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Photo Credit: Dan Carraco

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The Second Greensboro Verdict

BY JAMES RESTON, JR.

During the filming of "88 Seconds in Greensboro," the PBS Frontline treatment of the 1979 Greensboro, North Carolina killings by Ku Klux Klansmen, I was standing behind the lights, chatting casually with one of our willing extras. He was known simply as "Big Man" for obvious reasons, and he towered over me, as he waited to shoot a sequence on the breath machine that we were using to visualize how cotton mills test for brown lung disease. The disease, so widespread in the cotton industry, was the grievance that had attracted the young Communist doctors to the cotton mills of Greensboro, an attraction which eventually led to their death. Big Man's role in the documentary was simply to blow as hard as he could into a tube, while a gauge measured his lung power. The sequence is what is known affectionately in the television business as "wallpaper," for narration on the cotton mills would eventually be laid over it.

As we watched another mill worker huff and blow into the tube under the instructions of Marty Nathan, the widow of Dr. Michael Nathan, who was slain on November 3, 1979, and Dr. Paul Bermanzohn, who had miraculously survived a bullet in the brain, Big Man observed offhandedly how everyone had cleaned up their story in the three years since the shooting. Since his friends were the victims, I was intrigued, and I asked him what he meant. He proceeded, through my insistent prodding, to reveal a startling new detail about the Communist Workers Party (CWP) planning for November 3, for he had been present in the important strategy sessions in the days before the "Death to the Klan" march.

James Reston, Jr. lives in Hume, Virginia. His film "88 Seconds in Greensboro" appeared in the Public Broadcasting System's "Frontline" series. He is the author of *Sherman's March and Vietnam*, forthcoming from Mac-Millan.