful. We had, it was remarkable. They were like royalty in that town, it

was fabulous. But they were extraordinary, God-fearing, very conservative people. Republican, my father was, but he was born in 1881, so he was almost back, he's connected with the real, true conservatives and true Republican party that was related to some history to black people. But my mom, after she died, years, some years after she died, I was rummaging through my parents' old stuff when they're not there anymore and I found this scrapbook. It was so remarkable. Everything, my, that happened to me, my mother used to cut it out of the paper and put in the scrapbook. I never knew! Never saw it. My mom went blind. When she almost couldn't see at all, you know, one of the things I found out when you go blind, you fight it. She was fighting it. She was pretending she could see when she couldn't. I think that's what made her sick and put so much pressure on her, she had that stroke. But in this notebook, in this scrapbook, if you look, she would always, she would put these articles in, and then she would comment, write these comments. One of the last ones I saw , and still even now I just talk about it makes me want to cry, but she has this last, one of the last articles about me. And at the top, you begin to notice in the scrapbook her writing, the letters get bigger and bigger because she's going blind. The last one, one of the last ones, in the biggest letters she says, "We are all so proud of Earl." It's just an article that basically, it's just one of these things that reminds you of how truly blessed you've been.

And one of the things is, is that as you go along, and a lot of very talented people, they don't make it. Bob Maynard was, I would say, easily, he's the first black person I ever met who was, had the same dream as I had. I was in Lancaster and he was in New York and we met. Well, he was the first black person I ever knew that was chasing his dream of being a big city newspaper man. Bob grew up in Bedford-Stuyvesant in Brooklyn. I grew up in a little white town in the mountains of Pennsylvania. His son today is Alex Caldwell Maynard, and I think that sometimes, that really forms the basis of great friendship, the differences, and then you have something that's very same to share. We both had this big, strong feeling about the families, a lot of things. Excellence in journalism was one of the big bonds. But Bob died at an early age, you know so many people, they don't last, one thing or another. Bob got prostate cancer and died.

I had a really good friend, great writer, Jim Snyder, he was white. When I was a sports writer, he hit a tree in a car and died. I've known Ruth Ross. Yesterday I was interviewing a woman on my radio broadcast whose name was Ross, I kept mispronouncing her name. I apologized to her on the air, but what I didn't want to tell

her was that she had the name of a woman that was a journalist who was so close, she was with Newsweek. When I'd be going through difficult times, one of the things with me is I've always had, I've never, ever, ever had to face any crises by myself. When the government of the United States was taking outrageous actions against me as an individual, the black journalists took the leader, took the lead, but journalists all over America, they all stood as one with me, and they had ways of showing that they were truly with me, I was never alone. And I've always had that, which really means a lot because that's where I learned that, you know, you get strength from other people, strength as in, not togetherness though –

Clark: I just wanted to ask you, you talked about people dying early – what about you? Did you ever think, I may not be here to finish this story, or whatever, because of danger?

Caldwell: I think this. I went through those things, and I survived. After Martin Luther King, Jr., got killed, some man called me at the New York Times and said to me, "Go see this man. He's got a very important story to tell you about the killing of Martin Luther King, Jr. He's lived in Summerville, Tennessee." I'm like, damn. I looked up that map and it was damn near Mississippi, and I'm thinking, like, I'm not going down there by myself. And I called Jack White, who went on to have a very prominent career, too. Jack, they had him working for a paper in Nashville. Actually called the race relations reporter, of course Jack wanted to be a foreign correspondent with Time magazine. He showed me around Africa when I was writing a column, and he was a Bureau Chief for Time, and a big -time career. It started at the Washington Post. I did his oral history. But I asked Jack who was down there to come with me, and he did. Somebody tried to kill us. I say that, people say well, I'm being dramatic, somebody tried to run us off the road, they made us, they engaged us in a high speed chase by coming up on us and they were watching us, they had us under surveillance. We were already nervous, but then when they could they tried to force us off of an old back mountain road, and came very close to doing it. I was probably more scared that night. Well I used to be very scared with the Panthers, too, because when a lot of things started to happen, even before the government got involved, I used to go to the Panther headquarters, and I used to, I'd stay all night! Until about four o'clock in the morning – they'd be falling asleep and stuff and I'd leave. But to leave, you had to go out of a big two-story building walk down an outside stairwell. And I used to just pray, God, please let me get down those stairs, don't let anybody shoot me, because I thought somebody was going

to shoot me thinking they were shooting a Panther. And I was sure the police were going to be the ones who were doing it. And I used to just be so scared and I'd get down there to my car, boy, was I, I'd get in that car it was like I was in heaven, I just felt so safe because, you're so afraid.

But you know you go through a lot of things, and you have to do a lot of things. I remember even when I was traveling around Africa, whew! One day I was on a plane, and the plane landed. I saw all this smoke, I said, "The plane's on fire, the plane's on fire," running up (laughs). They said, the plane's not on fire, that's condensation. "The plane is on fire!" But you know, a lot of things you don't think you're going to survive, but you do. But after a while you think, you believe, I believe it's for a purpose, that you are here for a purpose. It is a mission. There is some reason that some other force larger than yourself has put things into your hands. It's part of your responsibility, it's a part of the reason that you're here. And I'm not saying you can just go out and act crazy and you're going to survive, but there is something that's looking out for you that's carrying you through, uh, that your, not yet met your destiny. I used to think that these things that happened to me a long time ago, but I sensed on a lot of other things, people don't realize it. And I think this is one of the reasons why I want to start this web business.

People don't realize what I did as a columnist in New York City. Well, I don't want to say people don't, people really do. I mean, and have had these expressions of it too, but I mean very direct, and the kind of support that I have in these communities today, so they know about your work. But I mean, I don't think I got the recognition for my work in New York City because I think a lot of people did not like the idea of – they just disagree with some of the things that I would say, that I would write. I remember the Mayor of New York went to the publisher of the paper to complain, "Why is Earl Caldwell allowed to write about Jesse Jackson every day?" This was in the 1984 campaign, which is a very historical campaign. They have people covering presidential campaigns, people writing about them every day! What he didn't like, what he was angry about, is that I was writing the hell out of it. I was good, I was doing it well. And it was having a huge impact. And they wanted to shut it down, they couldn't do it. Eventually, they got the paper out of the hands of those, that publisher, and they got it into another publisher's hands and they did shut it down, shut me down, threw me out.

But that wasn't the end of the story, you know, because I believe that there is something larger that is leading. I say now, at times of trouble, precious Lord take my hand, lead me on. Wherever it is and whatever it is, I'm prepared to do it. Now, I'm at Hampton University. I think it's very important, I think, maybe, in a lot of ways, no place I could be is more important. I'm also on the radio and I work, as it happens, with Pacifica Radio, which is probably the only air waves in America that would allow me to say and be as candid about things as I can be, but that's listener support. They would even like to throw me off there, but they can't because my people will give financial support to my broadcast, and they do. I've been very much involved in writing yet about Dr. King, his murder, there are truths that I know, I've been saying these things. It took them 32 years and, although on the night of the killing my room is facing the crime scene and no-

In the investigation they didn't ask me. One of the things I also knew was that, and I could prove, was that there was a dramatic altering of the crime scene. People say, "Ah, Earl, these things you're saying now," even the FBI. I mean the Justice Department under Clinton and Janet Reno and the investigators finally ask and say, "Why didn't you say these things then? Why didn't you say it? You didn't say none of this stuff in your story." Because you don't know. You only know, and we're here, Times is an official paper, the police told a whole story. We know who did, we have witnesses, James Earl Ray, a total case. You don't, this is why we depend upon the police to debrief everybody and put these pieces in place, and they can tell the true story, but they, they weren't doing it.

So, every, every, every year you begin to realize bit by bit by bit, piece by piece, this and that. This man, these years later, whenever they told me to go see this guy, John McFerrin was his name, in Somerville, Tennessee. He told a remarkable story about how he overheard them give the order to kill Martin Luther King, Jr., on the balcony at the Lorraine Motel. And, the FBI said he's delusional, threw his story out. I never thought he was delusional – the man was a black man who white people had driven into behavior that was sometimes irrational. But he had bullet holes in the door, he was considered a troublemaker up there, and I know people were screwing with him mightily, and yes, he was acting irrational, but there was a reason for it. They can say all they want to say, but it was one of these things, it was over twenty years later, a white man verified everything that this black man said. I mean this guy told the black guy, said, "I was in this produce dealer's place in Memphis, they wouldn't give him deliveries, they had to go to gas station and one of those little stores in the country

where they sell a little bit of everything, you know, because they considered him a troublemaker, they shut, they shut down all deliveries, nobody delivered, nothing for him, so he used to get in his truck and once every how ever often and go to Memphis and load up supplies and bring his own stuff back to his store." On the day that King got killed the fact of the matter is he was in Laberto's produce dealer's place and he overheard these conversations. All these years later this guy comes up and says that Laberto was a big guy and had given him money to be involved in the assassination of King. Well, oh, you've got, you've got corroboration here. The story of James Earl Ray killing King, there's no corroboration for that, but there's a whole other scenario that one of the things is, as it happened. You never know why God put you, looking at a certain thing, in a certain way – King was on a balcony behind me. The moment he got killed, I was going crazy because I was in my rookie year at the New York Times, and I was missing a deadline. You know, you can do a lot of things, missing a deadline is not one. And, especially on a story, we were watching King very closely here in these things, you can't miss the deadline.

As a matter of fact that day, you know, that day – this is at the Lorraine Motel, had an old fashioned switchboard, one line, one call. I kept telling them, "I'm from the New York Times, I've got to have a line!" And the woman said, "I don't care who you are, who you're from, I told you when I get a telephone line I'll give it to you, now, and don't call over here no more." She's making (inaudible). But what service they had they were giving to Dr. King. It was this little black motel's last great, last hurrah. They were going out of business. All those little motels, those black (inaudible), were going out of business because these white places were having to open up to black people. As a matter of fact, King could have actually stayed, I think he was maneuvered into staying over there in the black side of town, which was the perfect place for the murder. He was maneuvered over there. He was really, I think, set up, forced, not forced, but set up, it was a part of what, he was set up. But at any rate, I was missing the deadline and I did two things: one was I took off my pants, why I do not know, stalking about in my stocking feet smoking cigarettes. I thought I heard a rifle shot (chuckle) and I ran in the door and I look up and there's this housekeeper, a woman whose name was Theola Shavers, and she's looking at me and she's all, got a little shy look on her face because she dropped the Coca Cola bottle off the tray. She was on the balcony level cleaning rooms, and it broke on the concrete walkway outside my room on the ground level. But I heard a sharp crack, I thought it was a rifle shot. Anyhow when I went back in I didn't shut the door. Subsequently what I heard what I was sure was a bomb blast, somebody

had bombed the motel, and so, I don't know. Where were you standing, you could say the most furthest place in this little Lorraine Hotel room, in what, two, three strides you're in the doorway. I don't know exactly where it was I was standing. I don't know exactly how many strides, but I know the door's open and you're right in the door, and I expected to see all this damage from the bomb and all that, and I don't see it. And I saw two things: this group of guys jumping up and down over here to my right. And then I'm looking, and I see this figure pulling up out of the bushes directly across the motel in the thicket. And he was doing something, you know it's like, you can see the way he was looking, he knows what it is, and you're watching him to get the clue. And King is on the balcony, been shot, but he's behind me on the balcony level, so I can't see King, which is the mysterious, which is the, not mysterious, which is the interesting thing because if I were to see King, I wouldn't see anything else. You would only see that and focus on that and that would be everything. But as long as I – one of the unique things, I was just these few, probably not even minutes, maybe sixty seconds, maybe a little bit more of not knowing and looking and seeing something else. One of the things I saw was that figure in the bushes, I could never figure out what he was doing. But then this car comes roaring up to my door and back and up again and back, and the third it comes up the car lurches to a stop right in front of my door, and I recognize the driver – it's Solomon Jones, the guy was, I had met, because when I got there a couple days earlier, I didn't know any of these people. I'm going around introducing myself to everybody, and this guy was chauffeuring Dr. King, he told me that an undertaker had given him this car to chauffeur Dr. King around. And he finally comes to a stop almost right in front of my door and I ran out there in my shorts screaming, "What happened, what happened?" and he's banging his head on the steering wheel saying, "Oh my God, oh my God." When I'm out there in this little yard, it was like a parking lot, and you know, when I'm out there I look back and I see Dr. King down on the balcony. Now I know, and I run back in and grab my pants and some paper, raincoat, and run back out. I run over to where these people are jumping up and down, there's Jessie Jackson, Andrew Young, Hosea Williams, Jim Bevill, Chauncy Estridge, all King's inner circle and people. And I get with them, and I'm jumping up and down with them, not even, still don't even know why I'm jumping up and down but I'm doing what they're doing, and all of a sudden I see these police officers running through this opening by the office. And they start running at us, I threw my arms up, I said, "Oh my God, it's the police, they're shooting us!" (Laugh) The officer came up to us and said to me, "Which way did the shot come from?" I was so scared, so frozen, so sure he was going to shoot me, I couldn't even get a word out of my mouth. I couldn't do anything. He ran on past, and

then I ran over to the balcony, I ran up the stairs and went on the balcony, and when I got up there, the only one there was Ralph Abernathy, and he had a towel around King's neck. And I started doing what reporters do, you know. But, a lot of things happened, too many for me to even take the time here now to tell you about them.

But what I am convinced of to this day is that that guy was shot, that guy I saw, the figure in the bushes shot and killed King. I don't think it was James Earl Ray from the bathroom window. But the most amazing thing is there was a guy who came forward, his name was Harold Carter, Cornbread Carter, said he and his buddy was laying in them bushes over there drinking wine, ran out of bush, ran out of wine and his buddy goes to get another bottle, hears somebody coming through the bushes, thinks it's his buddy coming back with another bottle he's laying in a cardboard box, as bums used to do then. I knew this because we had a hobo district up there in Clearfield by the railroad tracks, and these guys used to be down there in them cardboard boxes, so it was, I understood it. He says the guy didn't, it wasn't his buddy, this guy went right past him, said he's close enough to kick gravel on him, but he didn't. Those old drunkards up there laying in them boxes, and the guy goes, he says, right up to the front of the bushes where I saw this guy, and he says he takes a position there and he watches him. He's laying in his box, he says he watched him, watched this guy go inside this baggy stuff. I said he had something baggy on, I didn't know what it was, he said he went in there in some baggy pants or something, and pulled out this weapon and with a shot killed King and then jumped off the ledge and walked out and walked away. Well, all they said, that's all bullshit. As a matter of fact, he got out of the box and went straight to the authorities, the story was discounted. But one of the things I noticed, the next day I went over to Memphis. When I came back, there were no bushes. Someone, now that's not Tom, Dick and Harry going onto the crime scene, someone had cut those bushes within an inch of the ground. I still didn't at that point, I didn't know, and the New York Times started an investigation and didn't even put me on the investigating team. Although I had a bigger story, I mean, in the thirty days after King was killed, I probably had more front page bylines than any other reporter in the paper. But I'm following the movement and this thing and that thing, everybody's doing stuff, they had this investigative team, I didn't even give that two thoughts because, they said, "Hey, we know who did it," and James Earl Ray, indeed, when they caught him said "Yeah, I did it." So there was no investigation, then afterwards, later he said, "Well I didn't do it." People said, "Yeah right, because your ass...now you see you're not going to be a hero down South, this ain't like some white boys killing black people and nothing happens,

this is some different shit, your ass got 99 years," and da da da. So I didn't pay no attention.

But the key thing is two things. One is, nobody investigating ever came to Earl Caldwell. One of the guys I quoted in my story was King's driver, Solomon Jones, because he said he saw this guy in the bushes and thought that was the – he was different from Jesse Jackson and those people because he was in the car, he saw it, look over there and then he reacted as the car shot up and back. I think it's instinct. I can't run, but he went to the federal penitentiary and he claimed that he was only in prison because he wouldn't change his story of what he said he saw at the moment of the assassination, which is what I quoted him in my story, which is very interesting. Another person who said they saw the figure in the bushes was this woman Theola Shavers who dropped the Coca-Cola bottle, she told me how when King's door opened, she was going across that balcony, she said, "I just happened to be looking, I was right, right at his door, the door opened and I looked," and she said, "Just close, close." King was right there in her face, they were face to face, she was talking about how exciting that was, she had gone on, then after King come out and lingered there, she was going down the stairs and walking away from the motel, away from the balcony over towards the office when the shot come. She's walking, she says she saw this figure: it was a kid. But what happened to me was, what turned things around for me in my head was the government had created a situation with me and the Black Panthers and I could not longer stay on that story, so the New York Times didn't know what to do with me. So they sent me down to Los Angeles to cover a murder trial of Manson, Charlie Manson, and a bunch of crazy kids were killing people and this murder trial was going on. There was another guy named Moe Waters who had been covering it, but they said his people were, Manson, were so crazy, he couldn't stand another minute with them, and he was stir crazy. So he said, Caldwell you go down and stay as long as you can. And I went down but we overlapped, you know while Moe's filling me in, and one of the things Moe had done was he had headed up the investigation the New York Times had done into the investigation of the King assassination. We met for about two weeks, exchanging information, we're supposed to be talking about the Manson murders, but it was about Martin Luther King. What Moe told me when we put our information together, it so changed things for me, that was the first time that I knew that I was probably going to leave the newspaper because I knew that something that I, I knew that I was onto something that was extraordinary, and of course it did turn out probably, oh, it wasn't much longer after that that I did leave the paper. I mean it was a couple of years

actually but, you know, these are things that take time. But, I forget when the third, oh I know. I come to the Angela Davis trial after that so I don't know, it was a while, and I wasn't going to quit but, I felt that the New York Times wanted to publish my book, and I'm thinking, you, you're going to be in it. But, one of the things that happens, and it happened to me, is that, when your employer has an interest in these things, which in the Black Panther case the New York Times did, and you have to put yourself in a situation and go against your employer, you lose your job. They don't fire you, they don't tell you you have to get out, but you do. And it was never the same with me at the New York Times, although I love the paper, I still consider myself a Timesman. I didn't go back in the building for years. I went back, the publisher greeted me, "Earl, this is your home," and he did some wonderful things for me and helped me with some other stuff, but it just changes things.

And the New York Times is a big, powerful corporation and they have interests. And the government in its deceitful way did not attack the corporation, but the most vulnerable person, which was me. And its action was all aimed at me, an individual. Again, I was truly blessed because, as I said, that support brought me the greatest constitutional lawyer in America then. I think it was professor Anthony Amsterdam, he became my lawyer, and he became my lawyer because he would do it with no fee, so that was a great thing. I later had this case after it was decided in the Supreme Court, people said we lost. We didn't lose, they stole the case. The sitting Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, William Rehnquist's first case, this was one of those, his very first term on the Court. And he cast the deciding vote in that case, although when the case was going on, when all this was going on, everyone down, Fred Greer would say, "Man, there's a lawyer down in the Justice Department really on you, name is Rehnquist. You should have heard what he said about you in the speech he made to the Chamber of Commerce today." He's saying all these things, doing all these actions, when he never accused himself, he shouldn't have been in that case. Thurgood Marshall told me that later. One of the things is I got a great friendship with Thurgood out of it. After the case was over he asked me to come see him. I sort of became his eyes and ears for maybe the next five years, it was wonderful. I'd go down to the Supreme Court once a month, twice a month, every time I'd be in Washington or had time, I'd go see Thurgood. We'd talk sometimes for hours, he introduced me to other Justices, it was great. I gotta go make a speech.