



Episode 5, 2012: Woolworth Sign

Matt: My name is Matt Flynt. I'm from Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

The man that sold me the signs said these two signs came from the downtown Winston-Salem stores. Which I knew was the exact location of the 1960 sit-ins that ended segregated lunch counters, restaurants and would spread and helped the whole civil rights movement.

Matt: I want to know if these two signs were actually from the Fourth and Liberty Woolworth that hosted the Winston-Salem Sit-Ins

Tukufu: Signs are important. Jim Crow was all about signs. They burned crosses in front of people's homes as a sign. No blacks served here - as a sign. Those signs gave meaning to some of the most degrading forms of human interaction that we know about. Let's get busy here.

Matt: Tukufu, great to meet you! Come on in. Here are the signs.

Tukufu: So do you know much about the sit-ins in Winston-Salem?

Matt: Well, I know they began a week after the Greensboro Four.

Tukufu: The sit-ins in Greensboro North Carolina grabbed headlines across the country. Matt says the Winston-Salem protests are less well-known, but were the first in the state to win a victory for desegregated lunch counters.

Matt: Just knowing that they also took place in my own community and were successful, that's very important to me.

Tukufu: So what do you know about where these signs came from?

Matt: Well, the man I purchased them from used to clean all the local Woolworths. And when they closed in the mid-90s, he was able to retrieve them. They were in a back room on the floor.

Tukufu: Matt was told his signs came from a Woolworths on Fourth and Liberty Streets. That's where 22 protesters were arrested on February 23rd, 1960.

Matt: You can see where they would've been framed in something....over a doorway.

Tukufu: You know this is a really profound, historic moment. 1960, North Carolina is a, a pivotal space. Things kind of lulled down since desegregating the schools and all this stuff and now, bam.

Matt: All it represents, the good and the bad, it happened here in Winston and I just wanna, want to preserve it.

Tukufu: Alright 6 feet long, about 10 inches and a quarter going up and down.

Tukufu: So you mind if I just take some pictures of these?

Tukufu: Thank you very much.

Imagine 50 years ago for me to come in a restaurant like this would've been a revolutionary act.

There was this system called Jim Crow. If you were an African American you could not sit certain places. You could not live certain places. I'm sitting here because they sat there.

You know I do know they had a sit-in in Winston-Salem. I don't know much about the details of it, but that we should easily be able to find out.

My first stop is the local Forsyth County Public Library, Librarian Molly Rawls offers to search their photo collection for images of the Fourth and Liberty Woolworth store.

Tukufu: Excellent.

The sit-ins were covered extensively. In fact, the protesters needed the media to highlight their struggle.

Tukufu: Okay, here it is.

Protests against the practice of not giving Negroes service at sit-down food counters spread yesterday to Winston-Salem and Durham, and here is the guy who started it all: Carl Matthews. The protest was started about noon at the S & H Kress Company. This says "Kress." Matthew's signs are from Woolworth.

Alright. Both Negro and White were arrested about noon today at the F.W. Woolworth Store at Fourth and Liberty Streets and charged with trespassing at White lunch counters. Fourth and Liberty. That's the Woolworth Matt thinks his signs are from.

But no pictures. It's clear from these articles that the grassroots action, led mostly by students and young people, is spreading across the country---and being heard in Washington DC, where Congress was considering Civil Rights legislation.

Here we go! A sit-in, at the Woolworths. And there's a sign!

Look at these letters; they're big. These letters are huge. The font and the proportion of the letters are slightly different.

Tukufu: We have a Woolworth sign above their heads, but it looks nothing like our sign. Maybe Matt's signs were in another part of the store. Or maybe they weren't even hanging during this time.

Lunch counters were closed at Kress, Walgreen's and two downtown Woolworth stores. Wait there were two downtown Woolworths and both were occupied by sit-ins? I'm not sure Matt knows this. Maybe this photo wasn't from the store on Fourth and Liberty where the arrests were made---but from another Woolworths instead. The caption doesn't say.

Molly was only able to locate one photo of the Liberty Street store from 1960 but it's from a parade, not a sit-in.

Molly: I'm going to show you what I found. A Christmas parade in Winston, Salem. So most likely the signs would be the same in this image as they were during the Sit-Ins earlier in the year.

Tukufu: There is a sign there, and the sign IS over the door.

Molly: Yes.

Tukufu: Molly shows me a photo of the other downtown Woolworths store, from 1955. This must be the second Woolworths I read about.

Tukufu: So those do look like we got a pretty good match.

Tukufu: It does look like it could be six feet. But this is 1955 and this is another store.

Molly: Yes.

Tukufu: And it's a possibility that these two signs are my signs.

Molly: It could be.

Tukufu: Matt told me the guy who sold these signs to him used to clean floors at all the local Woolworths. Maybe he mixed up the stores?

One person who might be able to unravel this is somebody who was there. My researchers tracked down Carl Matthews, the leader of the Winston-Salem sit-ins. He says he has personal photos that were never published.

Carl brought fellow protestor Bill Stevens – one of the white college students arrested with Carl at Woolworths. We're meeting at the store on Fourth and Liberty, which is currently for sale. We go in the side entrance, near the blacks-only counter.

Carl: This is where the black stand-up counter was. Black people would get their food, and be able to eat it, right here.

Around the corner was the whites only counter that Bill and Carl fought to desegregate. But there's no trace of it, or any signage.

Sensing the importance of the movement and fearing the possibility of violence, Carl hired the photographer to document what he was about to do.

Carl: That's a picture of the counters.

Tukufu: Being roped off.

On February 8TH Carl had entered the Kress Five and Dime Store. He had been inspired by the four protesters in Greensboro, who had taken their seats a week earlier.

Carl: They had done something that I knew was necessary. I went and took a seat. It seemed like the whole world came to a standstill. The waitress-says, "We don't serve colored here." I says, "I know." I heard a voice, said, "There's a nigger sitting down at the counter." And then everybody began to look, and to buzz, and to buzz, and to buzz. "What's wrong with this nigger? Let's kill this nigger." Now there was one white person, he did this to me and I closed my eyes. Because I wasn't going to hit back.

Tukufu: Why?

Carl: If I had hit back I would have set us back, as black people

Tukufu: This form of active non-violence championed by civil rights pioneers like martin Luther King and Rosa Parks inspired Matthews and the entire sit in movement.

Carl: And I had been praying all the time. After I had finished the 23rd Psalm, I walked to the door, and I felt 10 feet tall, because there had been no violence, no bloodshed, just progress.

Tukufu: Although I don't see any images of our signs, Carl's photographs, and story, makes the protestors courage and confrontations very real.

Carl: We would go from one store to another store. And we would close them down

Tukufu: What do you mean, you closed those counters down?

Carl: They – They stopped serving food.

Tukufu: They stopped serving.

Carl: That's the way they responded. And our response, then, we'll close them down every day until they serve us.

Tukufu: For one hundred and seven days, Carl and some five hundred local blacks took turns sitting in.

Tukufu: And when do you get involved in the movement,?

Bill: I was a student at Wake Forest, and a couple of us in the class thought, well, maybe we could join them.

Carl: I said, "I do not trust them, because we don't know what their purpose is. I just don't trust them." So, one of the fellas says, "Well, why don't you talk with them?" Says, "Talk with them." About five of them, we invited them over to my house. And in the five was his lady friend... Margaret Dutton. And – And she was so convincing, and she said, "We'll march with you." And whenever I said, "Did you know – Somebody's liable to try to kill us downtown." She says that if they tried to kill us, we'll all go down together.

Tukufu: Bill explains how white students from Wake Forest and Winston Salem Teachers College -- joined the sit-in right here, on February 23rd.

Bill: My fiancé, Margaret, was one of the ones that sat down.

Bill: And she ordered pie, and something to drink. She then slid it over to the Winston-Salem State Teachers College student who was sitting next to her.

Bill: They realized they'd been tricked, because a Negro had been served.

And it seemed like instantly, the police were here.

Bill: We said, "Well, we're not leaving." And so, we were escorted to the county jail."

Carl: In other words, we were arrested

Bill: We were arrested---escorted, that's the little cute soft word---and

Carl: they didn't escort us, they arrested us.

Bill: Well they took us over to the county jail, they finger printed us.

Tukufu: So you were arrested?

Bill: We were arrested.

Tukufu: Bill says although the events of that day are seared in his memory, the signage around him is not.

Bill: No, I can't say that I have seen it. But it does seem to me to have some symbolic value, in that we're looking through that sign, and seeing the future.

On May 25TH, 1960, after one hundred and seven days of protest, Carl took his seat one more time and made history.

Carl: I think it was the same seat, that I had spent those six hours on. And I ordered a drink.

Carl: And after I finished the drink, she took the glass, and threw it in the garbage can. And I just got up and walked out, and that was the end of that.

Tukufu: But you had effectively desegregated the counters in Winston-Salem.

Carl: That's right.

Tukufu: By the fall of 1960, the North Carolina sit-ins had spread widely, to some 80 cities across the south. I'd love to be able to tell Matt that the demonstrators walked under his signs but Carl's photographer had focused on the human drama.

Before I go let me just check out the front of the store. I mean, if we look at the sign up here, everything is, you know, is as it was. All the letters are gone. Uh And the only thing remaining is the diamond up there. But you can see where the "F. W. Woolworth Company" was. And you have the awning the original awning.

Matt believes that his sign came from above the doors, he thought they were hanging above the doors or they were framed above the doors.

But there's no frame in that window. And so, there's no evidence for us to confirm that our sign was here.

Tukufu: Oh man! Check this out!

Tukufu: Matt I want to thank you for allowing uh us to pursue this investigation. You know, the sit-ins were powerful, because they changed, really, a lot about what we think about each other. You know, part of what segregation was about, is so that two individuals—one looking like you, and one looking like me—would not occupy the same space.

I tell Matt that the best photograph I'd found of a sign that looked like his, came from a different Woolworths, where there had been no arrests.

Tukufu: Those signs look just like yours.

But as I left the Liberty Street store---I remembered that Molly Rawls had shown me a photograph, with a barely visible sign on the façade....

Our sign needs a frame and here we have a frame. Let's take the measurements here. Voila! Six feet. Let's see here. And ten and a quarter. The measurements are right.

It's very clear to me that your signs could have fit in that frame in 1960. It could have been in there February 23rd, when they dragged those people off to jail.

Matt: Wow.

Tukufu: So, what do you think about your glass signs, now?

Matt: I guess I'm kind of speechless right now, but.

Matt: You know, they obviously served more than just a piece of glass or a sign that stood over a door. They uh, they are a symbol for civil rights. So, thank you so much for all your work.

Tukufu: Thank you.

Matt: I appreciate it.

Tukufu: Thank you.

Two months after Carl Matthews sat down and was served at Winston-Salem Kress Five and Dime, Greensboro desegregated their lunch counters on July 25, 1960.

That same year, some leaders of the sit-in movement met at Shaw University in North Carolina to form the student non-violent coordinating committee. SNCC would be a leading voice in the increasingly powerful---and volatile---civil rights movement; starting voting drives in the deep South, participating in the freedom rides and helping to organize the 1963 march on Washington.