

Marcus Garvey: Look for Me in the Whirlwind Interviews

In the course of making the PBS (www.pbs.org) *Marcus Garvey: Look for Me in the Whirlwind* (2005, 2001) via of archival film, photographs and documents to uncover the story of Marcus Garvey who between 1916 and 1921 built the largest Black mass movement in world history, filmmaker Stanley Nelson interviewed several people who were members of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in Garvey's time. The following are transcripts of five recollections of Garvey and his movement.

Joseph Bailey

What was the feeling among people about the Black Star Line?

Oh, it -- it -- it caused tremendous excitement. Ahm, I remember the, ahm ... on a trip to New York, ah, from school, I spent a week in New York and attended Garvey celebrations on 138th Street, where his headquarters were. Ah, the enthusiasm -- enthusiasm of the West Indians was almost unbelievable. Garvey had some followers among native American blacks, but the vast majority of his following here in New York were persons of West Indian descent, especially Jamaicans. And it was weeks of celebration and excitement and enthusiasm. Ah, it's almost unbelievable to think how, ah, these people could not understand really how difficult it would be for the ... Garvey program to be really successful. Especially, of course, they didn't naturally know, but, as it turned out, especially since they had been deceived, the Garvey people, including Marcus Garvey himself has been, ah, deceived as to the condition of those -- the Black Star Line.



What was the Black Star Line's mistake?

In making a purchase of those liners without, ah, being led by experts. He was deceived about the condition of those -- of those ships and overpaid for -- for our own -- what their value should have been. It was a disaster for the movement and turned out to be a disaster for Mr. Garvey.

What was the influence of the "Garvey Must Go" campaign?

The "Garvey Must Go" program, ah, campaign was instituted because there was a feeling on the part of certain leaders of the NAACP and of the Urban League and, ah, A. Phillip Randolph and his associates, ah ... the *Messenger* magazine, ah, which was very important -- it was the organ of -- of Randolph and his associates -- was based upon the fact that, ah ... these men were integrationists.

They had dedicated themselves and the programs that they believed in to, ah, winning for black Americans the implementation of -- of their full civil rights -- the ballot, work opportunities, et cetera, all of the elements that -- that go into making for, ah, equality and citizenship. And to them, spreading a propaganda about the possibilities of -- of a Black to Africa program or, ah, implementation of Booker Washington's philosophy of -- of, ah, ah, accommodation and acceptance of white America's, ahm, program for -- for blacks, made Garvey an enemy to a full citizenship program for blacks in this country and in - - implementation of the rights guaranteed to -- to -- to blacks by the Constitution. And, ah... they wanted him out of the country. They felt that his propaganda was hurting a -- a program of, ah -- of equal, ah, rights under -- under the Constitution. And -- and that it was an acceptance of white America's, ah, program, ah ... and a feeling that -- that the Garvey program didn't call for the advance of blacks in this country, but, ahm, a far-fetched idea in the future of full rights in some other part of the world, mainly Africa.

Virginia Collins

What was Marcus Garvey like as a speaker?

Marcus Garvey was a very compassionate speaker. He was a person that, when he spoke, that you could feel what he was saying and you know that he meant what he said. Now he was dynamic, but not dynamic in the way that most people look at it today. His, ah, words were compassionate and his words were, ah, from his soul. He spoke from his soul, and, ah, you had this, ah, feeling that you were there, that you are he, too, that you felt the same thing that he was speaking of, you felt that you just want to go on and do what he was talking about... And, ah, Garvey spoke the words that you thought you was speaking yourself. In other words, if you had been in the position that Garvey was in, you would have been speaking the same thing. They were in your thoughts, in your mind, in your brains, but still you did not speak them the way Garvey spoke them. And it... ah, it was in one accord. It was just like, ah, everybody had one mind.



What were Black people's lives like in the South that made Garvey's movement so attractive?

Life was, ah, fearful for black people. For one thing, ahm, people had just come from World War I and, ahm, ah, lynchings was going on. Soldiers was being lynched in their uniforms. Ah, there was no jobs then for black people. Ah, black people was having a hard time. Education was a sore, ahm, a sore need for black people. There weren't many schools for black people. It was just a hard time, a hard... people had a hard way to go. And, ah, Garvey had put into black people, ahm, your own business. You know, "Get your own business. Get yourselves together as a group of people." And, ah, he talked about trade with Africa and the people began to look that-away. In other words, people began to have a world perspective, but in having a world perspective, you also looked around you and you knew that things were not right where you were. Black people did not have the right to vote. And that was one of your major things.

Talk about the importance of the uniforms and buttons and hats, et cetera.

The flamboyance of the Marcus Garvey Movement was important to black people because it made a statement. It set you apart from other people or other organizations or other things. Whatever, it set you apart, and when people saw you, they knew that you were a Garveyite. The plumage, brass buttons, the, ah, tassels, all of these things that the uniform said was a statement that black people made that "We are together." That was a physical statement that these uniforms and plumage made to the rest of the world that "We are Garveyites and proud of it." It also gave you that proudness.

What happened the day Garvey passed through New Orleans being deported?

Ah, the day Garvey passed through New Orleans, ah, a lot of people gathered very early so to make sure that they caught the last glimpse of him here in the United States. And, ah, we all went out to the river... And the people could stand on the levee and stand close to the river and, ah, you know, they were for miles and miles, a lot of people. They just stood up and they could wave. They could wave, ahm, you know, waved at Garvey. They saw him, they thought, like I said. I thought I saw him wave, but you could not... he wasn't close enough because you... the ship is high, way up. So it wasn't close enough for you to recognize it was Garvey. But people just felt it was Garvey. Those that were close enough could see him, but the people in general, they just was waving, waving, waving, waving and crying and waving, crying and waving because it was just like you was losing your own, or losing yourself. That's how people felt. "What are we gonna do now?" That was uppermost... It was just like your own leaving you, and for days after he left people just talked and cried and talked and cried. And we had this one lady, she says, "Oh, when y'all leave" ... she said, "When you leave here, if I'm dead, dig up my bones, bring my bones to Africa," 'cause people were so endowed with they had researched over the waters and Africa was our brothers and out sisters. And this is the real theme of, ah, Garvey's Movement. "Africa, Unite."

How did Garvey's deportation affect the movement?

The effect on the movement, on the Garvey's Movement was chaos, because as soon as Garvey left, ah, people felt lost. They felt that something had happened, that a part of them was gone. So people had to regroup, had to get themselves together and again to go within themselves and to think about what we do now. And people began to meet at their homes, at, ah, different areas wherever they could be, wherever they could meet, and then the... the, ah, authorities, they was hard on the people. The menfolk, if they had your name and everything and you were a member of the UNIA [Universal Negro Improvement Association], you'd lose your job. And, ah, they was trying to ... the authorities was trying to break up the groupings of people. So you had to meet in disguise. That was one of the reasons why the Garvey Movement was so thorough in being broke up, because people were afraid because they had to work. They had families, they had to feed their children and, more than that, they would put our men in jail. Our men just had to be careful when the UNIA ... you couldn't even speak it. You whispered it. You couldn't say, "I'm a U... UNIA member. I'm with Marcus Garvey." You whispered it, (Whispering) "Marcus Garvey," whatever.

Estelle James

How did you hear the news that Garvey was being let out of jail and coming to New Orleans?



The night that, ah, we received the news that Marcus Garvey was being, ah, shipped through New Orleans on the way to Jamaica from Atlanta penitentiary, it was on a Sunday night at a mass meeting and we were gathered in the assembly hall, in Liberty Hall, as usual and during the intercourse of the evening the African Legion who stands on the door, he comes up to the rostrum and whispered something in the ear of the presiding officer, who was the president, and then he went back to the door and he brought back a man dressed in cover-alls that we knew was -- we called him longshoreman because he works on the docks. And, ah, after he left out, the president then informed us of what message he had received from this man. And that was the fact that Mr. Garvey would be arriving in New Orleans in the morning, which would have been Monday morning, and, ah, the ship that he was on -- I think it was the "Salamika." And when he announced that to the membership, the house just went up into uproar. People, some was crying, some was laughing, some was hugging, some was kissing, some was -- oh, it was - - it was really something. And on that night, many people did not go home.

They stayed right there at Liberty Hall, because they wanted to be the first ones to get to the riverfront in the morning to -- to receive Mr. Garvey when he came in, ah, on the Mississippi River. And now those that went home or those that -- that had to send children to school or get husbands off to work or whatever, ah, maybe perhaps go to work themselves -- but those who did not have to go, they stayed right at Liberty Hall and left from there that morning at daylight to be on the riverfront when -- where they could receive Mr. Garvey when he came in.

What happened that morning?

It was a Monday morning in November, a cold, drizzly, damp November New Orleans morning. Ahm ... a lot of people walked from where they were to the riverfront where Mr. Garvey's ship was docked. And some rode the bus, or the streetcar -- there was no buses or anything. There was streetcars then. And they -- as they got on, I imagine the conductors got tired of, ah, asking for fares, there were such crowds. It was more like a Mardi Gras day in New Orleans on that particular day going out to see Marcus Garvey on this ship. And, ahm, I imagine the conductors got tired of asking for fares, so some people rode for nothing. And the fare was only seven cents, but I imagine he just got -- he said, "Well, I'd rather be safe -- I'd rather be safe than sorry." So he just let them ride and they was just packed on top of each other on the streetcar going out to the riverfront to see Marcus Garvey.

And after they -- when they reached there -- now this is what my mother told me 'cause I did not go. She made me go to school that day, and I've never forgiven her for that, because I really would like to have seen Marcus Garvey in person. Ahm, anyway, she said that as the people gathered there on the -- on the wharf, Mr. Garvey was not allowed to land. He had to stay on board ship. He did not put his foot on land. But during that time it was a little man on the ship who was going and coming, going and coming, backwards and forward, backwards and forward, bringing packages, carrying this, carrying messages. My mother said she's sure -- she was sure that that man was glad when that ship sailed so he could get some rest, because he was constantly going because Mr. Garvey had a tremendous amount of people sending and giving him gifts and money and presents and everything, flowers and everything. And he spoke to the people, bid them farewell and wishing them well and asking them to hold on, keep the fort. And as the ship was moving out from the docks, the people were singing, ah, the song that we sing for all president generals, which was written especially for Marcus Garvey, "God Bless Our President." And as they were singing the hymn -- we called it a hymn of the UNIA -- Marcus Garvey was waiving a white handkerchief and Mama said until the day she died, she would see Marcus Garvey waving that white handkerchief as that ship went out to sea. And the waves of the Mississippi River seemed like it was working according to the way the song was going, the way that people was singing. It seemed like the waves was in harmony with that song. And that's a day that a lot of people, a lot of people will never forget, those that's alive. And I know I will never forget it as it was told to me.

John Rousseau

What do you remember about the day when you met Marcus Garvey?



The day I met Marcus Garvey was one of the most exciting days of my life. It was filled with anticipation from the early, earliest part of the day because... Marcus Garvey was sort of an... a god, an idol for the black people in this area. Everybody was happy that Marcus Garvey outlined a program where he would help... help the black people and assist them to go back to Africa. And, ah, we had been so poorly treated by the white people. I was only 12 years old at that time, and in my 12 years I had experienced so much mistreatment at the hands of white people. When we'd walk along the plank walks... if a white person came along, no matter who it was, a white child, a white man, a white woman, if they came along, you had to get off the plank walk and stand in the mud until they passed. And I didn't... I didn't like that from a little boy... made me feel that the white people considered themselves so much better than me. In fact, I had gotten to the point to wishing that I would get in a position where I could treat the white people like they're treating me. And so when I got this chance to go meet Marcus Garvey, I was fully aware that he was our savior.

Why was the newspaper so important to the Garvey Movement?

The Negro World, ah, carried a message to the people, and a lot of people who did not know about the...about the, ah, Garvey Movement learned by *The Negro World*. And *The Negro World* in... influenced a lot of other people to read not only *The Negro World*, but the other black journals... And in New Orleans *The Negro World* just carried the message and, ah, it told not only what was happening in the United States, but it told what was happening all over the world, all over, say, Jamaica, ah, Africa, and other parts of the world. And it was educational. And it spread the... spread the Garvey Movement while it educated the people.

How did the Garvey Movement tie Black people together?

The Garvey Movement made me feel that I was part of something. It made me feel that I was something. It made me feel that I was a human being. I was not, ah, something to be trod underfoot, but... Marcus Garvey awakened a pride in myself and made me feel that, ah, some day we would enjoy all of the benefits that the other races were enjoying. So the Marcus Garvey Movement was just a wonderful part of my life.

Did people here know about the NAACP?

Well, the UNIA, ah, was a black man's organization. The NAACP in New Orleans, it included the black...the, ah, negro people as a race, but it included, ah, different color...color barriers, the light skins and the dark-skinned negroes, ah, had their own little things going in the NAACP. The UNIA, there was no color...no color line in it. You were black, you were just black. That was all. And, ah, the...the, ah, black people felt a sort of kinship to the...to the UNIA rather than to the NAACP... There was an old saying that "If you...if you are bright, you're right. If you're brown, stick around. If you're black, stand back." And that was the feeling and, ah, in the Negro race itself there was that color line and, ah, Garvey made you proud to be black. That was all of it. And I don't think in any of his speeches he referred to the light-skins as being better or the dark skins as being better, because all of that was a hand-me-down from slavery.

Frances Warner

What do you remember about Garvey speaking?

Marcus Garvey was a small structure, small built, but he spoke powerful and everybody listened. You could see that the attention was drawn to him whenever he spoke. But I enjoyed, ah, really more looking at the parades. Once in a while I would go to the hall, not often, because it was a very long affair. So the parades is what I was interested in.



Why did the Garvey Movement catch on so much at that time?

Well, I can only speak from my father's experience. He felt that Garvey was directing his black people to understand that they were just as important as the white race, and we had a home and we should group together, black people should all eventually return to their home, their native home, Africa. And that's the way he felt. And that's the way my father put it forth to us, that we also -- we should acknowledge that we belong there and that is our root. And eventually he said all black people will return to Africa.

How were Black people treated here in terms of education?

Well, to me, when I went to school, very little was spoken about the black history, very little. To learn anything about it, I can't recall. To me it was always Europe and the white folks, but not the black people. There was nothing in public school that made you feel as though you, ah -- it was important for you to know that you also had a beginning somewhere. The only thing we knew is that you were brought here as slaves from your home.

But that's -- it -- so that -- that's how my father came to keep pushing it and pushing it into us to remember that we, too, have a root. And it's the white folks that brought us here, but we don't belong here. And someday he hoped to live to see everybody going back to their roots. That was my father's wish.