

i ain't lying

\$4.00

Volume 4

Fall, 1989

No. 1



Mr. Charlie Ward, Storyteller

Six years have passed since we took Volume 3 of I AIN'T LYING to the printer and began interviews for Volume 4. Each new school year brought students eager to learn how to take pictures, print them in our darkroom, and work on the interviews. The past two years our progress has been hindered as we shared our crowded work space with young children who came enthusiastically to after school art.

As **Mississippi: Cultural Crossroads** grew and took on more activities, my attention was pulled away from I AIN'T LYING to organize our Quilt Contest and Exhibition, now in its third year, to arrange our visual artists' residencies in local schools, to see to the printing of **youngFolks** notecards, to schedule local performances of national touring groups, to coordinate the four month residency of Cornerstone Theater, and to nurture **Peanut Butter and Jelly Theater**, which recently completed a two month tour of the state performing "Be a Reader" for children and "Words and Memories" for senior citizens. Much of the material for "Words and Memories" was adapted from the first three volumes of I AIN'T LYING.

In spite of our expanded community activities and inadequate space, work continued on I AIN'T LYING. Much has changed since we laid out Volume 3. Students are now cutting and pasting electronically on the two Leading Edge computers we were able to purchase through a grant from the

Governor's Office of Federal/State Programs. We have a waxer to fix our student sketches in place--no more lining up the text and trying to get it down straight with rubber cement.

The students have different faces, but remain willing workers, eager to learn and accomplish something a little special. The men and women we interviewed continue to be the grandparents and neighbors of the students and to reflect the community's history. I apologize to the students who worked on I AIN'T LYING but didn't have the pleasure of taking their work to the printer, and to the men and women who have waited so long to see their story in print.

I wish to thank my daughters for working on I AIN'T LYING: Jessica, who spent hours transcribing tapes as a Highlander Summer Youth Intern; Sarah, who checked transcripts and helped edit articles; and Emily, who spent much of her last two summer vacations checking and typing transcripts, teaching the students to use the computers, introducing her father to Wordperfect, and helping with the editing, especially with Charlie Ward.

All of us who worked on this issue of I AIN'T LYING wish to thank James Miller, who suggested we interview Charlie Ward, and Carl Brandon, who arranged the interview with Mr. Ward and helped Harry Buck ask the right questions; Jerry Bangham for continuing to share computer technology with us; William Dowery for renting

us our cramped space for the past year in spite of wanting to use it himself; John Horhn and Linda Owens, formerly of the Governor's Office of Federal/State Programs, for encouraging us and helping us secure funding; LaBertha Coleman, Derra Dukes, Doris Hinton, and Dorothy Wren, who helped us administer the grant; and finally the board of **Mississippi: Cultural Crossroads** for their continued support and encouragement.

My thanks go to Trophia Robinson, who worked all summer, often alone, at all of the numerous tasks that needed to be done. She spent hours on end in a very hot darkroom, printing pictures taken by former students so they would be ready when this year's students came back to school.

Finally we all thank David Crosby, who has helped us throughout, going on interviews, fixing darkroom equipment, teaching me so I could teach the students, helping with proposals, researching computers and printers and working to master Wordperfect so he could layout, with our help, our edited transcripts, sketches, and photos. We value his editorial judgment, developed over the years as an English teacher, and are happy to have someone to ask when we don't know.

Above all, we wish to thank the men and women who shared their lives with us and, in doing so, have helped write the history of Claiborne County.

--Patricia Crosby

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Working with I AINT LYING has been a rewarding experience. I have learned many things that will stay with me the rest of my life. Editing a magazine involved more than I ever would have thought. I've learned how to use a camera, develop film, print pictures. I've also had to transcribe an interview and edit it. Everyone who worked on our staff got a lesson in responsibility. We all had to do our part and learn to work together. My only regret is not getting a chance to do an interview. I am looking forward to meeting the people when we take them the finished magazine.

As our magazine is reaching the final stages, I feel that every minute was worth it. What could be more important than helping the men and women of the community tell their history! Our interviewees have so many stories and experiences to tell, so much advice to give, and so many things to pass on to coming generations.

Of all the people who will be educated, entertained, and amused by our magazine, no one will gain as much as I have. Working hard on the staff, I've made many good friends and have enjoyed a feeling of accomplishment. I hope any other jobs I will have in the future will be as good an experience as this one.

--Darcy Schraufnagel

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60, Wilson; 62, Farr;
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63 (top right), Wilson
63 (bottom), Dee; 66, Wilson;
67, Farr; 69, Steward

I have been interested in the I AIN'T LYING magazine since seeing the article published in the 1982 issue about my grandfather, Mr. Early Wren. So when I was asked about the job I jumped at the opportunity.

Working with the I AIN'T LYING magazine has been a wonderful experience. I thought the job was all about taking pictures and developing them, but it was much more than that. Transcribing and sketches needed to be done. After a while I realized that I had to have determination and dedication.

Days passed before I was really convinced that this magazine was going somewhere. Finally, the pages were getting laid out and I was so happy. Even though it took some late hours getting it done, I feel it was worth it. I learned that being prompt and reliable are very important on any job. Also it gave me the opportunity to learn to budget and spend my money wisely.

Each person in this magazine is important and unique in his own way. Each of them has something to offer to the community. Even though I didn't get to know them personally--and I wish I had--they are all special people.

This job has given me more opportunities than the average teenager could ever ask for. I am grateful to Mrs. Crosby for this job and I AIN'T LYING!

--Tara Yvette Wren



Harry Buck interviews Mr. Charlie Ward on his front porch.

Charlie Ward

Interview by Harry Buck and Roderick Red
Transcribed by Fellecchia Archie
and Jessica Crosby
Edited by Tara Wren and Emilye Crosby

Last spring Roderick Red and I interviewed Mr. Charlie Ward, a very intelligent, wise, and funny man. I really enjoyed my interview with Mr. Ward, because he told so many amusing stories.

Mr. Ward lives in Sugar Hill with his wife, Mrs. Estella Ward. The day we visited him his nephew, Mr. Carl Brandon, was there also.

I went to Mr. Ward's house looking for the same old dull story, but believe me, this was not an ordinary interview. At first I was reluctant about doing an interview because I thought I was a photographer and I shouldn't do anything else but take pictures.

But when Mr. Ward started telling some of his stories, I found myself getting involved in what he was saying.

Mr. Ward is a great storyteller. He told us a story about the time he went squirrel hunting. He got up early and saw this big brown pretty squirrel, so he decided to shoot him. Then the squirrel started cussing because Mr. Ward had shot at him.

He also told us about how his dog thought he was the baddest dog around until one day he met this raccoon. The raccoon kissed his dog before he beat him up.

I hope someday I will be fortunate enough to return and listen to Mr. Ward tell more stories.

--Harry Buck, 1986

As I listened to Mr. Charlie Ward's interview, I was amazed at how well he told a story. His stories got me interested in his life. I didn't want to stop listening until the last word.

Mr. Ward was born in July of 1902 in Claiborne County. He killed someone, and

as a result went to Parchman in 1938. Mr. Ward returned to Claiborne County 13 years later and lived here with his second wife, Estella Ward, until he died December 9, 1986.

Today people talk about what they will and won't do. But after people have read about Mr. Ward's life, they might change their story. I suppose he said he'd never eat flies and cricket legs, but he did. I suppose he never planned to go to prison for committing a crime, but he did. When he tried to run away from his punishment, he probably thought he'd get away, but he didn't. Mr. Ward probably never thought he'd take a life, but he did.

A person never knows what he's going to do, and the life of Charlie Ward proves this. "You know where you've been, but you don't know where you're going," is what I'm often told, and I believe it. It's like Mr. Ward always said, "If a man don't know, he just don't know."

Mr. Ward's storytelling is very different from anyone else's that I know. He expresses his thoughts freely--says exactly what he feels. The I AIN'T LYING staff

I suppose he never planned to go to prison for committing a crime, but he did. I suppose he said he'd never eat flies and cricket legs, but he did.

worried about publishing Mr. Ward's interview because of some of the words he used. We weren't sure how the readers would respond to them. But the more we talked about how great the stories are and how much the readers would get out of them if they read them with interest and imagination, the more we decided Mr. Ward was right for I AIN'T LYING.

His life story is essential simply because of the stories, lessons, and laughs. I'm sure that his family and friends will agree. What a great way to remember someone after they're gone. After all, it's life! "If I'm lying, I'm dying."

Here's Charlie Ward...

--Tara Wren, 1989



Charlie Ward begins his story.

I was born in 1902 [in Port Gibson]. Yeah, hard working people didn't have a damn thing to do. See that's way back yonder. I'll be 82 years old in July.

[Can you tell me a little bit about your parents?]

All I know, they raised us off of milk and bread. You understand me? My mother and father. My father was a son-of-a-gun. You understand me? He had mama and about seven women. And every time that sucker throwed at a woman, it'd get a child. I got more half-brothers and half cousins and things, it done tilt this country. You hear me! My daddy was a son-of-a-gun. I know what I'm talking about. But he dead now. Both of them. But, man, he didn't take no foolishness.

A man don't believe, a man'll breed just like a woman. See what I mean? You know you'll breed. You know, it's like you got a wife, you get her in family way. And don't you think you ain't gonna breed just like she is? That boy coming yonder right now, I used to give him a job. We's work together and he'd be just "hu hu hu." I said, "Boy you breeding." I said it. Look here. Man, he be

carrying on scantily. You understand me? But he didn't know what was wrong with him. Yeah, he was breeding.

[Did you play any games when you was coming up?]

No, wasn't no games. Nothing to play then. You know what I mean? Just hunt rabbits and things like that. We didn't play no football and basketball. No stuff like that. They didn't have nothing like that. The children, then, they didn't have nothing to play with, you know, they went down in the wood and cut a log, and saw wheels off it, and make them wagons to run up and down the road. It was dust whirlwinds back in them days. You know what I mean? It wasn't no cars.

And [one day a] man come through there. The old folks then would have their children sitting 'twixt their legs killing lice. Lice be in your head. You know what I mean? You think I'm lying. Lice be in your head and women and girls and boys. Shoot, big old lice run down here and go right on back up in there. And look here. Ha, ha, ha. Now y'all think I'm lying.

But now here what I'm talking about. When the deal rocked up, a man come down through there, a white fellow. He said, "It's going be something coming through here. They call it a car, an automobile." And the old folks said, "What kind of automobile coming down through where?"

Said, "It's going be coming down the road running, running. Coming down the road."

Said, "What going to be pulling it? Mules? Horses? Or cows or bulls or what?" You see ox and things used to pull wagon then, you know.

Said, "No", said, "gasoline."

"What is gasoline?"

Now you think I'm telling you a lie. People didn't know what gasoline was. Know what I mean? I was young then. I was around about ten or eleven years old. [And] the big road then, wasn't no concrete or

nothing. Blacktop or stuff like that. Man, dust would be this deep. You understand me? Up to your knees, man.

Man, we were down in a deep hollow-- about eight of us. And I looked up the road. I said, "Look a yonder." And man, talking about the sun shining hot, the sun shined hot then. Then I said, "Man, look a yonder at them whirlwind." Well, see it use to be whirlwinds, you know. Had the dust going up the road. You know what I mean?

And I said, "Oooh, I ain't never seen the whirlwind like that." And I'm down in the road. Just playing. Just talking.

After a while, that thing pop around the bend--around the curve on us. "Tit-a-tat, tit-a-tat, tit-a-tat."

I said, "Wait." I said, "What?" I said, "Look here." I said, "What is that yonder?" I said, "Ain't no mules got it. Look at it.

God Damn! Look here!"

I went up there. Now y'all think I'm tellin' you a lie. I went up that mountain. I went up that mountain just like--a cat couldn't a went up that mountain no better than I did. And the rest of them went right up behind me. You know what I mean? We made a road going up that mountain, all right. That

thing, "tit-a-tat, tit-a-tat, tit-a-tat." Well, that was that Ford.

Man, I come out of there, I said, "Great God almighty." I said, "Looka yonder," I said, "what is that?" Thing scared me to death. "Look!" I said, "I'm going down tell my mother them about it."

They sitting on the garret killing lice, you know.

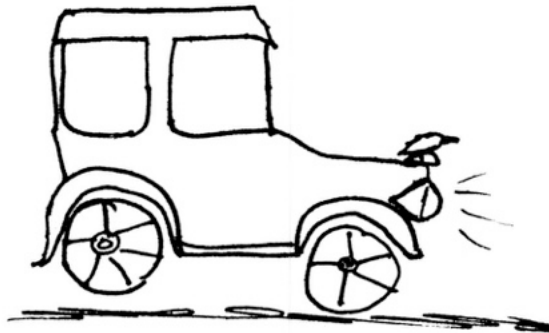
I went on down there. I said, "Mama", I said, "looka here." I said, "Something come by there a while ago running, hollering 'tit-a-tat, tit-a-tat.'"

"What was pulling it? Mules, horses, or what? Cows? What was pulling it?"

I said, "Wasn't nothing pulling it."

"Boy, you get your ass way from here. I'll tear your ass. How could it run?"

I said, "I don't know how it was running, but," I said, "passed by us."



And about eleven of them--now y'all think I'm telling you a lie--about eleven of them old ladies, you know, and one high hipped woman was there. She was high hipped, you know. And she said, "Lets go up there and see."

I said, "It's got tires." Tires were about the size of a motorcycle tire. See what I mean? And look, you could smell that rubber, you know. That hot road. And they got out.

"Who--who..." About a half a mile you could hear them. Look, "Umm-umm-umm-umm-umm." They say, "Yeah, I can smell it. Umm-umm-umm." And that thing popped around the bend on them. That old lady jumped over that fence. Looka here. I ain't never . . . Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha. Now y'all think I'm telling you a lie. Boy that was something to think about.

[She jump right over that fence?]

Whew! That woman went over that fence. Looka here. Look here. They wore them long dresses then, you see. Way back, way back. You couldn't see their shoes hardly. You understand me? That woman went over that fence and that wind had her dress up like that. She went over that fence just like that. First she couldn't hardly get over that fence. You understand me? See, that thing

pop around the bend "tit-a- tat, tit-a-tat." She look and didn't see no mule or nothing pulling it.

"God," she said, "the world is going to end." Now y'all think I'm lying. A person don't know.

But let me tell you something. The half ain't never been told. Look, man, people, a heap see, but a few know. You understand me?

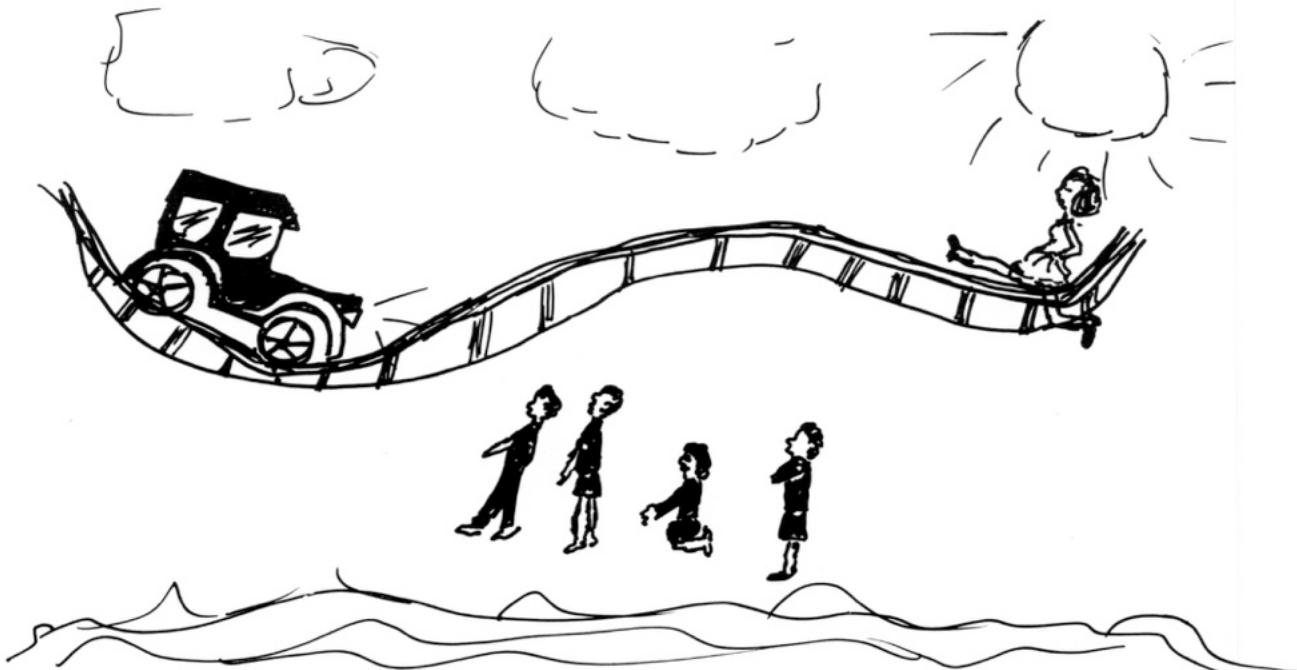
Now you couldn't get people back in them days to walk up to a car. They were scared. And one woman got there and got in the car.

See, that thing pop around the bend "tit-a- tat, tit-a-tat." She look and didn't see no mule or nothing pulling it.

"God," she said, "the world is going to end."

The man took her picture and she had her hand on the steering wheel. And they carried the picture to church and, man, they broke up church. Now y'all think I'm lying. They broke up church, man.

"Do you mean to tell me Sally driving this thing here?" Man, them folks were having a fit there. They like to had a fit. You



understand me? But anyway, back in them days was something. People don't know, they just don't know.

[Did you ever go coon hunting in those days?]

Yeah. We went coon hunting. We went coon hunting and possum hunting. We'd go at night. We didn't have no lamp or nothing like that. Get a bottle, put some coal oil in it and light it.

And see, them old possum was easy caught. You understand me? Them old possum was easy caught, but them coons was hell.

[Tell them that time you squirrel hunting and you kept shooting at that squirrel and he start cussing.]

Look here. That was back over here. I was back over in there and I said, "Doggone it." Now y'all think I'm telling you a lie. I said, "Doggone it. I'm going to get that squirrel yonder." Look here. And I throw up, "Dow!"

"God damn." Look here. Now y'all think that squirrel cuss just as good as a man. "God damn!"

Don't laugh. Don't laugh. Now looka here. Y'all think I'm telling you a lie. Look, I ain't never seen nothing like that before in my life. That squirrel cussing good as a man could. You know what I mean?

Well, I had a dog right here. My dog. They was nice dogs--the best dogs it was. You understand me? Whip any dog. And he tore out, went up that road and jumped on a dog up there and that dog rode him. Rode him from up yonder to right yonder.

He call me, "Charlie. Uh, Charlie. Get this son-of-a-bitch off me." Just as good as a man. I run out there and I look. And that dog come back down. "God damn. That dog rode me all the way from up yonder down here."

Ha ha ha. Now y'all think I'm telling you a lie. That dog talked just as good as I could talk. You understand me? "God damn. I ain't never had nothing to ride me like that." That dog rode him from up yonder clean down here before he got off him. See, I thought he was the baddest dog down in here, but that

dog was badder than he was. Ha, ha, ha. Was badder than he was. I'm telling you what I know.

[Did you use dogs when you went hunting?]

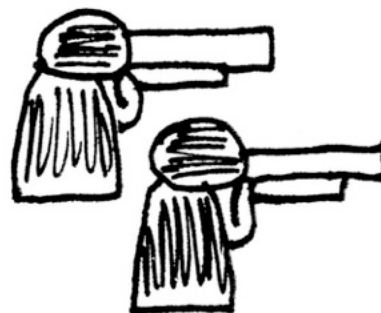
Yeah. I had dogs with me. But man, them dogs they didn't fool with nothing but a possum. You know. They was running on a coon under a log back over yonder and that coon would grab him and smack [kiss]. Now y'all think I'm telling a lie. That coon would kiss him just like you would kiss a woman. You understand me? And great God. Look here. I had about nine dogs [and] every one

A coon can fight, man. Every time he kiss a dog, that's a lost dog in high oats.

of them--every one of them--that coon whapped every one of them dogs. A coon can fight, man. Every time he kiss a dog, that's a lost dog in high oats. You hear me. Now I'm telling what I know. And therefore I says, "Lord, here's something to think about."

[Didn't you used to carry two pistols at one time?]

Yep. Man, I was a bad sucker, you know. Man, I had a 38 and a 45. And man, I was



nervous. And I'd hurry to hammer in a minute. Now look, I was dangerous. You understand me? I was dangerous, man, and I'd walk along and I'd hit myself. You know what I

mean? Guys would look at me. Now you think I'm telling you a lie. White folks would look at me. Look at me, "That God damned

Nigger. That God damned son of a bitch. He's a bad son of a bitch. Look how he hitting himself." You know what I mean? But now you see you hit yourself. You know what I mean? You know how to do it?

[Check and make sure they're there?]

Yeah. Ha, ha, ha. Man, it was something to think about. But anyway, we went through something man, above suspicion. I know what I'm talking about. I know what I'm talking about. Life is just what you make it.



"Now you think I'm telling you a lie."

I had one woman--they call her Mary Hardleg. Look here, I go to Vicksburg every Friday and Saturday and go up there and stay through Sunday. Come back Sunday evening, Sunday night on a bus.

And I told her, I say, "Look," I said, "now you have me something to eat." I said, "I'm going right down this road here," I said, "I'm going down and get my money." I was

working for Charlie Mangles at a cedar mill. I said, "I'm going down there to get my money." I said, "Now you have me something to eat done," I said, "[and] when I get back we can go to Vicksburg."

And she there combing her hair, she combing her hair, and when I got back, she yet combing her hair.

I said, "You done cooked?"

"Hell, no, I ain't cooked." Now you think I'm lying. "Hell, no, I ain't cooked."

I said, "Well, you know I'm home."

"I just get tired of folk worrying me so much about cooking and going on."

I said, "That's all right." And out the door I went. You understand me. Out the door I went.

Well, I had some people staying right back of her house, and my old lady was staying right back there. I went on back over the house where she was. Where my old

She said, "You wait till I go to Baton Rouge. I'm a have them howling like a dog."

lady was. And that Monday morning she got up she said, "Shit." My other old lady she said, "Shit, I ain't worried." She said, "I ain't worried. You wait till I go to Baton Rouge." She said, "Shit, down there them folks down there can turn water to wine." She said, "You wait till I go to Baton Rouge. I'm a have them howling like a dog." Now you think I'm telling you a lie.

Man, that woman went to Baton Rouge. I like to died. I moaned like a dove. You hear me? Look here. I don't know what they was doing to me down there in Baton Rouge. You understand me?

[That's that hoodoo, isn't it?]

Yeah, it's them hoodoos in Baton Rouge. You know. And the stuff she give me to eat. See, [she] can't fix you unless she put something in you. You know what I mean? [She] put something in you and you eat that. And man ain't nobody gonna tell you nothing. You understand me? I know what I'm talking about. I carried her right over

yonder--them woods right down over yonder. And I was just worried to death. Folk was scared to come up to me.

I was cutting cedar. Had a little bitty ax and saw and everything and they was scared to come up to me. You know.

"That damned nigger cut your head off." Say, "He crazy." Well, you see, I was worried to death. You know what I mean?

"If you don't have that off me tomorrow, by this time tomorrow morning," I say, "I'm gonna kill you and put you in this lake tomorrow night."

And when the deal rocked up, I carried her right over there in them woods, right over in yonder. And told her one night, "It's a big lake down in there." I said, "If you don't," I say, "if you don't have that off me tomorrow, by this time tomorrow morning," I say, "I'm gonna kill you and put you in this lake tomorrow night."

And she said, "Huh?"



I said, "You hear me!" I said, "Whatever you feeding me, and put on me," I said, "You better take it off me," I said, "'cause I'm losing my mind." I said, "God damn it, I been to penitentiary and I'll go back."

And blessed God, that day about nine o'clock something flew out of me just like birds. Brrrrrrr. And, oh man, I hollered. You understand me? And the folk broke and run.

Say, "What's the matter with you Charlie?"

I said, "Something went out me like a drove of partridges." You understand me? And I, look here, I got all right.

[Did you find out how she did it?]

She went to Baton Rouge. And the people in Baton Rouge can turn water to wine. It's a woman down there jumps in New Orleans. My boy got her daughter. He just as crazy as a Bessie Bug. You understand me? You hear me? Now you think I'm lying. He ain't hisself. Look, look and that woman she look undereyes at you. Little Charlie's old lady. She won't look up at you like that. Man, she

drop her head and she turn her eyes up like that. You know what I mean?

Her mama got a big table in there and she dance and you ain't never seen a person dance. That woman be naked and be dancing around them candles, you know, burn them candles. She got 24 candles on the table and she talking to them. Like you go there, she want to know your name and how old you is



and everything, and ask you a whole lot of questions. That woman would. And she do everybody like that. And she just stayed round that table.

But her old man makes around \$300 a week and she give him two or three dollars to buy him some beer. And she take that money and go to the hoodoos on a Monday. And man, look here. She spend that money on the hoodoo. And that's all she believe in, hoodoo. Now you hear me. She say she gonna get you, brother, you better watch out.

Now she thought she had done hoodoo'd the rent man, and had done got by him about five or six months. And he come there with polices, polices and shot guns and everything, and throwed her stuff out the house. Told her to get out, get off his place.

See, she thought she had him with that hoodoo stuff. She had to go to my boy's house there and stay all night, stay for a week. See what I mean?

[It didn't work on the rent man?]

No! Didn't work on that rent man. See she thought she had him. She hadn't paid rent for four or five months. And she just knowed she had that house just free. And that man come there with all them police and things, and wanted to eat her up. That was so. You hear me? But she down there right now. I'm going down tomorrow.

[You said that you like to drink whiskey?]

Yeah, man.

[You remember when prohibition was in don't you?]

Yeah. You couldn't get no whiskey.

[What'd you do when you couldn't get none?]

I'd howl like a dog. Now you think I'm lying.

[I bet you knew where to get some.]

Look here, I got some of that tickey liquor. You know what I'm mean? Tickey liquor, that juice. You know, white tickey liquor.

[Did you make it?]

Oh, it was made. And I dranked it. But anyway, the whiskey's going out of style. You know what I mean? The doctor put me on whiskey up there in Vicksburg. Man, I was laying there looking. Oh, mmm, and he stuck that needle up in my arm. You know what I mean? And drawed that blood, and tested it. Said, "Uh-oh, uh-huh. Son of a winehead." You understand me? Look here.

He come back, he said, "Mr. Ward."

I say, "Yes Sir."

He said, "Do you like whiskey?"

I said, "Well sometime"--I's stuttering you know--I said, "sometimes when I can get

out a lit bit, I take a little taste."

He said, "Uh-huh." He said, "It's all through you."

I said, "Sir?"

"It's all through you." He said, "Wait just a minute."

Now y'all think I'm lying. God knows I'm not lying. That man went on and gave that woman eight dollars and something and she went and got me a quart. I was in Mercy hospital. You hear talk about Mercy hospital? I was in Mercy hospital and he went on and bought me a fifth of whiskey and said, "Give him three zams of this everyday." Take that shot, you know. Three little shots, not too much. Three shots everyday. And said, "Its better than any medicine I got and anybody else got for him."

And I said, "Great God almighty today." I said, "Man," I said, "you the best." I patting him all upside the head and everywhere.

When the deal rocked up, I said, "Pour me another zam in there." Look here. Look here that woman poured. "Charlie, that enough now." Look, here I, "Ahhhh!" Look here.

But now, see, I can't drank it less'n it got sugar. I got to have my sugar. He bought me two pounds of sugar. But anyway he asked me how did I drink my whiskey. I told him I drank it with sugar. And he give that woman eight dollars and something and she bought me a fifth of whiskey and two pounds of sugar. Do you hear what I'm telling you?

And ever since that I been drinking. I've got enough bottles out yonder, if I had the money, I'd be a millionaire. You hear me? I've got bottles out yonder stacked from high as a man can stand. You know, for whiskey.

[Who did you get that tickey liquor from?]

A lady down there from the oil mill. She made tickey liquor. Yeah, you know, white lightning. Called white lightning. Yeah.

[Well didn't the sheriff ever bother her?]

Couldn't catch her. She's back there, you know. She's an old lady. And she don't hardly come out [but] every now and then.



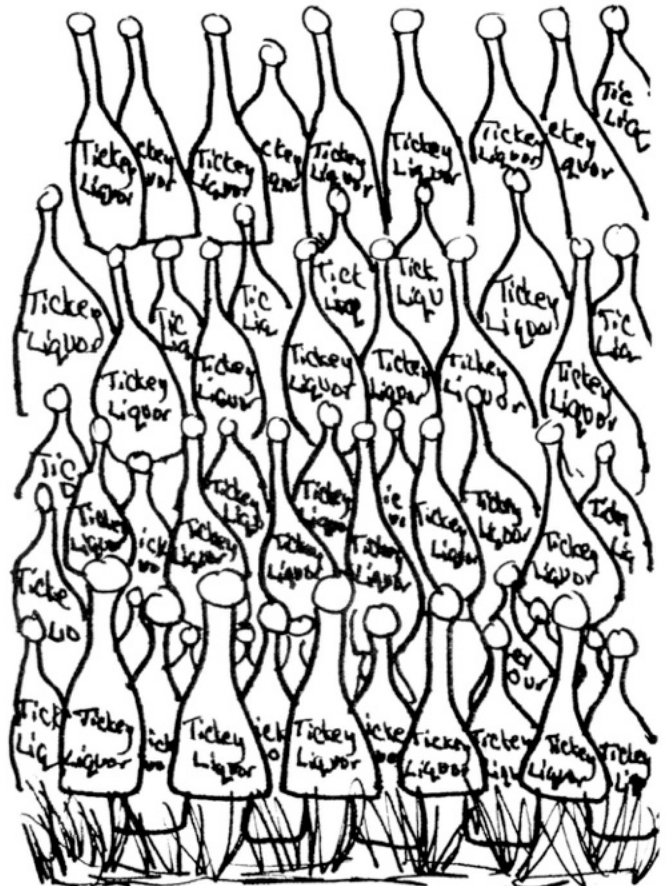
[Wasn't it Captain Bagnell. Wasn't he a bad sheriff? He never could catch her?]

Captain Bagnell caught this guy. Let me see, what his name? Sam Banister, down here to Fayette. Not Fayette, Russum. Down there in Russum.

And Captain Bagnell told him said, "Look," said, "Sam," said, "you making whiskey." Said, "I'm gonna catch you if its the last thing I do." Sam told him, said, "No, man." Said, "You can't catch me and I ain't making it." He said, "I'm tickled to death over it." Said, "No I ain't making it."

And old man Bagnell, Sam Bagnell, was going everywhere catching folks with whiskey, you know. He said, "Well, all right, I'm gonna catch you if you making it."

One day he got on a freight train. Sam Bagnell blackened his face, you know, put that soot all over his face--hoboing. You know what I mean? And all on his arms and things.



[This the sheriff?]

He was the sheriff up here in town. And had on some old raggedy clothes--you know what I mean--and got off the freight train. And Sam Banister was standing there looking at him. Got off the freight train. He got off.

"Hey."

Sam Bagnell said, "Hey." Said, "Uh, what what town is this?"

He said, "This Russum."

He said, "Man." He say, "I'm telling you the truth, I been riding all night and all day." And said, "I'm just knocked out," he said. "Don't they have no beer or no whiskey around here to sell? Nothing to drink? You can't buy a drink or something like that?" He had his money, you know. Pulled out of his pocket a handful of money, you know. One dollar bill, fives and things.

Said, "Man, I got whiskey to drink. I got whiskey if you want to buy some whiskey." Sam [Banister] told him, you know. Said, "Yeah, man," said, "I got whiskey if you want whiskey. You ain't got to buy no drink. Come on go down to my house. I ain't got nothing there but whiskey!"

Now y'all think I'm telling y'all a lie. Sam Banister dead now, but anyway, the sheriff

went over there to his house. Sam Banister come on back in here and look. Couldn't smell nothing in there but whiskey. You know that. That tickey liquor, you know. And said, "I got a barrel coming on right here."

He said, "My God, this here good whiskey. Uh-bububububu." He said, "This here good whiskey." He said, "How long you been making this here?"

"Oh, man, I been making this here whiskey." Said, "I been making this whiskey for years. Where you from?" He told him way somewhere out of Texas. He said, "I been making this whiskey for years."

He said, "Man, I wished I was over here where I could get in touch with you. Where we could get together." He pulled out a five dollar bill, you know, and Sam said, "Look I want to get a quart of this whiskey."

Sam told him, "Well, all right." Sam fixed him up a quart, then gived him all he wanted to drink. Walked on out and left out the house. He said, "I'm a walk far as the railroad track with you. That train'll be along here after a while."

He said, "All right."

[He] walked on out there and said, "Wait, let me go on back in there and stir my



Mr. Charlie Ward entertaining friends on his front porch: (l-r), Harry Buck, Mr. Ward, Carl Brandon, David Crosby.

whiskey." He went back in there and stirred his whiskey and come on out and fasten the door. Come on out. He said, "We got a sheriff up here. We got a sheriff up here called Captain Bagnell. Uh-uh, he bad." Man said, "He bad, but I got him beat to the first."

And *talking* to him. Just was talking to him. Now y'all think I'm lying. Talking to 'im right then when the deal rocked up.

He got all the whiskey and he said, "Well, don't look [like] the train gonna go." He said, "I reckon I may have to go back to your house and stay a little while."

"Well all right, come on go back. Come on go back."

And got on back there and he went there and washed his face. Sam looked. Now y'all think I'm telling you a lie. Look here, see he washed all that soot, smut, and stuff off his face. Sam looked at him. Looked at him.

He said, "Ain't no need to looking." He said, "This here Captain Bagnell."

And Sam shit all over himself. You hear me? Do you hear me? Man, that man shit all over himself. Look here, look here.

He said, "I told you I's gonna catch you if you stayed on land."

And he caught him. And that broke up Sam Banister.

You'd meet hot wind in the road you know, call it hot wind. You know what I mean? Them ghosts.

[Do you know any ghost stories?]

No. I always was scared of ghosts.

[Did you ever see any?]

I never see no ghosts. No I never seen, never see no ghosts.

[Bet you heard tell about some people...]

Way back yonder, you see, since they shot that 'tomic bomb, that 'tomic bomb, that drove the ghosts and things out of the United States. Out way from here. Way back

yonder, you be coming down the road and meet ghosts. [But] say that 'tomic bomb shot over yonder. Overseas. Say that drove every ghost away from here. You don't see no ghosts now.

[You don't see them any more?]

No. Man, look here. When folk die and they went to the funeral, and come back and come in the house, well that night they'd see that man or woman sitting in there. You understand me? You hear me? I know what I'm talking about. You can't see that now. No! Hot wind. You'd meet hot wind in the road you know, call it hot wind. You know what I mean? Them ghosts.

[That's a ghost, huh?]

Since they from hell! You understand me? Yeah. They hot. The wind is hot. You understand me? And you'd meet them in the road. And you meet that all up and down the road. And that dusty road. But, anyway, now you don't meet nothing like that now. No, unh-uh!

[What kind of work did you do?]

You know back yonder, I put down pipe line. Down at Alcorn. All down there, Vicksburg. From Port Gibson to Vicksburg. Put down sewage line.

A man went through a Indian mound down there [by Alcorn]. And he just picking up stuff, you know. He liked me, you know. White fellow. And he just picking up stuff, and I say, "I wonder what in the hell that he picking up." And he just picking up stuff, you know. Putting it over there. Picking it up and putting it over there. And he had about a basket full and them was Indian heads and Indian bones. And knee bones and all that stuff.

He come on, say, "Here, Charlie, here."

I said "Man, hell, I don't want that. I don't want them darn things."

He said he's going to carry them to Vicksburg and put them in the showcase. Said he get paid for it. You know folks come in there looking, see them old Indian bones been in there for 200 years.

[Didn't you get buried down in Alcorn working one time?]

Yeah. I was down in a hole and that thing cave. See, now, when that thing started to caving, I was about 20 some feet in the ground. When it start to caving, if you run from it, it's got you. You got to run to it, when it start caving, you know. Yeah, you gotta run to it when that big hunk of dirt break off coming down on you. You got to run to it. See what I mean? You run from it, it's gonna kill you. And, man, looka here, I run from it. You understand me? And that darn dirt buried me.

Now y'all think I been buried alive. That dirt buried me, man. They had to dig there. Lord have mercy, I been a lucky man. Look here, I went out just like a light. But the Lord was with me. I caught breath enough. [They got] that backhoe and pulled that dirt off me. Man, that dirt cave in there, it's dangerous. I thought I was gone, man. Now y'all think I'm telling you a lie. I was out and them folk was laughing at me.

But all right, when the deal rocked up, I'm laying there in the bed [in the hospital]. Laying there in my bed, you know, and folks

Now you hear me? Man, if I'd a stayed there, I'd a died. I say, "People dying here ain't never died before."

passing by the door, you know. I'm looking at them, you know, and they pass by, going up and down the hall. And, blessed God, I was a sick man.

And finally when the deal rocked up, they come rolling a woman by, a dead woman. You know what I mean? Yeah, you know, roll her, she come right by my door.

I say, "What's the matter with her?"

Say, "She dead. She died last night, this morning before day."

I said, "What!"

"Yeah."

And I said, "Good God Almighty today." And long about 12 o'clock the next day, looka here, man, here come a white man.

I said, "What's the matter with him?"

Said, "He died."

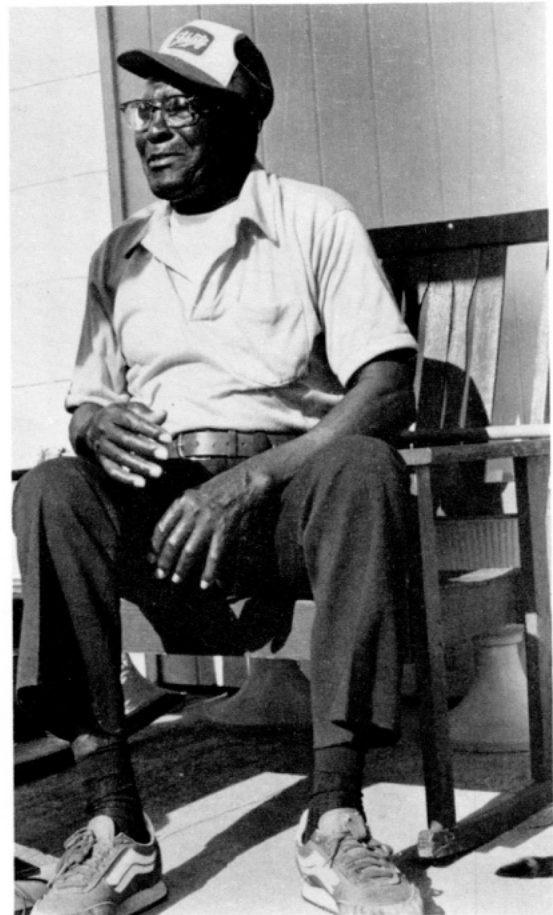
I say, "I be damn if I ain't gonna get out of here. I ain't near ready." Ha, ha, ha. Now y'all think I'm lying. I said, "I ain't near ready to die."

"Oh, Mr. Ward. Oh, Charlie. Oh, Mr. Ward." They call me Mr. Ward.

I said, "Man, you can't say nothing." I said, "Look," I said, "if you don't discharge me, I'm discharging my own self."

Now you hear me? Man, if I'd a stayed there, I'd a died. I say, "People dying here ain't never died before."

You hear me? And them womens just thought they'd grab their stomachs. You understand me? Boy them women thought they would die laughing at me. But I had them women just dying. They hate for me to come out of that place because I kept it lively all the time. But anyway them women, I said, "People dying here ain't never died before." You understand me? And boy them women thought they was bursting they side. But man I come out that hospital. You hear me?



Mr. Ward left the hospital just in time.



[Have you ever been sick or been in the hospital any other time?]

[Once] I was down there in that hospital, and I was sick. Right here on the hill up here [Claiborne County Hospital]. And I was a sick man. "Ho, ho, ho, ho, ho."

And when the deal come, the man give me an enema. You ain't never had an enema, has you? Ha, ha, ha.

Look here, man, I say, "Take it out, take it out, take it out!" Don't laugh. Looka here, I say, "Take it out, take it out, take it out!"

[You talking about you went to Parchman, what they send you there for?]

I's snatching bloomers.

[You was what?]

Ha, ha, ha. Snatching bloomers.

[Who caught you?]

They caught me in Jackson.

[It wasn't Captain Bagnell, was it?]

No, wasn't nothing of Captain Bagnell. But no, I killed a man in Jackson. And they sent me to the penitentiary.

You get in a fight with a guy or what?]

This guy come there. See, him and another fellow was looking for me to kill me. What he was, I thought he was a friend of mine, you know. We stay right there together.

And finally when the deal rocked up, when they went down the street that way, I went back this a way. Well, I didn't have nothing to provide me at all. And they had guns and things. I didn't have nothing. And I said, "Well, Lord, I don't know what to do."

I went to a lady's house, a friend of mine. I said, "Look here, I want to borrow your gun. I'm going up to Vicksburg to shoot some ducks and things. If I kill some ducks," I said, "I'll bring you a couple of ducks back."



She said, "Your eyes don't look right."

I said, "Ma'am?"

She said, "I don't believe I want no ducks." She said, "Let that gun stay there."

I said, "Well now if that ain't something else. I don't know how in the hell she could tell it." But she said she seed it in me in my eyes. Well, I trying to laugh. You know what I mean?

I went on down Fair Street and I said, "I'm a buy me a gun." I went on there and got me a brand new shotgun, had never been shot. A brand new one. And twelve shells, number fours. I come on back out. The police is just standing there like this here, you know. All out on the street. If I come out this thing with a gun, they gonna stop me or do something. You know what I mean?

Didn't a sucker say nothing to me. Didn't say nothing to me. I come right on out with my shotgun and 12 shells, and walked right on 'twixt them. They just talking and

"If you come home, I'm a kill you."

And said, "If you stay away, I'm a kill you."

laughing, ain't looked around at me. And I went on down. Tell you, you can go home when you can't go nowheres else.

Well, the nigger told me, he said, "If you come home, I'm a kill you." And said, "If you stay away, I'm a kill you." Said, "I'm a kill you if you come in here before day. I'm a kill you."

I said, "Well, I'm going home." When I coming on back across the railroad track, they was looking for me. Just as I coming off the railroad track, coming down the hill, they was coming on across the road and looks here.

"Here come that Charlie Ward now. You see that son-of-a-bitch. I told him I was gonna put him in hell time enough to get supper." Now Lord if I'm lying I'm dying. I ain't got to lie.

Well the sun wasn't down. And I, I just kept a walking but I had my gun up under my shoulder and walking like that. And one shell in the barrel. I coming on down walking, whistling.

"You need to whistle you son-of-a-bitch you." Said, "You gonna be hollering in a few minutes."

I said, "Man, y'all go on let me alone." I said, "Please let me alone." I said, "I'm going home." I said, "I ain't bothered y'all." I said, "Please let me alone." I said, "Let me go."

He said, "Naw, God damn it. We want to kill you." That's what they said to me.

When they turned around and started back walking to me, they's about far from here to that tree yonder. And they turn around and they come on back. I was talking to them.

I stopped and I said "Doc," say, "I told y'all to let me alone. Let me go on to the house." And I wasn't very far from the house. I was in calling distance to the house. I said, "And let me alone." I said, "I ain't bothering none of y'all." I said, "And let me go."

"Nigger, I told you I's gonna put you in hell time to get supper." And he raised, when he done this here.

[Reached to his belt, huh?]

When he reached for his gun, I popped him. I popped him right then. Knocked all of that off. Knocked all of that off. I'm talking about thumped down. And all that went off.

[Right in the face, huh?]

Uh-huh. Thumped him right there and all of that went off. And when he hit the ground, that other nigger--it scared him so bad--it was some water out there side of the road in a ditch and that sucker went out there and sunk himself in that water. I'd a killed him, but I couldn't find him. And I left him laying there.

I said, "You son-of-a-bitch, you won't bother nobody's else."

And I left there and passed right by my house. My house about far from here to that trailer yonder. I passed right by it. Didn't stop. My old lady was in there. She ain't knowed nothing. I passed right on by it. And folks was hollering and screaming up there on the road. I passed right on by and got on a railroad track.

I walked the railroad track that night until near about daylight with my shotgun loaded. I was going towards Yazoo City. I met two more fellows on a train. And we got on that train and we got off up there near about to Yazoo City.

And this fellow, "Here come the man."

Man, the police come there, broke up there. I done put my gun up beside a bridge and left it there.

And they said, "Which one of y'all is Charlie Ward?"

I said, "My name George Thomas."

And the nigger said his name was George Thomas. He was so scared, you know. And look, y'all think I'm telling y'all a lie. Look. He was so scared he had turned.

And [the policeman] said, "One of y'all Charlie Ward killed a man in Jackson. Killed a man down there in Jackson." He said, "We looking for him." And said, "One of y'all is Charlie Ward."

And I just laughed. Standing up there laughing. And this other fellow, look here, "Oh, oh, oh," he said, "you the one. You



I said, "My name Charlie Ward."

"One of y'all Charlie Ward killed a man in Jackson. Killed a man down there in Jackson." He said, "We looking for him."

Charlie Ward." Now you think I telling a lie. He said, "Oh, oh, oh." He said, "Look," he said, "I come out that delta."

"What you doing down here?"

He said, "I come down to tell a man something," and said, "I'm on my way back. I ain't killed nobody." And look here, he, "Oh, oh, oh."

We [had] slept together that night. That was the next day.

And he said, "Carry him, get him and carry him, put him in jail."

And I told them, I said, "Look," I said, "I'm Charlie Ward."

They didn't want to believe me. No, they didn't want to believe me.

They said, "Naw, you ain't no Charlie Ward." They thought it was the other guy.

"That's the guy yonder. That's Charlie Ward. See how, look he trembling yonder.

And I told him, I said, "Look," I said, "I met this man last night." I said, "I come out of Jackson." I said, "This man was on this train. We slept together last night. He ain't killed nobody." I said, "I'm the man killed a nigger down there in Jackson."

And you know I had to talk, man, I had to tell them folks five or six, seven, eight different times that I was the man. 'Cause they didn't want to believe it.

They said, "You mean to tell me you taking up for this man here, Charlie Ward."

I said, "My name Charlie Ward."

They said, "Naw, your name ain't no Charlie Ward." He said, "Wait a minute. I'm a tell you what I'm a do." He said, "You think you slick. I'm a carry both, I'm carry you and Charlie Ward back to Jackson." And said, "The people'll know you when you get there." And carried that fellow back to Jackson.

"Naw," [they] said, "This Charlie Ward here."

He said, "He said his name was Charlie Ward." He said, "Well, I'll be damned." He said, "Charlie, you could a got away." He said, "This [other] man done done something somewhere. This fella."

Look here, man. This man, this fellow had a buck ager.* Look here. He couldn't hold nothing.

"Oh, oh, oh."

He said, "Well what's the matter with you?"

"Ain't nothing, nothing, nothing."

Look here. He couldn't talk. He was so scared. And he said, "You mean to tell me I slept 'side you last night and you done killed a man, and didn't tell me nothing about it. I'd a jumped out of that train." Ha, ha, ha, ha. Boy that man tickled me.

[How long did they sentence you for?]

You know, back in them days, if a colored man was working for a white man, and if that

He said, "Kill 'im," kill him. "Hang him," hang him. You understand me? "Send him to the penitentiary," give him life in the prison.

white man was a powerful man, he was lucky to go to the penitentiary. 'Cause what[ever] he said, them folks was gonna do what he said do. He said, "Kill 'im," kill him. "Hang him," hang him. You understand me? "Send him to the penitentiary," give him life in the prison.

Well, that's what they done for me. Give me life in prison cause that nigger was working for a big white man. He had plenty a money to run a big place there in Jackson. And he had a voice, you know.

What I went through, it's a crying shame. You know, when I was in the penitentiary, man let me tell you something. It was something else. I put 13 years over there. And in the 30's, you know, 30's. And, man, I'm telling you the truth. That man eat your

* Editor's note: *Buck ager* is a variant of *buck ague*, which equals *buck fever*, signifying a loss of control under stress. See *Dictionary of American Regional English* under *buck ague*.

ass up without salt. You understand me?

They had a leather. See, they don't whip them now. [But I seen him whip one fellow.] And I had never seen nothing like that.

And he said, "I want you just like you mammy had you." You know what I mean? And that man bucked him up like that, you know? And they throwed that leather to him. And he want know where the Lord live. And the man told him, "I beat the Lord to you." You understand me? Look! A man don't know, he just don't know.



And he said, "Old Charlie Ward?"

I said, "Yes sir." I was supposed to say "officer" to him, you know what I mean?

And the folks said, "Listen at that man talking about, that Ward talking about 'Yes sir'."

Well, see, he knowed I was a new man.

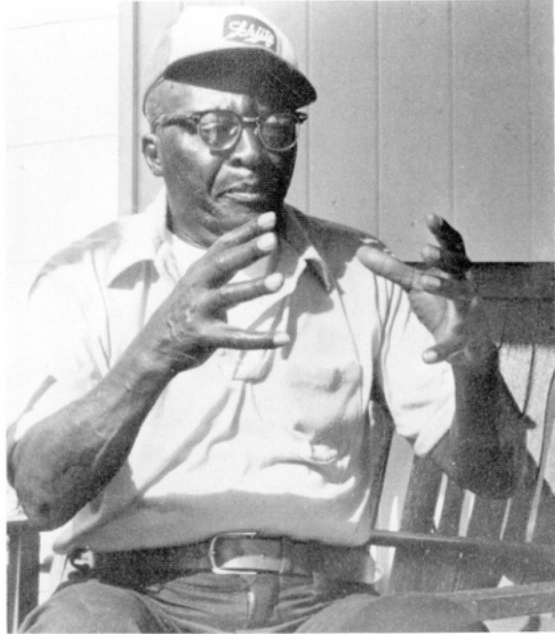
He said, "Now, you see that grass there?"

I said "Yes sir."

He said, "That's yours." He trembling in his voice. He said, "You see them onions there?"

I said, "Yes sir."

"They mine." He said, "Now if you cut



that onion down, I'm gonna hit your ass a bail and a rembling."

And I cut that onion down. And look, if I'm lying, I'm dying. If I'm lying, I'm dying.

Looka here. I grabbed this onion, and the butt that big 'round. I grabbed the onion up, you know, and he whupping a man up there. And I start to and he said, "Don't bring the onion over here. I'll cut your so-and-so head off."

I said what was I do?

He said, "Eat it."

Now y'all think I'm telling you a lie. I ate a onion, the butt of it that big, in that delta. I had to take my hand and push that onion down my throat before he could see it. You know? And I was trying to put the top in my bosom. And I couldn't.

He said, "Eat that."

And man, I ate that onion. I cried three days. You hear me? Water came out of my eyes three days. You think I'm telling you a lie.

Man, when I got out, I wouldn't let nobody know I ate a onion. You understand me? And I wouldn't let nobody know it down here. I told my old lady, I say, get what you want down at Mrs. Rosalee's, you know, down there at the Jitney Jungle.

She said, "Whoo, Charlie, you believe in eating!"

I said, "Yes Ma'am." I said, "Get what you

want. I'll pay for it." Looka here.

And she [store clerk] said, "You done got steak, beef and everything. You got all kind of meat. Why don't you get you two these big red onion?"

I said, "Damn them onion."

My old lady said, "Don't mention them onions to him." Out the store I went, man. Look a here! And folk call me onion from that day on. You understand me?

Look, and I moved out here on Sugar Hill. And look here. Folk was making garden all day. They get onion butts, you know, and I be planting my stuff out there and I'd stomp them in the ground, you know. "You son of a bitch, you." Looka here. Looka here. She say onions didn't grow in Sugar Hill. You hear me? Now you think I'm lying. Man, look here, I stomp them onion in the ground for about three or four years. She said onion didn't grow out there on Sugar Hill.

"Some fellows--how they onion grow?" Them other folks you know. But I stomp them under the ground. You understand me? Man, I been through so much.



[Mostly you did hoeing up there at Parchman?]

Hoeing. That's right hoeing. Them jokers, them colored cats, name their hoes Cadillac, Buick, Studebaker, Hudson Super Six and all kind of different cars, you know?

And talking about hoeing? Man, you couldn't keep up with it. Look hear. I couldn't get off the center with my hoe. Always see my mother take the back of it and push the grass. Man, I'd go, "Whsht, whsht, whsht," then book you and gone.

That man sitting down there said, "I want that row starched and ironed." You hear me? You hear me? Now you think I'm lying. He said, "I want that row starched and ironed." Look hear. And you talking about guys hoeing a row.

[How many men were in a camp at Parchman?]

It was right at 80 or 90 heads in a camp.

[And they had a bunch of camps I guess?]

Oh, man, they had a bunch of camps. They had a bunch of camps there.

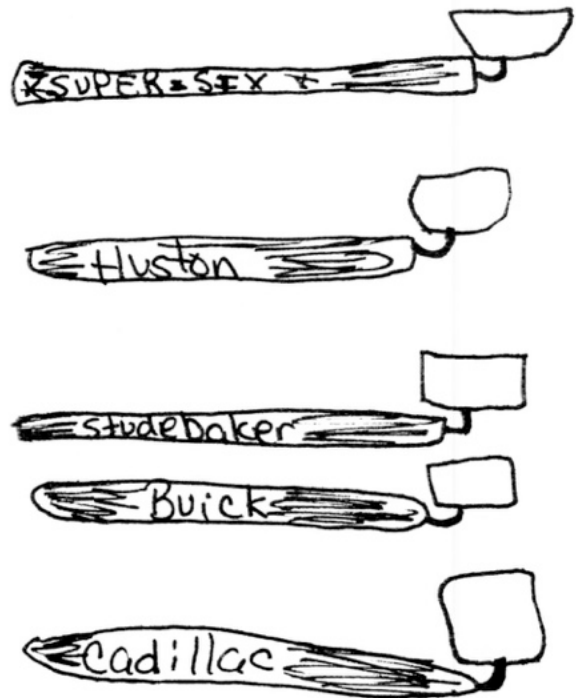
When you in love, you dangerous. You hear me! Look a here. I loved my old lady worsen a farmer love a Jersey cow.

[Tell them about the time you tried to slip off from the pen and that rooster kept you there.]

Yeah. Look a here. Now its bad when you in love. When you in love, you dangerous. You hear me! Look a here. I loved my old lady worsen a farmer love a Jersey cow. You understand me? That was another wife I had.

And I said, "Honey," I say, "I ain't going to penitentiary unless you go." You understand me?

And the man said, "Well, we'll fix a way up there for her," said, "but she can't come over there where you at until on Sundays."



I said, "Well just fix some kind of way over there where ain't no man around her," I say, "and let her stay there until Sunday and she came over there where I'm at."

And he said, "All right."

Well they brought me on to penitentiary. And I'm grieving. I'm worried to death. You hear me. I'm worried to death. And them guys get on they bed you know and talk.

Said, "Ain't no need of you worrying about your home affairs."

I jumped up. I said, "Nigger, why?" I say, "Why can't I worry about my home affairs?"

He said, "Because its a ground hog rooting in your home somewhere." Damn! Man, I fell. I fell like a dead man. Now you think I lying. Looka here. If I'm lying I'm dying. Looka here. I never had nothing to hurt me so bad.

And I jumped up and I said, "If she don't come Sunday," I say, "I'm going, I'm leaving here Monday."

I had old man who was guarding me, you know, he set up there on that thing. I said, "If he nodding," nodding you know. I'm working over there in some big bushes, you know, in an old road there behind some white folks house. And you hear talk of 49-W going into Jackson. 49-W. Look here man.

And I said, "If you nod again," I say, "I'm gone."

And he sitting up there with that rifle. After awhile he done this here. And when he done this here. Ha! Look, I was young. I could jump far from here to that place over yonder. Hop over there in them weeds, man.

And a rooster said, "Cu-cu-cu, cu-cu-cu."

I said, "Don't shoot. Don't shoot. Don't shoot." See, they was killing them up there, then. Now you hear me?

I said, "Don't shoot. Don't shoot."

And the man jumped up and said, "What you doing?"

I said, "Slipped off in here."

And he said, "Come out of there."

And the rooster kept me there 13 years. You hear me, man? If I'm lying, I'm dying. I never seen nothing like that before in all the days of my life. But, anyway, that rooster kept me there 13 years.

I said, "Well, Lord, if a man don't know, he just don't know." You hear me?

[What did they do to make y'all work?]

Man, people can work when that leather. See that leather. Look here, you could hear that leather popping. And you calling the Lord, and he telling you he beat the Lord to you this morning. You hear me, man?

[Could you describe that leather for us?]

It was a strap. It was about that long. Just about that long. [About a yard long.] About 8 or 9 inches wide. And he had it on a handle. And when he do this here, they buck you up like



that. Don't let him cross over in Arkansas. Now you think I'm lying.

Hear him, "Oh, Lordy, don't let him step over in Arkansas." If he step over you and hit you three licks under here, you was a dead man. Now you think I'm lying. And they say, "Oh, oh, sergeant, don't go over in Arkansas." You hear me? Now you think I'm

Man, I went through some things above suspicion. You hear me? That's reason I say, "The Lord blessed me."

lying. And that man hit you, look here. You could see thunder and lightning and everything. Ha. Ha. This here the best part about you. You see here. I know what I'm talking about. This here the best part about you. Back here. A man don't know, he just don't know.

And people talking about, "I can't do this here, man."

You can do anything. You hear me, man? I know what I'm talking about. And therefore I said, "Lord take care of me, Jesus."

Man, I went through some things above suspicion. You hear me? That's reason I say, "The Lord blessed me." Understand me? For what I went through with, you understand me? I said, "Lord, take care of me, Jesus." And he did it. You understand me?

And therefore, that's reason I have all that arthritis all in my arms, all in my neck and back and everywhere. Now. In my knees and things. I can't hardly walk. Over yonder you get so cold until you get hot again. Out there in that snow. Now you think I'm lying.

[Snow?]

What! Out there in that snow and it's freezing. You don't have no fire.

[What were you doing out in the snow?]

Working. Cutting wood, toting pole, toting wood, toting limbs, trees and all that stuff. Clearing that land up. Look here. Picking up logs, you know, with a stick.



And they holler, "Raise!" When they holler raise, everybody come. You know what I mean? Now if you don't know what you doing, I knock all your teeth out in front. You hear me? I ain't got to do a thing but do this here. And you going against that log. You understand me? Your mouth and everything. You can't dodge it. And therefore, as I said, a man don't know, he just don't know.

[Did a lot of people get hurt doing this?]

Ooh, man! I'm telling you. They got cemeteries up there, man, long from here to Port Gibson down yonder. Nothing but prisoners buried out there. You know what I mean? That's only time they get some rest, you know, going to the funeral. That's right. Now you think I'm lying, man. They used to jump in the '30s.

See now up there they got television and all that kind of stuff, man. Slot machines and all that stuff.

My sister wrote me a letter and said, "Brother," said, "look", she said, "I want you to hurry up and come home." Said, "I hope

you hurry up and come home. They going have something they called a television." television, had it on the letter. A television. Well your sergeant read it before you do.

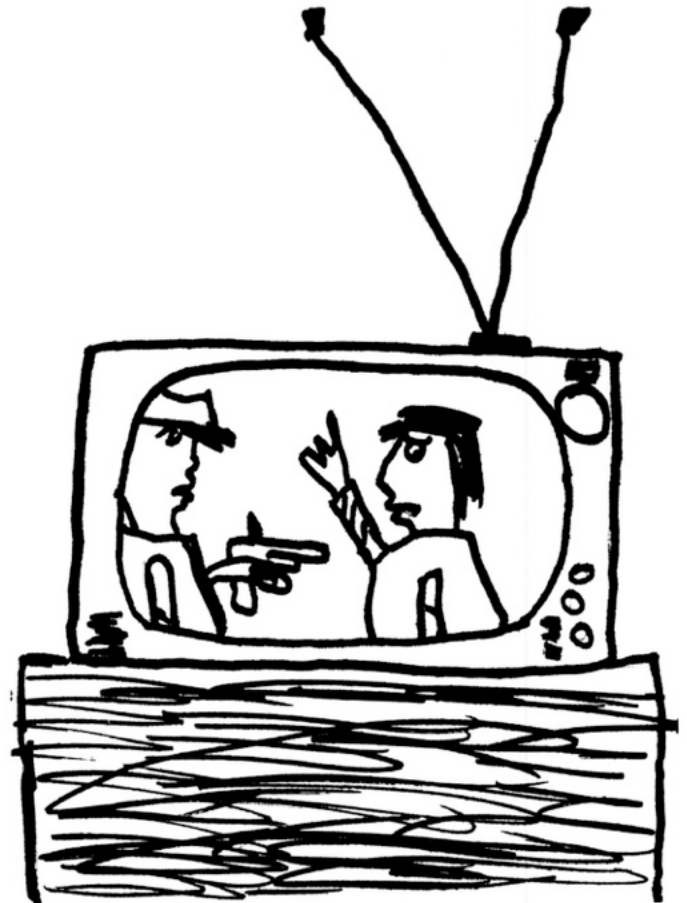
"You see people, cars, trains, and buses and things. People walking and going on and you can see them walking."

And the sergeant said, "That's a damn lie," he said. "That never would happen in this world. How in the hell I can sit here and see people in Chicago and Detroit and different places like that. That's a damn lie."

But you can do it. You can see people all over the world. Can't you do it?

[Yes, you can.]

See, I was scared of a television when I come home. You understand me? If a man point a gun--look here, now you think I'm telling you a lie--I knock all the chairs. I knock that chair. Raise a gun like that on television--man, what you talking about--I get out of town. You hear me? Well, you



see, I was scared. Look like he going to shoot you. You know what I mean?

Train running, I get up out. Cars be coming, shit, I get up out. Now you think I'm lying. That's reason why I said, "If a person don't know, they just don't know." You understand me?

[Did they feed you good up there in Parchman?]

Oh, man, no indeed. You talking about hungry. Now y'all don't believe me. I've ate grass just like a mule. Now you think I'm lying. I got so hungry, a bunch of us went out there and ate grass just like a mule. There eating it. You understand me? And it done me good. Clover, you know. Ate it just

I got so hungry, a bunch of us went out there and ate grass just like a mule.

like a mule eating it. I know what I'm talking about. The reason I say, "A person don't know, he just don't know." The groceries and everything give out. Up there at Parchman.

[They just give out?]

Didn't have nothing to eat. Nothing to eat but you had to get up in there and work.

[What did you have for breakfast?]

Biggest thing was flies. You know what I mean? And them flies is pets. Now you think I lying. Them flies. You be eating bread, you can't, pfffff, blow him off your bread or nothing like that. You have to knock him off. You don't want him to come, mmmmm, and come right back there.

But anyway, we would have them sorghum molasses. They be so sour until--look, now you all think I'm lying--them molasses will take all the skin off your teeth. It was so strong. You understand me? Pour them over there to the hogs.

The man told them, say, "Well them fellows can't stand this," say, "it's making

them sick."

And the hogs would go, "Wheeeeeeee," and up through the woods them hogs would go! You know what I mean? Them molasses was so strong.

But anyway, I said, "Lord, the people don't know. They think they know. The half ain't never been told." You understand me?

[Then] my sergeant come. He was a Ward. Just like I am.

And he come there and said, "What's your name?"

I said, "My name Charlie."

He was a great big man. I said, "Lord that man." Every sergeant come here would tear asses up. I said, "He's a big man." I said, "They bring them great big men here." I said, "Lord have mercy."

I said, "My name Charlie Ward."

He said, "Well, my name J. C. Ward."

I said, "What?" We grab each other and kiss each other.

He said, "Look, Charlie," he said, "don't you worry." He said, "You going to get out of penitentiary." See I had long as the sun shine.

And he said, "You gonna get out of



penitentiary."

I said, "Look man," I said, "I don't know."

You remember then they blowed up Pearl Harbor?

[That was '41.]

'41. '41. Well looka here. Man, well I was intending to be in that line. You understand me? They coming over there in Parchman, getting prisoners from there. Carrying them, putting them in the army.

[Putting them in the army right out of Parchman?]

Right out. Look, they had me in class A, and them Japanese is over yonder. Them suckers, look here, they got the power. Ain't nobody got the power like them folks got. You know what I mean?

[I sure do.]

Them suckers can do anything. You understand me? And I was in class A. They was gon' send me and a bunch of us to Pearl harbor. You understand me? And they were coming to other camps getting them, getting two and three and four out of the camp.

And I said, "Lord,"--I was the first man signed up--I said, "wonder why in the hell they don't come and get me." And blessed God. The man come told me my sergeant had

Said I running the camp up there in Parchman and said they couldn't do without me. Put me back in the last rank.

done slipped to Jackson, and my superintendent, and talk to the sergeant over there. Said put me back in the last rank. Said I running the camp up there in Parchman and said they couldn't do without me. Put me back in the last rank. And said then if they had to take me I'd be the last one go. You understand me? Man, I was so mad I didn't know what in the world to do.

Well, see, when they blowed up Pearl

Harbor, they kill a bunch of them. You understand me? And them Japanese blowed up Pearl Harbor and they killed a bunch of people.

And the sergeant said, "Well, see that, Charlie," he said. "Now if you had been gone down there over yonder in Japan," he said, "you would been a dead man today." He said, "Them other fellows what done left camp 2, 12, 1 and 3, 5, and 6 and all that," he said, "they'll never get back here because they all done got killed." See what I mean?

I thanked him. I patted him. I thanked him. You know what I mean? Ha, ha, ha, ha, man.

[What was it like when you got out of Parchman?]

I got out there in the first of '50, you know. Went in in '38 and got out in first of '50. And when I got out, man, looka here, I was stepping high as a Georgia pine. You hear me, man?

I come on down here. Down here to Port Gibson. Been here ever since. And I was just as nice and kind as anything you ever seen, but I was dangerous as a rattlesnake. You understand me? But I wouldn't bother nobody. You know what I mean? But my people talk to me all the time.

And they fix me all kinds of cake and steak and pie and that all kind of stuff. I couldn't eat that. I wasn't used to eating nothing like that. I wasn't used to eating nothing but flies and cricket legs. Now you think I'm lying. You think [you're] spitting coffee grinds out, them fly's heads. Man said, "Man, this more meat than you ever is et." Now I'm telling you the truth.

And my peoples down here, they were so proud of me. They fixed all kinds of stuff for me, but I couldn't eat it. I wasn't used to it. Been eating that other stuff so long. 13 years. You know what I mean?

Well, I'm telling you, if I'm lying I'm dying. People just don't know, they just don't know. Man, I been through something. I'm a lucky man to be living.



Sylvia Smith

Interview by Vikki Smith
Transcribed by Vikki Smith
Edited by Jewel Dee and Sarah Crosby

My decision to interview my grandmother, Sylvia L. Smith, was an easy one.

She and I both live in the Willows community. "Grandma Sylvia" told me about her memories of her early days in Willows. She told me about her school days, her family, "Pop Charlie" (my late grandfather, who worked on the Natchez Trace Parkway), and about the Claiborne County fair and holidays.

I extend my love and thanks to "Grandma Sylvia" for sharing her reminiscences, and hope someday to pass them on to my grandchild as she has done with me.

--Vikki L. Smith

I was born in Willows, Claiborne County, [in] 1920. I had one brother who was the

oldest of the four children. He was Ben Allen. My mother was Hattie Boines, my father, Carter Boines, my grandmother, Georgia Davis, and I didn't know my grandfather but I saw his picture. He was Henderson Davis and he owned a big part of Willows in property. This is [a picture of] Archie Davis, he was my great grandfather and this is Henderson Davis, my grandfather. I have no idea [who took these pictures]. Only a few people were able to have those kind of pictures because they weren't able to afford them, but my grandparents were well-off in those days.

[What was it like when you were young?]

Oh, very tough. We worked the field, we worked the farm, my two sisters and brother. It was very tough living in those days. We worked cotton, corn, peanuts, and sweet potatoes. As far back as I can remember, I went to the fields, and when I was big enough to hoe my row, I hoed my row with my mother. When I didn't do that I'd take water to my father, who was plowing or cultivating with the mule.



Archie Davis



Henderson Davis

[Who was the most important person you knew when you were growing up?]

Our superintendent of education, that's the most famous one I can remember. He was Mr. Mack Jones, and I thought it was something when he came to the school and we got a chance to see him. If we knew he was coming, you know, we would have on our different clothes and different hair combs, and cleaned up all different because that would be unusual. Once maybe twice a school session he would come out.

[Why would he come?]

To see how the school [was] going on and see was the trustees doing their duty around the school and just to see if the teachers were doing their duty.

[Who were trustees of the school?]

Lennie Dotson. My father, Carter Bolnes was one. I can't remember the others. They was supposed to see that we had wood, and if anything needed fixing around the school they were supposed to come fix it. Like the steps--we had the wood steps that were built for you to climb up, you know. Window panes get out, they were supposed to come and see that they were put back in. A lot of times they didn't do it.

We walked to school, and had a wonderful time playing along the way. Those were the happiest days. It was about six or seven miles one way.

[Were there many kids in your school?]

Oh, I would say about twenty something that attended regular, but it was more than that, they just didn't attend regular, you know. There was me and my three sisters, and the children that were the Campbells. They came regular and our cousins the Dotsons, they came regular, and a few more that came regular, I would say twenty something, as near as I can get it.

We had one teacher, and one wood heater that we had to get wood for ourselves. We went into the woods and got the wood. This was a woody area that surrounded the school

and we could go into the woods and get our own wood. That's what we had to do. Sometimes the trustees would get it. Then again we had to wait on them, and they didn't come on and get that wood for us. We had to get that wood ourselves.

My first teacher was Mrs. Caldwell, when I was in primary class, you know, when I first started. My next teacher was Mrs. Anne Powell, and my next teacher was Marian Johnson. That was the last teacher I went under.

[Were you popular in school?]

Not really. I was somewhat smart in a manner. I would always do my lessons, the teacher would always depend on me to have my lessons.

[Who was your best friend?]

A cousin of mine, Tomokeus Woods, she was about my age. We were in class together.

[What kind of games did you play when you were growing up?]

"Merry-Go-Round the Mulberry Bush," and "Hide and Seek" and "Lost My Handkerchief Yesterday and Found It Again



Today." Sometimes we'd play a little ball at school if we had a ball to play with. If we didn't have a ball we'd make a ball. We'd wrap any kind of used cloth around a rock or anything and sew it together the best we could. Then sometimes we'd have a good ball and that's what we played with.

[What kind of ball did you play?]

Baseball, and thought we were good too, for the time.

[Did the girls play too?]

Yes, indeed, mostly made of girls. I would always be out in the field. I don't know what else you call it now, but we always said, "I'm

We would learn our parts just as perfect as we would and play 'em, you know, something like the soap operas now.

gonna put out in the field." I'd run sometime but I'd always get put out and so they wouldn't let me run very much.

[Did you have programs at school?]

We would have maybe a Thanksgiving Program, maybe something for Christmas, but never nothing big. We would learn our parts just as perfect as we would and play 'em, you know, something like the soap operas now. Yeah, we played our parts good, what we would call 'em concerts at the time. Then we'd have a Thanksgiving Program, and once a year maybe we'd have a concert. It would be at night, but the Thanksgiving Program would be in the evening time. Then we'd have a few days out of school just like we do now.

You would always have them at night, and acted the parts something like a soap opera. We'd have it at a church, because the school wasn't hardly big enough. We wore old garments, long dresses, old people hats. We dressed like old people. If it was a girl, she put on her mother's clothes--them old long dresses and old straw hats, old funning

School Play



hats. That's the way we dressed for our parts.

I don't know where they would get 'em from but they would always give one his own individual part and expect him to learn it perfect for the concert. So we did. We were just happy.

[What were your favorite subjects in school?]

Spelling and English. Yes, I always liked those two subjects. I like others but those two was my best, the next geography. I'll never forget we had to buy our books and we never got a full set of books because our parents weren't able to get them.

We'd borrow books from the better situated children that would have their books. I'd borrow and copy down and use a book and take it home. "Let me use your spelling, let me use your English tonight." I'd have my lesson about as good as they that had books.

[Graduation] was always at this pavilion in Hermanville and I never got to go, but it would be a big thing, everybody told me.

Lots of people came from everywhere, and one of my friends, Gertrude Smith graduated, and a distant cousin of ours, Gertrude Campbell graduated. Odessa Humphreys. All of those graduated, but we never got to go. There wasn't a way for us to go.

[What were the celebrations like?]

Oh, there would always be the closing of the revival, and that would be a good one. You would always have dinner baskets after church, lots of people. That was a big religious event, that I can remember.

[What went into a revival then?]

We always had two weeks of it. We had one week prayer service, and another week preaching service, so different from now, you know. And lots of people would come from far and near with their horses and buggies, and ride horseback with two or three in a buggy and wagons and we'd have a gathering.



[What was the prayer week like?]

Every night the old people meet, sing hymns and pray. Didn't have no preacher around, two or three of them preach, sing and pray tonight, next night two or three more sing and pray. Sing those hymns, and that's the way it was.

[And the preaching week?]

Well, we sang about one or two hymns and prayed and then the preacher would preach. Then we'd always have invitation to join the church, if you want to. By baptism or either we'd talk about "turnbacks." Where you'd

Turnback. That's what you call it when you have been baptized once and go back to the church.

been baptized once to take you in, you didn't have to be baptized no more. Turnback. That's what you call it when you've been baptized once and go back to the church. So many times they left the church at that time.

[Did you use a hymn book while singing in church?]

Not hardly. We did have one, Gospel Pearl songbook. We didn't learn 'em, we just came by 'em some way. I don't know how we learned those songs, but I remember the Gospel Pearl book.

[Did the place you grew up on have a name?]

Well, not exactly, but it was Henry Campbell's farm. He had the big farm, and was a big colored man too. He had three or five farm tenants on his farm. He had farmland and pasture land and he had plenty cattle. Yes, he did raise cattle. He raised sheeps, and goats, and hogs, and I'll never forget the mules he had. You could use mules on the farm. My brother would work, I'd say on the half. He didn't use his mule because he didn't have a mule, but my father did have his own mule and wagon. So my brother would have to sacrifice the thing between the two of them, and he would go and use the mule from the farm and raise his cotton, corn, sweet potatoes, peanuts and all of that.

[Did he sell what he raised?]

Well, no, we just had enough to live from.

We just [did] not have to buy all of this through the winter, and we cured our own meat. We raised enough to have our meat to eat, and some left over for a raise the next winter. That's about all we had.

[How many acres was the place?]

It was very large, but how many acres it was I have no idea. It is still owned by his children. They were, you would say, well-to-do people in those days, like people were then, so I have the big pictures of them up to the hill there. He [was] deceased quite a few years ago, but Lawrence Campbell, Lynette Campbell, Ruth Campbell and Alan Campbell lives at Aurora, Illinois. They still own the property, but they don't live here. They come home and deer hunt on it every year.

[What was the Willows store like when you were growing up?]

You came out there and bought your groceries a lot of time. Lots of people would



be at Willows store. You drink cold drinks, which were in the bottle at that time. You didn't see cans. You would sit around, and if they sat around long enough you would always buy a little piece of cheese. If you bought the cheese, they would give you the crackers. We would sit around that store and just have fun, laughing and talking with people.



But we'd never get to stay out very late, we'd have to come in this time of evening. We had to walk, no means of riding, unless you had a horse, and there wasn't enough horses to go around. And so that's the way that went.

The previous store that was there got burned, so they built this block store with gray cemented blocks and it's there now and been there for quite a few years.

[What was the other store like?]

It was a grocery store and [they had] some of any and everything else that they could keep there, like heater pipes, lamps, chimneys, coal oil, plow lines, plow handles, anything that people use on a farm. Mr. and Mrs. Nelson kept the store in the early days. Before they got it, it was Mr. Trevillion. So that's what they kept. That and a whole round thing of cheese in the eating part. You could buy a dime or fifteen cents worth of rice, and back in those days fifteen cents to twenty cents worth of sugar, and most of the time the farmer bought the whole twenty-five pound sack of salt. They never did buy the little small boxes of salt like we get. They bought the whole twenty-five pound cloth sack. They gave some of the salt to the mules or to the cow or put it in the hog's slop.

[How much sugar did you get for a dime?]

A nice size bag. We had it a long time to sweeten our coffee, because my mother used

to take the eggs and buy the sugar and coffee. And from that very store you could buy your coffee. You could get any amount you wanted, fifteen cents to twenty cents worth, bring it home. It was a grain coffee. Parch it and then grind it. Most of the time we wouldn't brown no more than we were gonna use right then. Next morning we'd grind another certain amount. Now we can just pour some hot water on. Using instant coffee you can have coffee in an instant.

[How did you parch it?]

Put it in your skillet, set it on the stove, that wood stove, and stir it until it get brown. Then we ground it. She had to do all this before she had coffee for breakfast. I think I got that little mill up there now we use to grind coffee in. You screw it into the tackle.

[What was the biggest event in Port Gibson when you were growing up?]

The biggest thing I can remember when I was growing up was the Spring Carnival. That's where they had the fat cattle, the fat calves, the fat hogs, the fat sheep, and we would enjoy that carnival so much although we wouldn't hardly have money to take the rides. But we would enjoy being there, we young people. We'd have a day or two out of school for that, that was about the biggest thing I remember.

[It] was right in the same place where the fairground is now--you know, where the cucumbers is sold. That's where it was. But they got the place fixed up so much better

And most every year when the carnival came, it would rain. Never a year that it didn't rain.

now. There wasn't a place go get in the shade out of the rain at that time. And most every year when the carnival came, it would rain. Never a year that it didn't rain. We'd be standing around the mud and our feet would be cold, but we didn't give up. We never ready to go home.



Three sisters in town

[You say there were fat cows, did you take them to the fair?]

Others did. Me and my sisters didn't have the cows, but people that were able to afford them and support 'em had them. White people mostly, and some colored would be in with the white people. They would get blue ribbons. The blue ribbons were the best, other colors were next and on.

[Did you have any kind of adventure when you were young?]

My biggest adventure was that I had a chance to go in the city, and that was into the city of Port Gibson, I would say, because in the days that I came along children worked. They went to Sunday School and Church and back home. And it was quite an adventure to get to Port Gibson, to the city.

[How did you go?]

I had grown a little bit old and my brother had a T-model Ford, and he would take us when he felt like being bothered with us. If he didn't want to be bothered with us we didn't get to go. My [two] sisters and I would always come acting a little nicer and nicer toward the weekend so he would be nice to us, you see.

[And what did you do when you got there?]

Oh, we'd walk the street, look around, and we didn't have much money to spend, cause people didn't have much money in those times. We would just have a joyful time walking around and seeing people that we thought we knew, and things that we hadn't seen before.

I'll never forget the first time seeing the monument that stands up tall in front of the courthouse. I met my Aunt Mary over there and I looked out the window and saw, guess it might have been a soldier. I hadn't seen one, only a picture of one. I don't know whether he was a soldier or was he one of the boys from the Chamberlain Hunt Academy over there. He was dressed somewhat like a soldier to me. That was some of my



Confederate Monument



Mrs. Sylvia Smith's house, built in 1951

biggest adventures in town.

[When did you get a place of your own?]

[It was] late '50 or early '51 when we got this little piece of property here, and we moved here in that little house up the hill in '51. We built it and it has never been finished. We had a part-time carpenter that

When I grew up they lived around a turnrow, in fields. This is not a good house. You see it's not. But it's good beside what I grew up in.

did it so far and not having enough money to get him to finish it and so it never have been finished.

[Do you think it's important to own your own place?]

I think it is. Because when I grew up

they lived around a turnrow, in fields. This is not a good house. You see it's not. But it's good beside what I grew up in. You could have look out through that and see daylight through the floor. We sat right close on the fire and never got warm. Around the walls was cracks. We had to paper it up.

[There were] battens on the outside. You use long planks and where they didn't meet together you took another little narrow one about so wide and nailed over the little crack that was left, all the way down--just a strip all the way down. You don't see those houses any more. We get some kind of siding to put on the outside. Like I have grey siding, because my house was built out of those long planks. Put grey siding on the outside to cover the cracks. It's not so very nice but they are much more comfortable. When I was growing up no rugs on the floor, whatever. Nothing like that.

[Where did you get married?]

At Campbell Chapel Church, one fourth Sunday evening after regular service. Just

the people that were there at church that day came. My aunt signed our license for us to marry. The preacher was Reverend A.L. Martin. We bought the license from the courthouse. My husband Charlie paid three dollars for the license for us to get married. I had just come seventeen.

[Where did you live when you first started out?]

We lived back of Willows Store on my uncle's plantation. My uncle's name was Archie Davis. We had this big place back there, and we lived there with him and farmed partly and he worked partly. We had cotton and corn, and when he [Charlie] get caught up with his duties on the farm, he would go out on his log job again and catch up and work.

[Did he work on shares with your Uncle?]

Yes, he did, I think he said, worked on half. If you make two bales, one his, and one the farmer or merchant. If you make two wagon loads of corn, he'd get one and you'd get one. If he didn't make but one wagon load of corn, he'd get half of that load, and

If you make two bales, one his, and one the farmer or merchant. If you make two wagon loads of corn, he'd get one and you'd get one.

you'd get half of that load. That's the way it went.

[What did your husband do?]

Well, my husband public worked. From the beginning he was a logger. He went from logging to construction jobs and helping build the Natchez Trace, from there to the "Valley of the Moon" plantation ranch. Those are about the last places he worked.

[How old were you when you started your family?]

Oh, about seventeen or eighteen, I don't

remember my exact age. At that time when I was having my children it was tough for me. We didn't go to the hospital, you always had the midladies to come to your home--that was the toughest part--and sometime not having the money to pay her all the time. All those kind of things.



Then after the baby's born I needed somebody to stay with me. Nobody stay with me. I had to do the best I could for myself. Nobody was close to me, only an invalid aunt that wasn't able to help me, and I had to do what I could myself. My mother was living, but she lived a long way from me and the only way she had to get to me was to walk.

[How far away did she live from you?]

Oh, my goodness, ten or twelve miles, maybe more.

[Who was the midlady of your children?]

Melissa Mobley. Then the last one I used was Earnestine Parish, and the other children I went to the Vicksburg Kuhn Memorial Hospital. And then I had another midlady, Jesse Dismuke, delivered one child.

[How many children do you have?]

I have six. I lived to raise six. I lost my baby girl, I don't have a girl child. All of my children are boys.

[Did you get presents at Christmas when you were a child?]

Not hardly. We'd get a little Santa Claus--candies, raisins. I'll never forget the raisins on a stem. You get the raisins

You get the raisins that was on the stem. But now you get raisins in the box. You never hardly see raisins now on the bush.

that was on the stem. But now you get raisins in the box. You never hardly see raisins now on the bush. Now they are in a box pressed down. Raisins then had seeds in them.

We had one or two apples and an orange and some candies. I'll never forget the candies we had, already made up in a little box. Some would be white, some yellow, some pink, and some gumdrops.

And we always had firecrackers. Well, all we knew, Santa Claus brought them, and we would have firecrackers that were big around as my fingers--my fingers are small--but you don't see them any more now. We light 'em. We never did get hurt. We knew how to light 'em. We always had Roman candles, a few big firecrackers and a few small ones. I guess the big firecrackers got dangerous and they quit making them. There were times when some children would be careless and get their fingers blown away, some kind a way.



[How did you celebrate Easter?]

Boiled our eggs. We always had an Easter program. Most of the time, the way we would color our eggs, we'd get calico colored pieces and those that would fade quickly and wrap it

around that egg and put it in the water before we boil it. When we'd boil it, coloring would come off on the egg, and that's the way we colored our eggs. And we'd have some beautiful designs come off there good and be pretty.

Lot of times we'd have our Easter program at church. That was another pretty good event in our lives, something good. We'd learn our parts and say them and act them and have our songs and we be dressed up then in our real clothes, you know. Mother would always make us a dress for Easter. Fix our hair ourselves and come out looking good. We three sisters had our own way of doing these things. We'd be dressed up then in our own type of clothes.

[What about the Fourth of July?]

We'd have that day off. We wouldn't go to the field that day. My brother would always



raise watermelons. We have watermelons, cantaloupes, and other things that we raised on the farm for dinner. Our own home-raised fried chicken. Everybody would always try to have some roasted corn ears

for the fourth. We'd have that and maybe had your dinner. Your home-raised chicken was your meat and that was the day.

[When did you first register to vote?]

Since the Civil Rights been into action, that's when I became a registered voter. I went to the courthouse to register. I don't know exactly what it was gonna be like. Wonder am I doing the right thing. What's it gonna be like. Someone call me across the street said, "Come in now and get registered to vote." I wouldn't ask no questions. I was fully grown then.

[Do you feel it's important to vote?]

I think so. If you vote you help choose the ones that are qualified to do the things you want done while they are in office or what need to be done in your county. You cast your vote and you feel like you have a part in whatever it is. You can speak out if you vote. I think it's very important. I think everyone should. If they don't

they should go on into it, since they have the privilege.

[What's the biggest change you think has taken place in this county since you were a young girl?]

The first biggest thing for me was I had a home of my own. Then for the children they had a ride to school. In other words, the children rode to school before I got the home. And the next thing I can look around and see



Interviewer Vikki Smith

most any black person with a home of their own. I was one of the few in this area or among some of the first ones to have a little piece of land I could call mine, me and my husband. Those are some of the biggest changes. And also a car to ride in. Every

We were very poor but we were happy, though, and maybe we visited one another. They don't do that now hardly.

house has at least a car that they go where they please.

[Are people different now then they used to be when you were growing up?]

Yes, I would say that they have a very different attitude. Because we were very poor but we were happy, though, and maybe we visited one another. They don't do that now hardly. We would visit and late in the evening we three sisters would get together and sit out in the cool and sing. We would sing spiritual songs, that's all we knew.

Rev. William Walker

Interview by Darrin Davis
Transcribed by Darrin Davis
Edited by Rejanah Steward

I was born in Claiborne County right across the hill, about three miles from here on March 24, 1905.

My father was named William Walker. I'm named after him--Billy, Billy Walker. And he was raised right around in here. In Copiah back up there. I think he was a good old man.

My mother was named Dora Walker. She was born right down here by the old Sawyer place. You may not know where it's at, but it's right down the road there, where Mary used to live, my sister. Right there on this side of Freedom Hall fork, up on the hill here. She was born right out there in the front of that house, in that pasture in a little old house, so she says.

[Papa and mama] lived right around in here until they got old. And they went to Detroit with the other children. And then, when my sister's husband died, they came back to Jackson. They lived with her. Papa died in Jackson and she died in Detroit, Michigan. But they all buried right down here.

Mr. Jim Person--you might know, little Jimmy down there in Port Gibson--well, his daddy, bought that place and that's where all us was raised up.

[Did your father own the land you grew up on?]

He didn't own any land that I know of. We stayed right up here, where I was born at. Another man owned that place, they call old man Will Young. And the bank down there broke him up. I was a little old boy then. I



Rev. William Walker standing near his house.

didn't know nothing much. Bank broke him up. And Mr. Jim Person--you might know, little Jimmy down there in Port Gibson--well, his daddy, bought that place and that's where all us was raised up. Right up there, on that place. Never have farmed with but one man and that was Mr. Person.

And it was just like a home. We didn't own it, but we was at home. And could have been up there now, but I didn't like to stay on no ranch where they raising cows. I didn't like to stay on there.

And I moved down here when a man, Mr. John Machen, he asked me about moving out here with him. His wife was sick, and he told me that I could move in here and I could stay here till I die. So I say, "Well, that's just a good enough home for me." I came on down here and that's where I been ever since.

And Mr. John was mighty nice. He died. His wife died. But his sister owned this

place and operates it now, but she nice. They all were nice people.

[Tell me how did your parents treat you?]

Fine. They did the best they could. They weren't able to buy books. The government



wasn't furnishing books at that time. But they would buy books and we never did get all our books, but we would have to study with some other children that had a book. And then sometimes they didn't have a book and they

would study with us, and that's the way we did it.

[What did your father tell you about growing up?]

Well, I can't remember all of it, but Mr. Walter Trim mostly raised him. That was a white fellow. His wife was named Miss Anna Trim, and he would tell us how she taught him. Mostly that's how he got his learning, right from that white lady. And she taught him how to read and how to tend to business, and that's what he would tell us about. He would always teach us to let somebody tell us something. Pay attention to what they was saying, and then, if it was good, we could get something out of it. And if it was bad--well, we would know how to shun those bad things and do the things that was good.

When they sell you, you had to go in the name of the man that bought you.

I can't remember everything he taught us because he taught us a whole lot of things, you know, that I never will forget. When I was coming up, if he would tell us to do something and we failed to do it, then we may musta look for something--a lashing. I

know I won't forget that.

He was dairying, you know, he had a little dairy farm. And that's after we had got on up and he was kind of prospering a little bit. He bought some cows from somebody out at Wesson. They were Jersey cows and he got them on this term: he would take them and milk them and pay for them from that. From milk, you know, and profit that he get out of the cream. And that's the way he paid for them cows. And from that on he went to stepping up, you know, where he could provide for us a little better.

And so he told us to keep the calves out the corn, and me and my brother Fred went off and went to playing--like children will play--and he came home and caught them calves in the corn. And he called us. Now that was one of the worst whippings he ever gave. But I never will forget it and I never did let them calves get back in the corn either.



My granddaddy, my daddy's daddy, he came from Virginia. He was sold in this country. They sold him from Virginia. I don't know what part of Virginia, but he came from Virginia. It's a fellow--they say the name of Walker--bought him back yonder in slavery. When they sell you, you had to go in the name of the man that bought you. And he went in that name. And I don't know what we was earlier, before he left there. But he came here and that's how the Walkers came in, far as I can know about it. He said he came here as a sold slave. But now when I got up big enough to know him, he was an old man. He was a preacher, too.

My grandmother, she was a Gage. She

married a Gage, but I don't know what she was before she married a Gage. I don't know.

But now my grandmother on my mother's side, she was a Kindless, but she married a Brown. And that's my mother's mother. She married a Brown, and she was born right down here in Claiborne County. Papa was born up there in Copiah County. She lived to get 97. Papa lived to get 94.

Mr. Person furnished me five dollars a month and that would take care of me and my wife, a month.

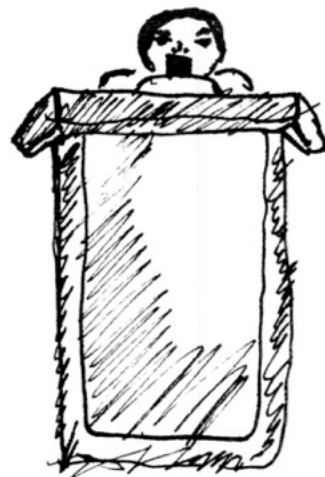
We lived pretty good. Course, you know, stuff wasn't high as it is now. You could take five dollars and buy enough. Well, when I got up and started to farming and married, Mr. Person furnished me five dollars a month and that would take care of me and my wife, a month. Other than, you know, what we would have raised at the house. And it wouldn't take much money to get a pretty good little [bunch of groceries]. You couldn't tote it. But now you can tote 25 dollars worth in your hand.

And back there at that time, you know, we had to work. Children had to work and some of them couldn't get our schooling. We had one sister, she went to Alcorn, and we had to stay at home to work to keep her in school. That's the way that happened. But Papa would take care of us, you know, the best he could. He would try to keep us knowing the church, and that's one thing he did. He didn't send us to church but he carried us. Sunday School and church every Sunday. We'd walk. We didn't have no other way to but walk. We walked five and six miles. And some-times further, going to church. And that was one thing that kept us out of devilment. Going to church.



[Did you go to school?]

I started to school when I was five. But I went to school when I was four. They would let us go out to school and they put me on a program. Them older ones that was having the program. They put me on there because I was mannish. You know, lots of little boys will be mannish and they would speak up. They had me in the school room in the program at the school turn-out. I remember part of the speech that I spoke--and only four years old--but yet I can speak a speech.



I'll tell you what we have at home.
Some chicken, ducks and geese,
And a nice big turkey we will have,
To put up on the table on Christmas day.

Now I remember that. And that was the first one. I can't say the last one--not to save my life--'cause I done forgot it. I went to Pisgah--up here at Pisgah school--under Professor Miller. A Rosenwald School. I finished eighth grade but I never did get my diploma because we had to stop in March and go to farming. And that's where I stopped off at.

[What was it like in school?]

Oh, we had a principal and we had an assistant teacher under Professor Miller, who was the principal. The first that I can remember was Mrs. Ethel Moore. She was assistant teacher. And Mrs. Reed's mother was our assistant

too at one time.

Well, mostly we was taught mathematics, history, but it was not like these books we have now. We never did study much about the presidents. We were taught how to read and write, how to speak English, something like that.

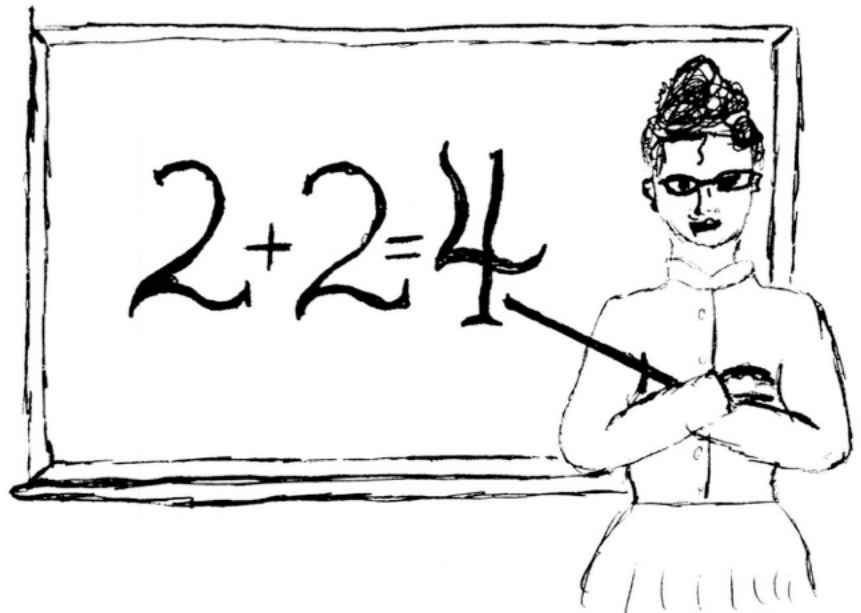
[What was it like when you were young?]

Oh, it was kind of tough. I worked. My daddy would make sorghum molasses and corn potatoes and stuff like that. And that's what we would have to eat. And we would eat some milk that come from my boss man, Mr. J.W. Person. Papa would milk for them and we would get some milk--clabber milk and bread. That's the way we came. When I got up large enough to work, then we would work for fifty cents a day. Fifty cents a day, from sun up until sun down.

[What was it like working?]

Well, we would have mules and horses, and we would have turning plows, and have what we call inside harrow and we would twofer this land. And then we'd have a middle splitter, we'd bust it out with a middle splitter. Then we would harrow the ground off. And then, if we planting corn, you would have open that ground and plant that corn, and that's on top of the row. And sometimes he would plant it in the middle and then work the dirt to it.

Then the cotton--when we would plant cotton, we would break the ground up and then harrow it off good. Take the plant and get up on top of it, and we plant it then. That's the way we planted. And we'd plant peas. We'd plant some in the corn. Then we would have some pea patches, and Papa would have the barn full of peas. And he would raise his hogs, and he would raise chickens. And we didn't have to buy anything but something like sugar--sugar, soda, and baking powder. Something like that. Things what you couldn't raise. We



didn't have to buy any lard because he would raise that. And that's what we had.

[What kind of work did you do to support yourself once you were out on your own?]

Well, when I got out on my own I was farming. I would farm, and then after the farming--we always finished up our hoeing and cultivating it in July--I'd go out there and work at the little groundhog sawmill



until the crop got ready to be gathered, and then I'd come back and gather the crop. And sometime we didn't have much to gather. We'd fail sometime when it was a bad year. And the boss man would tell us--Mr. Jimmy--

say, "Y'all spit in your hand and try it again." And that's what we would do. I remember PPapa got up to about 1,500 dollars in debt. In that time back yonder. And money was money.

Another fellow got up to somewhere like that ['cause] Mr. Jimmy sent his son to the Madstone* down in New Orleans and it was about nine or ten hundred dollars when he got through.

You know what I meant by the Madstone. That's what they called it at that time, you know, when dogs used to go mad.

It's a dog was following a man named Kelly Shaifer--he used to following a wagon--he ginned cotton and carried it in a wagon--and this dog went mad. He came down the road by this fellow's house. And this fellow saw the dog coming, and the man went to hollering [to his son] to tell him to go back in the house. And [his son] had a dog named Drummer, and he went to calling, "Here, Drummer! Here, Drummer!" And running out to where the dog was, and then this dog bit him.

And when this dog bit him, they didn't have no shots and things here like they used to. But they had a place they called a Madstone. That's what they called it down in New Orleans. And that's where they sent

Them dogs would go mad and bite things. They'd bite a hog, you know that hog would go crazy.

this boy. Mr. Jimmy sent him down there. Cost him 'round about 900 dollars or better to get him straight. And I don't know just how long he stay, 'cause I was a little boy then. But I know he stayed down there a long time. But when they brought him home

* Editor's note: the Oxford English Dictionary defines *madstone* as "a stone supposed to have the power of allaying or curing the madness caused by the bite of a 'mad' animal." See the box on the next page for a description of the madstone Rev. Walker is most likely referring to.

he was all right.

You see, them dogs would go mad and bite things. They'd bite a hog, you know that hog would go crazy. I knowed one to bite a cow, and that cow went crazy hollering and doing ever kinda way. And I had a dog. A mad dog bit him. And this dog, I had him tied and he went crazy and had to kill him.

But now you know they don't have to send 'em off. You can go to a doctor's and they got shots for to give you for that now.

That's what I was talking about. Mr. Jimmy, he would always take care of us. And he'd send you to the doctor. You never had to worry about no doctor, and if you had to go to the hospital, he send you to the hospital. And he would foot the bill 'til we get up able to do so.

So this man got dissatisfied, that was a fellow the name of Judge Swan. He got dissatisfied and he said he was gonna move. Called my daddy Billy. He said, "Billy, I'm gonna move."

And Papa said, "Judge," say, "what you want to move for?" Say, "You know Mr. Jimmy sent your boy down to the Madstone and got him straightened out."

And he moved. Went out in Copiah somewhere, but he never did have no good luck. But Papa stayed there. And I remember he made 19 bales of cotton and he paid out that \$1,500 that year. And then he bought us a saddle a piece. Yes, a saddle a piece. We had horses and we rid them horses. And the next year, he made 22 bales of cotton and he got an old '27 Chevrolet car, and that's way we come. Just like that.

[What was it like when you went out on your own?]

Well, I'll be frank. I never did buy anything. Papa would do all the buying. I didn't even buy my clothes or nothing. Papa would do it. And when I married, it would just look like I'm out on my own, now. And look like I just couldn't do it. I couldn't hardly know how to make grocery. I just didn't know how to take care of a house. I had to learn. I just had to learn it. I did learn it and I wasn't long in learning, 'cause I had to do it, you see.

When I started out, I didn't want to stay with my mother-in-law and father-in-law.

The Madstone of Vacherie

by Darcy Schraufnagel

In the little town of Vacherie, Louisiana, midway between New Orleans and Baton Rouge, there is a small black stone which has become a legend. The stone is said to have cured as many as 4,000

The stone is placed on the bite wound and it sticks there until all of the venom has been "sucked" out.

people who have suffered from a snake bite, spider sting, the bite of a rabid animal, or anything resulting in a poison infection in the blood stream.

The stone is placed on the bite wound and it sticks there until all of the venom has been "sucked" out. When there is no poison left it simply falls off the wound. After the healing, the stone is soaked in cold water. When it is first placed in the water, it boils and bubbles and it is thought to be releasing the poison.

The legend says that the stone was given to the Gravois family 200 years ago

by an Indian. The Gravois, one of the earliest white families to arrive in Vacherie, were friendly with a neighboring tribe of Indians that lived on Lake Des Allemands. When Madame Gravois was bitten by a poisonous snake, an Indian appeared with a black stone about the size of a man's thumb and cured her with it. One year later this same Indian returned. He was suffering from some kind of internal illness. He stayed with the family for a long time and was nursed back to health. Before leaving the family, he gave them the black stone as a token of gratitude. He told them to keep it as a treasure but never to sell it. Many people say that the stone was taken from the heart of a white deer.

The stone has been used so much that it has worn down and broken into three pieces. It is kept in the Gravois' house in a small tin container that used to hold

Indian massage cream. Once the stone was taken to New Orleans and examined by doctors. No abnormalities could be found. The doctors could see no reason why the stone would have such healing powers. The Gravois' are always ready to offer the help of their mysterious stone and never charge for its use, but many people leave the amount of money a doctor would have cost them.

Though there is no proof that this stone is the madstone referred to by Reverend Walker, but its potent reputation and the nearness of Vacherie to New Orleans suggest it's a good possibility.



Our thanks to Jessica Travis, librarian at the Historic New Orleans Collection, and the librarians at the St. James Parish Library in Lusher, Louisiana, for their help in tracing the madstone. Sources include articles in the *New Orleans Times-Picayune Magazine* Section (6/19/49), the *Baton Rouge State-Times* (2/12/74), *Cabanocey: The History, Customs and Folklore of St. James Parish*, by Lillian C. Bourgeois (New Orleans: Pelican Publishing Co., [n.d.], and *La Paroisse de St. Jacques: A History in Words and Photographs*, by Leonce Haydel (Baton Rouge: Pelican Management Corporation, 1988).

And I didn't want my wife to stay with my father and my mother. I had me a little house built on the hill up from Papa. A two room house. This



was the sleeping room and that was the kitchen. And that's where I stayed until I got, you know, children beginning to be born. Then I had to get into a larger house. And

that's the way I come up through life. I didn't want my children to come up like that. I'd send mine and let them buy something. See, I didn't know how to do nothing. Papa did it hisself. We didn't do nothing but work. And when he'd get ready for us to have, he go out there and buy it himself.

And when they were running this road right down through there--that's been a long time--I was about 12 years old--Mr. Jimmy, he got the job of that road from where

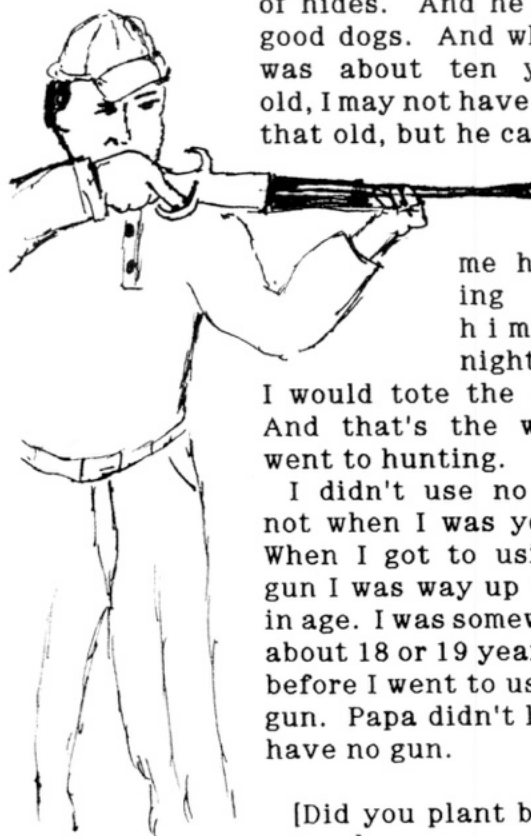
A Nehi was a nickel then, and that's what we would get out of a week.

Caleb Jones stay up there right down here to Pisgah fork. Papa would drive the mules. We work all that week. And that Saturday--my brother-in-law had a little store down there, right where Mary Marks stays now--and he would go down there. And a Nehi was a nickel then, and that's what we would get out of a week. He would give us a nickel Nehi.

We had to put up with it, you see. We couldn't say nothing but take it. It don't look like you would do that now do it? It don't look like it. But if you had a come back yonder you'd a did it. It looked rough, but my children sometime they say they couldn't have did that. And I say, "If you had came back yonder, like we came, you'd a did it." That's right.

[Tell me when did you learn to hunt?]

Well, I been hunting practically all my days, 'cause I'd go with Papa when he would deal with fur, too. Hides--possum hides, coon hides, skunk hides, fox hides--all kind of hides. And he kept good dogs. And when I was about ten years old, I may not have been that old, but he carried



me hunt-
ing with
him at
night, and

I would tote the sack. And that's the way I went to hunting.

I didn't use no gun, not when I was young. When I got to using a gun I was way up there in age. I was somewhere about 18 or 19 years old before I went to using a gun. Papa didn't let us have no gun.

[Did you plant by the moon?]

Uh-huh. My daddy always would use the McDonald Almanac and the Lady's Birthday Almanac. Now then, it would teach us not to plant on a new moon nor the full of the moon, which was three days before or three days after. That's the way they taught in that book. He worked by the moon. We'd have in the McDonald Almanac, they called it Scorpion. That was the sign they said most fruitful of all. When I plants something now I plants by the Scorpion. And Cancer is the next best sign that we planted by. That was a good sign for planting. It would bear good fruit, but Scorpion was most fruitful of all. Liberty and Pisces are some more signs in there where it said you plant underground, that means for root crops. Gemini, that's the sign we go for destroying weeds. And like you go out there and you want to destroy some weeds or cut some weeds down. You can cut 'em down and they ain't coming back no more. So that's the way we would do plants.

Just like when we got behind in our crop and we just had to plant when we get our ground ready. You know, when plowing with horses and mules you can't just jump up. It take you a day or two to get your ground in good shape, something longer than that, but if you had a tractor now, you can just up and get it ready right now and plant it. But back there when them sign done passed, then we just get our ground ready and just plant when we can. But you can see a difference in it.

And it tells us how to, you know, wean babies. Some of them signs how to wean babies. And how to castrate hogs, and when, and so on like that. And that's the way we went.

[How is weaning babies done?]

On one of those signs now, the baby probably may be sucking your breast, and the mother want to wean him. And she get on one of them signs and she start on that day and he won't be much trouble. He may cry a little 'round there, but he won't be much trouble on them signs.



going, we would do that. And then after I married, I was called to preach. And that's the biggest role I've had in the church, since I've been preaching. And I've been pastoring now 44 years with this last past year. Forty-four. And I'm the president of the Minister and Deacon Institute and I'm the president of

the Copiah County Association. And that's the role I'm playing up until now. And I am the corresponding secretary in the Claiborne County Association. I works in two counties. I'm pastoring two churches in this county and two in Copiah County.

[What are those churches?]

Hickory Flat out at Barlow. Shiloh down on [Highway] 28 at Pleasant Hill. St. Peter at Pattison, and Mount Pleasant is out from Pattison.

[Where did you preach before the church called you?]

I preached right down in the Methodist Church in a rally. I'd preach over at Whitehall in a rally. They had give me my local license. I didn't have no ordination license. I preached right down here to Montro Grove. And I preached down there to Holly Grove and Mount Vernon, Whitehall, Mount Pleasant, where I'm pastoring all around these. But I was just a little preaching. But they would get me to preach in the rally.



[When did you join the church?]

I joined church when I was eleven years old. I joined Shady Grove up here under a man they called Elder Roman. He was the pastor, and I was eleven years old. And now you can count it up. I'm 84 now, and I've been in church ever since I was eleven years old. Never have been out.

I taught Sunday School. I hadn't married then, and I'd go to church and anything that we could do to keep the church

[What's a rally?]

They would have a program for the church and they would bring something to eat out there. They'd have three or four preachers. All the preachers they could get to preach in this rally. And after we preach, now, they would take up collection. That's for the church. And they'd take up a collection and sometime we would pay fifty cents, and that was good money at that time. And sometime two bits or whatever we had. That's what we would call a rally.

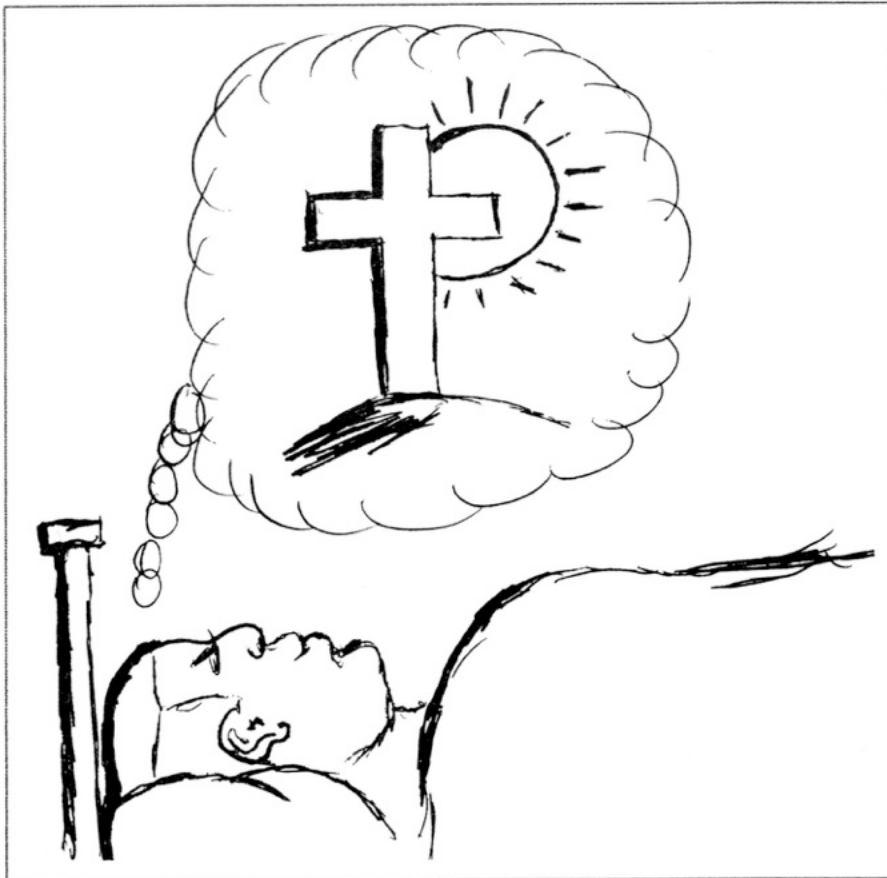
Each preacher preach and he would take up a collection. Then after the rally was over, then they'd go out and have little feast. They'd feed us, you know. That's what we called a rally. They don't have 'em now like that. They have different other kind of program.

But that would keep a young preacher, that would give him something to do. They'd call him to preach at the rally for them. He could preach every Sunday somewhere at that time. And by doing that, and by my father was pastoring and my father-in-law was pastoring, and I had a brother-in-law was pastoring. Well, you see, I had somewhere to preach. And I didn't have no trouble. And they went right on and elected me. I had been preaching a year and eleven months. I've been going ever since.

[How old were you when you first started preaching?]

When I married I was 24 years old, and I had three children when I started to preaching. Now I've been pastoring 44 years, and I'm 84 now. I been preaching a year and eleven months before I went to pastoring. Now then you can kinda get my age like that.

[Tell me, were you inspired by God?]



Yeah. I tell you he called me. But now I don't know, I might have been asleep. I don't know. But I don't know whether you call it a vision or what, but I never will forget it. When I was called, I was following. It was three men. One was in the front of me, leading me. The other one was behind. I was in the middle, and the other one was on side. And he carried me on out there and he

told me, he say, "You're anointed to preach." That's just what he said.

I said, "No, I don't want to preach." I never did want to be a preacher. Said, "No, I don't want to preach."

He said, "You anointed to preach."

Then I woke up. I went on for a long time and finally that same thing came back. And a pastor was pastoring us at that time. They called him Reverend Joe Miller from Bude. And the second time it came to me, it kinda worried me. And I went to this pastor. And

I told him what I had seen.

He said, "Walker," say, "you better prepare yourself because the Lord want you to preach."

I say, "No, I don't want to be no preacher."

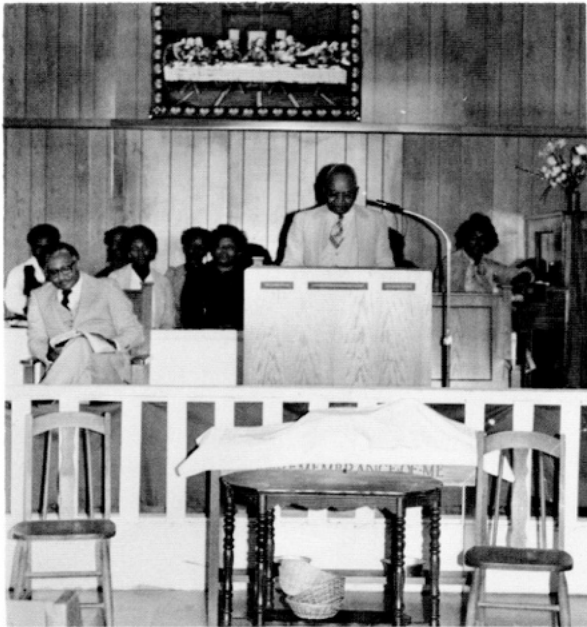
He say, "Yeah," say, "but you gonna have to preach, that's all I can see in it."

And so I went on. It came to me again and it carried me to the church. And one man was standing up there looked like the pastor, and one was sitting down behind them same men.

This man that stood up, he said, "This young man is sent to preach the gospel, and what shall we do about it?"

And he said, "Let him preach."

And I got up and preached the eleventh chapter Hebrew in the first verse: "Faith is the subject of things hoped for, the evidence of things unseen." And I went on out there, and I went to preaching. And I hadn't preached but about a year and eleven months, and the church called me and I been in it ever since.



Rev. Walker preaching at St. Peter's M. B. Church near Pattison.

[What are your feelings on religion?]

You ain't talking about the denominations or nothing like that, is you?

[No. Do you think religion is important to a person?]

Yes. I believe if you got religion, you got to be regenerated and born again. Then after you get regenerated and born again, then you has a guide. And I think you'll find in your Bible where he said, "If your own

It's something within you, that'll let you know when you're about to go wrong. See, an individual he just can't go wrong and not knowing it.

conscience don't condemn you, neither do I." And that religion, in a way it guides you, if you got one. It's something within you, that'll let you know when you're about to go wrong. See, an individual he just can't go wrong and not knowing it. He knows when he about to do wrong. Because he's got something in him telling him, and they call it a conscience. That's what Christ said, "If your own conscience don't condemn you, neither do I."

And where this condemning come in--you see, if you gon' do wrong and it letting you know before you do it, and then you go on and do it, then your conscience has done condemned you. You did something that you shouldn't do. And Christ then said, "If your own conscience don't condemn you, neither do I."

So therefore, that religion is a guide. If you got religion, it'll keep you out of a many thing, if you been truly born again. In other words, it'll make you stay in your place, keep you, make you stay in your place and let the other fellows alone. And then sometimes it'll give you a mind--like this boy was going wrong--then it'll give me a mind to go to him and talk to him. But if I have that feeling he won't accept it, then the Bible tell you don't go to him then.

Sometimes a man be drunk and he haven't had a swallow of whiskey. He just drunk in his mind. Mind leads 'em all. Come down to the religions, in the Church we are all one. Christ didn't have no denomination. The church was in the mind of Christ long before he built it. When he got those boys out on



The choir singing at Rev. Walker's church.

the road to Syria and Philippi he asked them, "Now, who do men say that I am?"

"Some say you're Jeremiah, and some said you're one of the prophets. Some say this and that."

But he said, "Who do you say that I am?"

And Peter spoke and say, "I say thou art Christ, the son of the living God."

Then he said, "Peter, son of Jonah, flesh and blood didn't reveal this unto you, but my father which is in heaven." Say now, "Upon this rock I'll build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." Then he told him he gonna give him the keys and whatever he loose on earth he would loose in heaven. Whatever you bound on earth, I'll bind in heaven.

See that preacher--I'm talking about a man that's been really called by God and really got the church at heart, and got religion--God will deal with him and he'll give his preacher the key. What the key was is the word, the word of God, that Bible. That is the key. That's to God's kingdom. And if you give him that key, and he hear it, you're going do it. See, you're going do these things when you hear it, you're going to do what he say. And then God will deal with it, that's religion.

Now we have some religions that ain't nothing but devils, and they'll tear up a church. But now I believe, I believe this comes down to the denomination. Every frog will praise his own pond. I'm a Baptist, and I just believe in the Baptist.

Now but I don't fight these other denominations. I don't fight 'em because whatsoever they are, it ain't but one Book, the Bible, and we all going by that. If you going by that word, why, you all right. I don't fight the Jehovah Witness. If I have time when they come around here, I'll sit down and talk with them. I don't fight 'em. I don't fight the Methodist. I don't fight the Holy Sanctified. I don't fight 'em. I just go on and preach from the same book, the word of God, and teach people how to do right and what to do. So, I don't have nothing against no other denomination. That's right I don't.

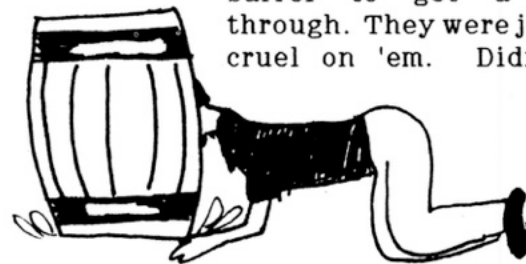
[Did your grandfather ever tell you about the Civil War?]

My grandfather? No, I was too young to know anything about the Civil War. Even ask him about it. I was too young. I never did hear him say anything, 'cause he lived since the Civil War. He wasn't in it.

Every frog will praise his own pond. I'm a Baptist, and I just believe in the Baptist.

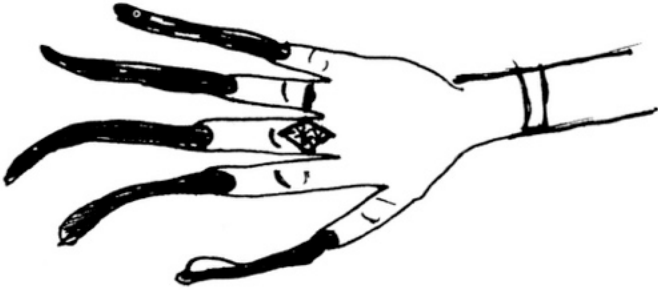
But it was an old lady, since I been preaching, [Aunt Milandy Shoulder], she live the other side of Beechgrove--it's a place down here called the McAlpin. And I'd go down there and talk with her sometime about slavery. I'd be there talking with her and she would set down and tell me how the people, how they would handle 'em you know.

And said they wouldn't allow 'em to pray and allow 'em to go to church and what not. Say if they wanted to get a prayer through, sometime when they get the ups on the old master, said they'd have to get behind a barrel and sometime stick they head in the barrel to get a prayer through. They were just that cruel on 'em. Didn't 'low



them to call on God. And that's what she would tell me.

Since I been preaching and pastoring, I went between McComb and Brookhaven to a little place they called Bassfield. And I got down there and a lady was down there, she was a slavery lady. And that lady had fingernails. They had growed out, and they



had--you know these old ram horns when they twist over like that--her fingernails were twist over like that and they were about that long. Her toenails were the same way, and she was 92 years old.

"Lord, I'm glad I didn't come back then, in slavery."

And she told me that the Lord put her down there and told her that her fingernails was gonna grow out like bird claws. And her toe nails. And said if she cut 'em off she would die. And that's what she told me. And she told me she came up in the slavery.

And then they taken me down to a church--a great big old church--and they had an upstairs. They had a door you come in here, and the white folks went in here. Then it's a door here, it'll carry you on upstairs. Then it had a place up in there where they would whip you, if you do bad--they had a place up in there to whip you. And

then if you do a bad enough crime, they had a place up in there where they hanged you.

And I looked at that place and I said, "Lord, I'm glad I didn't come back then, in slavery."

And that was a sight to me. It made me look back to see how people came back yonder. But that church is still there and they was having service in it. They had turned it over to the colored people.

[What is the oldest thing you own?]

The oldest thing I own is my wife. I've been had her fifty-three years. Now that's the only thing I own. I don't own nothing else but horses, and mules, cows. Something like that. Chickens. That's the only thing I own. I just got rid of all them, 'cause after I got of age I couldn't handle them. 'Cause I couldn't farm, I just let 'em went.

[How did your parents prepare you for life?]

Well, it's just like I said, when he prepared me for life, he sent me to school when I could. And then he would teach me how to handle people. He would teach us to know how to take care of things through life and not tend to other folk's business and some-



Rev. Walker at home with his wife, Bernice.

thing like that. Not to have anything to do with other folk's business. Let that alone. A thing that didn't concern us, let it alone. He taught us that. I won't forget that. As I've said, he sent us to school and then he sent us to church. And that's why I'm preaching today, I reckon, because he sent me to church.

I've been pastoring 44 years. The same people, the first church called me. I been right there 44 years, and through that part of the life, back yonder 44 years ago, they were paying 25 cent a member. Twenty-five cent a member. They couldn't do no better

I've been pastoring 44 years. The same people, the first church called me.

because all them was rural churches. They was farming and a farmer couldn't get his money only in the fall of the year. And some of them would bring some chickens out there and pay their salary. Well, we had to take what the peoples give us, you know. And we came through that part of life, and I suffered with the people, and they suffered with me.

[Do you have any advice for young people today?]

Yeah. Go to school and get your learning, but always have an object in view. See, you first got to know what you want to be, and know what you want to do, and you get that in your mind and work to that end. See, you can't be two things at one time--you got to get one at the time.

And go to church. Go to Sunday school but be sure to go to that public school and get your learning where you can be able to master. 'Cause if you ain't got your learning, you won't master. You gon' have to have something up here [in your head]. That what you gonna have to have. And if you get that learning, it'll make a way for you.

I teaches 'em that in the church. I tell 'em to get an education, get that learning. Sometimes I tell 'em how I come. I let 'em know that it's gonna take more than what I had now to go through this world. See, I done passed that now. I'm gone on. I ain't

looking for no job. But if I was young and was educated, I'd be getting some of this good money.

You know, I tell these young fellows they set around throwing their life away, instead of going to school, trying to make something out of their lives. It's bad, you know, it's bad for man to live in this world, and get to be whole in this day and time, and can't read and neither write. See it's bad.

And then it's bad again when a man gets up yonder in age, old man, and die out of the church. I telling a few yesterday, a old man, 74 years old hadn't been belonged to no church. And I told the peoples it's bad to live in this world and get 74 years of age and then die and go to hell. It's bad. Anywhere a church is in a community, it's a help to that community. Anywhere a school is in a community, it's a help to that community.

Now I think they made a mistake, I don't know. But in little rural schools, we had little rural schools all out in the country. And as long as the children was going out there at this rural school, them children were learning. They were learning good.

Now I know right now, I finished eighth grade, and I've talked with some children, some children who have finished high school. And I asked them some questions, and they

It's gonna take more than what I had now to go through this world.

don't know what I'm talking about. You see, they just going. I could tell 'em you know, I can tell them how to live, and how to treat one another, and how to treat their leaders, the ones that over 'em, the teachers or what not.

Go to school and get all the learning that they can get, because they can't come like I come. See now, if that young person don't get a learning and ain't got no education, he up against a problem. But back yonder I could do pretty good. You know I wished I had a coulda got it. I'd a been a better man today, 'cause I'd have more learning and what not to instruct them. But I didn't get it. And I tell them to go to school.



Harriet Aikerson

Interview by Veronica Buck
Transcribed by Veronica Buck
Edited by Frank McGriggs and Sarah Crosby

I'm very proud and honored to have two grandmothers in this world today. In this article you can meet one of them. Her name is Mrs. Harriet Wilson Aikerson.

Mrs. Aikerson lives at 204 Mansion Avenue, and is very well known in Claiborne County and surrounding counties. She is a very outstanding and brave person, not only to me but to other people. Now that she no longer works at school, she works with a lot of people. She takes them to the store, the doctor, wherever they need to go.

When reading this article you will learn some ways in which grandma brought her children up and also how she was brought up.

I believe my grandmother's motto for young people today is "if the shoe fits, wear it," and for adults is "don't let your children grow up being nothing."

I enjoyed talking to my grandma about how she brought her children up. I hope you will enjoy meeting her also.

--Veronica Buck

I was born in Claiborne County, nineteen hundred and twenty-three, December the 16th. Times wasn't nearly like they are now when I was young. It was fifteen children on the plantation that I grew up (on), and we was all like one family. It was five in the family, three boys and two girls.

[I lived] on the Greenwood Plantation. That's on this side of Westside. No one lives there now. Going to West Side it's seven miles from here, and it's a gate on the right hand side of the road where we lived back up in there. Then I moved to Vicksburg to live with my aunt. My family was still here, but that's where my mother sent me to go to school. I first went to the Beechland School, in the Beechland community. Then I went to Cherish Creek School, and after finishing there I went to Magnolia High School on Cherry Street in Vicksburg.

[Did you have to walk to school?]

Four and a half miles going. Four and a half coming back.

[Suppose it rained?]

We walked.



[What was your favorite subject in school?]

I always did like English in school. I speak very poor English but, I always did like to write a lot. I never did write no poetry or poems, or anything like that. Nothing but my lesson, you know. We didn't have but one teacher. Mr. Henry Watkins. He taught us everything. It would be great big boys and girls and little bitty children at the same school. Later years they had two rooms and Henry Watkins' daughter, Ms. Annie Smithers, was the first teacher trained under Mr. Watkins. She would have the first through fifth or something. We didn't have but two classrooms. I can tell you about how many children were in my class, it wasn't over ten of us. It wasn't a hundred children going to the school.

[On the plantation] we played hopscotch, marbles and had our little dolls. We got an old china doll for Christmas. We would make our own dolls out of grass. We'd go out and get some grass, and that would be the little hair. We tied it on a stick, and we would comb that baby's hair.



from one Christmas to the other. You could get a tea set then for fifty-nine cents. And we would jump rope because we would go out in the woods and get a grape vine and make a jump rope out of it. [We would] cut it down

We would go out in the woods and get a grape vine and make a jump rope out of it.

and use it as a rope. See those great big vines hanging low over on those trees, well, that's what we use to jump rope with.

[How long could you get these ropes?]

Well, ten feet.

[How did you start talking to boys?]

Girls was always bashful, didn't want their mamas to see you talking to the boys and all of that little stuff. A boy had to first ask your mama could he walk home with you. And we started off in church because they would say boy where you think you going, you know and all that stuff. Boys couldn't come to your house then without being fully dressed with a coat on.

[Do you remember any sayings that your parents use to say when you were growing up?]

Spare the rod and spoil the child. That's one of the things that they used to say. Spare the rod and spoil the child. That's just like your children needs punishing for something and you don't do it. People nowadays, when children do bad things, they say that's funny. They little they say it's funny. Then when they get up a little size this child so bad I can't do nothing with it. I never have told nobody that I couldn't do nothing with ten of my children. Because as long as I am feeding them and clothing them and (they) step across the doorsill coming home, I'm gon' do something with them. Spare the rod and spoil the child that means that you don't whip them when they supposed to be whip.

We raised everything mostly that we ate, with the exception of sugar, and macaroni, and rice, and stuff. We made our own grits. We made our own meal. We didn't make flour, but all the other stuff we raised it. We

would kill hogs and kill a beef once a year. We had chickens. We had cows for the milk and butter, and all of that stuff. We just raised what we ate. We made sorghum molasses, and Louisiana syrup. See the sorghum is one syrup and the Louisiana is another syrup. The sorghum syrup we had more of that than we had the Louisiana syrup, and we could have sorghum syrup every day. But we had Louisiana syrup twice a week, which is on Sunday and Wednesday, those are the special days.



[Were things cheaper back then than they are today?]

Oh my God, you could take twenty dollars and come to town and have a wagon load of



groceries when you get back home. You could get a half barrel of flour for a dollar and a half. Sugar was a nickel a pound. Coffee was fifteen cents a pound, and stuff like that.

[What did you have to do to earn twenty dollars?]

Oh my God, when I was first grown, my daddy and my mother didn't let us go out hoeing and picking cotton too much for different people. We would help one another on the place. But you see, fifty cent is all you could get a day. And fifty cent for a hundred pound of cotton. I haven't been

able to pick a hundred pound of cotton yet. I would always get thirty pound in the morning and twenty pound in the evening. I never could get over that. I don't know why. And you see, just like you could work a

I haven't been able to pick a hundred pound of cotton yet. I would always get 30 pound in the morning and 20 pound in the evening. I never could get over that.

whole week for two dollars and fifty cents. Pay by the day and that would be from sun to sun. We didn't have no eight hour job, it was just all day. Quite naturally that show you how long you would have to work to earn twenty dollars.

[Were clothes cheaper?]

Yes, a nickel a yard for material. We didn't know anything about bought made clothes. Mama use to make our clothes. And she used to make our panties out of flour sacks, and our slips out of flour sacks. And get a nickel a yard for our cloth and make our little dresses. We would have our little cotton stocking to wear to church, and you didn't get a pair of silk stockings until you



got over twelve years old. We had two pairs of shoes a year. A pair of high-top shoes for school and we would have a pair of black shoes for church. Now that



was for a whole year. Two pair shoes for a year. And we wore Union's down in our stocking, that's [so] we would never get sick. But you all go around here naked nowadays. Outing* was two yards for a nickel. We would make our outing slips to wear. I never had owned a pair of pants. Our dresses, you know, come way down. We wore long dresses. We didn't go around here pulling on your dress tail trying to make them come to your knees.

[Well, when you went out to the field to pick cotton, what did you wear?]

We wore our old dresses. See we would have to go home and change our clothes when we come from school. And put on our old clothes, and go the field, but I never did.

[Did you have to wash your school clothes out every day?]

Yes ma'am, wash 'em out every night. We had wooden tubs. We'd saw a molasses barrel in two and make the wooden tub out. We had to rub things; we made lye soap, and that's

*Editor's note: outing flannel, a soft, lightweight, cotton fabric, usually with a short nap on both sides.

what we would use. We would have to wash those clothes every night, and get up and iron them with the black iron before we go to bed. If not, we would do it when we got up in the morning.

[Who were your parents?]

Elijah Jeremiah and Agnes Edward Wilson. I knew my grandmothers on both sides, but I never did know either of my grandfathers. My mother's mother was name Agnes Edward Scott and my father's mother was name Classie Wilson. My mother's mother passed when I was five years, but she was paralyzed. She had had a stroke and my mother would always have to fix her food and set it on the table, and by her being incapacitated, and me as a little girl, I would always slip up behind her and drink her tea and coffee, or whatever it was that she had to drink. She was very honorable. My father's mother, she used to cook a lot, but she cooked on the fireplace. She baked cakes in the skillet with a top on. She did all of her cornbread and biscuits in the skillet. We had something that you hang down in the fireplace. We put a pot over it and cooked. We made lye hominies, and all that kind of stuff. It was just real good. My father's mother had a lot of antique furniture, and we used to just love to go in



her sideboard. That's where she used to keep all of her sweets and things that she be done baked. We would just love to slip in and you know, kind of lift a little off behind her back. Which made it real good.

[Who was your husband?]

[My husband was] Walter Frisby Aikerson.



[We met] at church. The church was the onliest place we gather. I didn't have no wedding. No, ma'am, the preacher married me. I was married right around there in a house that's burned down. Rev.

Spencer married me. Come to town and got your license. See, it took him three months to make up his mind to ask my parents to see, could he marry me and after they considered, we got married in January. And come to town and bought the license and Rev. Spencer married us down at Mrs. Julia Collins' house. That's where he would take his couples when they got ready to marry.

[Who was present?]

Rev. Spencer and this Mr. Collins, he and his wife. When we was young and went out on our own, we still was out on our parents own, because they think we will still have to abide by their rules, you know. We thought we was grown, but if we didn't do the right thing our parents would come in and correct us.

[Where did your husband and you first live?]

With his mama. That was down to Westside when we first moved in a house by ourselves. I showed you [Veronica] that house on the side of the road coming from Westside. That was over on Mr. Hunter's place [on the back road.] A little old house on the right side of the road. It just about done fell down. I have ten (10) children. I raised my children like my mama raised me. Didn't nobody have to whip my children too much. I raised my children to learn to love and to respect, and right now you can't hear my children call one another a lie. They will call one another a story. Because we wasn't allowed to call one another a lie. We would say you told something untrue or something wrong, but just to call them lies, you know children say anything and everything. I can sometime be sitting in my house and hear things that I've never heard before out of little bitty children, you know. And I raised them up God-fearing. My little baby [was] in the wheelchair after she got sick. Then all of us had to just center our lives around her. To take care of her. And we just did. I have ten children, the baby died, and eight of them have at least a high school education. And two, three, four of them have a college education. I have three live in Chicago, one in Texas and the rest of them live here. My son went to the Army in 1961. He sent me

I raised my children to learn to love and respect, and right now you can't hear my children call one another a lie. They will call one another a story.

that Bible and that cuckoo clock from Germany. I never have had to go to jail to get one of them. I just raised 'em up God-fearing. [My children are] Elijah, Vergie, Agnes Marie, Helen, Leanna, Ethel Jean, Esther Lee, Clara Rose, Janet and Patrick and I raised Donald Ray. [I have] twenty-one [grandchildren and] seven [greatgrandchildren.]

[What was the name of the first church you joined?]

Beechland Missionary Baptist Church. Rev. W.M. Winder [was the pastor.] I have been in church since I was fifteen years old. I have served on the Usher Broad since 1960 and in the county I have served as a County Usher since 1963. I have served as secretary in the state capacity of the Ushers as Financial Secretary since 1965. I have served as secretary of my membership church which is now the Greater Saint Mark Missionary Baptist Church under the leadership of the Rev. W.C. Mazique. I have served there as the church clerk or secretary, whatever you'd want to call it, since 1962. Missionary Society, Junior Matron, at times. Sometime I'd rather go to Sunday School. Not all the time, because I have my little girl I have to stay with. At one time I served as President of the Usher Board and we had elections so often. Now, I'm just a member because I had so many things I had to do until I had to give up some of these things. I recalled my seat vacant, and didn't accept it anymore. So I'm just a member. [Members] have posts that we are stationed to. We have to seat the people. I used to, if people got happy, I would, you know, try to console them and all of that, but I'm too old for it now. But now in the



position that I hold at the Membership Church I don't have time to seat the ushers because I'm secretary. I have to take care of all the business part of church, but I still haven't given up ushering.

[What kind of business is involved being secretary for the church?]

I have to keep up with membership. I have to keep up with who's paid their membership dues. I have to write the checks for the church of the bills that come in. I

Now I am the manager of the cafeteria, but when I first went there I was a buck private.

have to every month you see, tell how much money is taken in under that heading that it's taken in under. Well, I said I have to write the checks to pay off all the people. That's about it. At the end of the year I have to give a yearly report of how much was raised. How much money was spent and what every dime was spent for. How much money is left in treasury, how much is left under the saving.

[What kind of work did you do to support yourself?]

After I got through having babies, I cooked for different people. I think Mrs. Clara Dungan was the first person that I ever cooked for, and from her Mrs. McCarley. I stopped working for her in 1963 to start working at Addison. August 28, 1963.* Now, I am the manager of the cafeteria, but when

*Editor's note: In recent years Mrs Aikerson worked in the cafeteria at Port Gibson High School. In June, 1989, she retired after 25 years.

Lunch Workers



I first went there I was a buck private. And you know a buck private have to start at the bottom and work up. I started working there in '63. We were serving five hundred children. It was only three ladies there, and two of those ladies, I found them there. And they told me that their previous supervisor had told them that young folk would do all the work. We had, ah, it was eighty children that they would let come in on their break or whatever you call it. They would work for their lunch. They didn't have free lunches for the children then as they do now. And so many children would come in and help serve the line, then their day come when they had to leave, and so many more would come in help serve. We would have it cooked, and they would come in to help serve. They would help wash dishes and mop the dining area after everybody, well, after all the other children would leave out. I enjoy my job. I enjoy getting up going to work. But when it's confusion, you know and all that on the job, a conflict or something like that, now I don't like that. But I just don't like conflicts. And I just like to be happy, and everybody happy. Nobody walking round looking funny, acting funny.

[How many people work in the cafeteria now?]

Oh, it's ten, excluding myself.

[How many children do you cook for each day?]

Nine hundred and seventy-five. I can't say exactly what year this was they stopped the children from working in the cafeteria, and that program came in that the children of the poor parent to have free lunches. That stopped them from having to come in to have to work for their meals. May of 1964, I had to start going to school for this work.

[What kind of courses did you take when you went?]

Nutrition. I had to go for three years straight, and then I could get a certificate for three years. I have to go now, every three years to renew my license. Now I go to Utica Junior College. When I first started I went to Jackson, to the Deaf and Dumb School, in 1964. Six years later I went to Hattiesburg to the University. I've been there for three times. And for the last three times I've had to go to Utica Junior College.

[What changes have you seen at Addison over the years aside from the children working in the cafeteria?]

We are serving more of a variety of food than we used to serve because we used to, if



we made a menu for one week we would do that for this month. Whatever we had on Monday we'd have that for four Mondays. We just don't have the same menu over and over like we used to have. The job has improved a lot. We've added more employees than it was back when I first went there. Yeah, I love to cook. Just common food. During the

We didn't have no recipes. Run a little salt through your finger, little baking powder, little soda in the sour milk to make the rolls...

holidays I just love cooking all pastries and stuff, pies, and making candies, and all that kind of stuff. I started when I was eight years old standing on a wood block. I had my little tea set and whatever [my mother] would have she would give me a little of it, maybe cornbread, whatever, you know. I would just go along with her.

[Did your mother use recipes?]

No, we didn't have no recipes. Run a little salt through your finger, little baking powder, little soda in the sour milk to make rolls and all of that.

[What's the best thing your mama cooked?]

Oh, my God, my mama was a good cook. My mama just was a good cook and everything she cook was special to us.

[How do you feel about life in general today?]

I feel that I'm blessed by the Lord to let me live to get sixty-five years old, and I try to live as the Bible say live. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

[What is the oldest thing you own?]

An old antique sofa. Fact of business, I have quite a bit of old antique[s]. I have a dresser in there which was my mother's. I moved in a house and that couch was given

to me, but I had to have it repaired.

[Have there been many changes in Port Gibson?]

Oh, my God, yes indeed. We used to come to town when we were children twice a year, that is when we gin our first bale of cotton and for Christmas, well, maybe three times. Because sometime they would let us come for Easter. When we would come to town people would be so glad to see one another, and we would just have the best fellowship. But now you don't know your next door neighbor. And when we was growing up, whatever one of us had, it was seven families on this place, whatever one family had all of us had some of it. If my mama killed a chicken her brother had to have part of it. If she had, we all had it. And it was just people loving one another. People don't love one another no more. People kill your mama now easy as they could kill rabbits. Cause they had a certain time of the year they had rabbits to kill. People kill people anytime now, you know. I don't know what happen along the line.



Detail of Mrs. Aikerson's antique dresser

[What advice could you give young people today?]

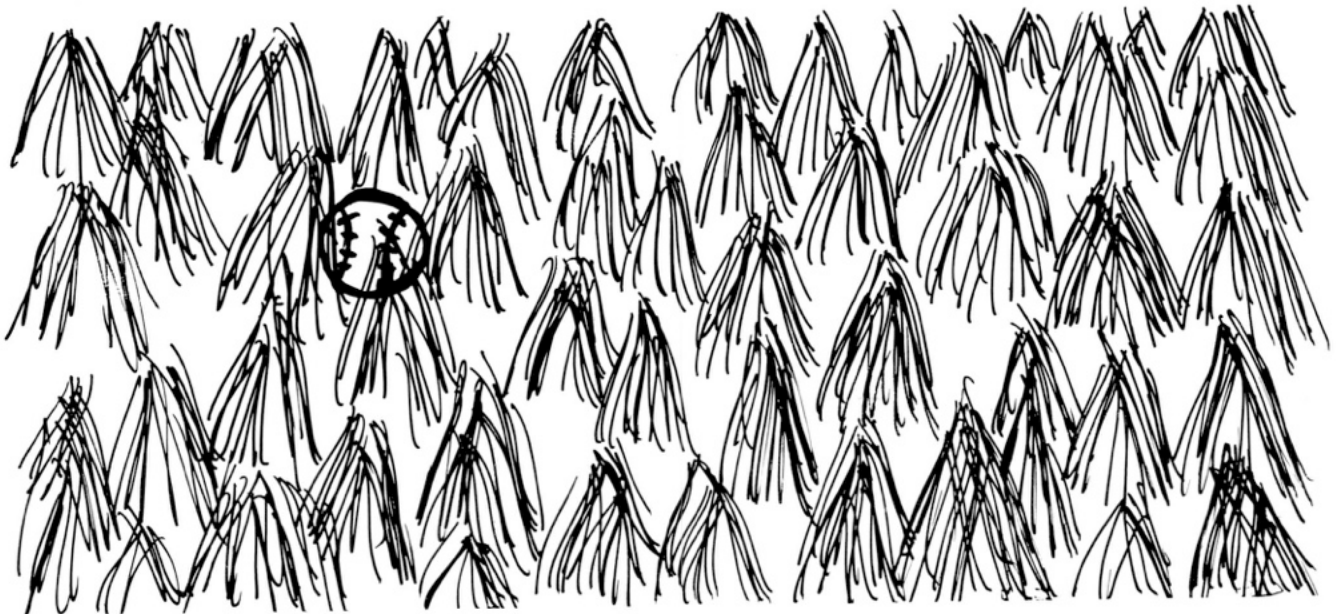
My advice to them would be to live God-fearing. If you live God-fearing you wouldn't do all these things that some people do in life. And go to church and listen to the minister. And when you listen to him put some of what he's telling you in practice. Get you an education, look upon yourself for the other person. If you respect yourself other people will respect you, but if you don't respect yourself don't expect to get any respect from no one else. I would tell them to be happy in life, you have to do what's right. Get yourself a good education, learn to take care of yourself, because nowadays if you don't learn to take care of yourself, the men folks they don't want to take care.



Veronica Buck talking with her grandmother, Mrs. Harriet Aikerson

They say you people ask for equal rights, and they feel like the lady folks have to get up and go [to] the jobs just like anybody else. But I tell them this, "Don't have no babies until you get grown and get you a husband." I don't believe in abortion cause the Lord intends for lady folks to have children. But now you girls know what it takes to have children. As long as you don't do those things you won't have them. And then when you get married you have your children. And raise them and raise them God-fearing. Long as you do those things, prepare yourself for

life, then you don't have to look to nobody. You don't have to be beholding to nobody. You can face the world. But if you don't get an education, you just a lost ball in high grass.



Edward Johnson

Interview by Jewel Dee
Transcribed by Jewel Dee
Adapted by Darcy Schraufnagel

In March, 1984, Jewel Dee interviewed a neighbor of hers, Mr. Edward Johnson. Mr. Johnson doesn't use many words, but every word he spoke was worth listening to.

Mr. Johnson was born to John and Julia Johnson on March 11, 1908, in Copiah County. He's been living in Claiborne County since 1961. He spent most of his life working in a saw mill and farming. He is married to his second wife and has eight children. His son, Charles Johnson, is District 5 supervisor.

Mr. Edward Johnson is one of seven children. He started working for his father and picking cotton when he was six years old. Although he wasn't very fond of school, he does remember the games he used to play at school: Poison Oak, Fox and Hound, and Little Sally Walker. They sound very similar to the games I played when I was five and six years old.

Mr. Johnson is very proud of one of his possessions. He still has a gun that he's had since he was young. It was given to him by his nephew, who was older than he was. He started shooting it when he was around eight years old. His father would only let him go by himself to shoot at squirrels, rabbits, and coons. None of his brothers or sisters was allowed to go with him. He learned how to shoot by himself. Mr. Johnson says that the only thing that keeps him from hunting now is the rheumatism in his knees.

Mr. Johnson feels that his parents did the best they could to prepare him for life. There wasn't much else they could do for their children in that time. Mr. Johnson said, "They told me I was going to come up



Mr. Edward Johnson with the shotgun given to him by his nephew when he was young.

in a hard world. It was hard. People was mean. Just had to be particular coming up in the world." Mr. Johnson got a taste of the real world when he was 18. His father went in debt and Johnson had to go off and work at a sawmill to help out. Also that year his mother died. He was still living with his father at the time. He married his

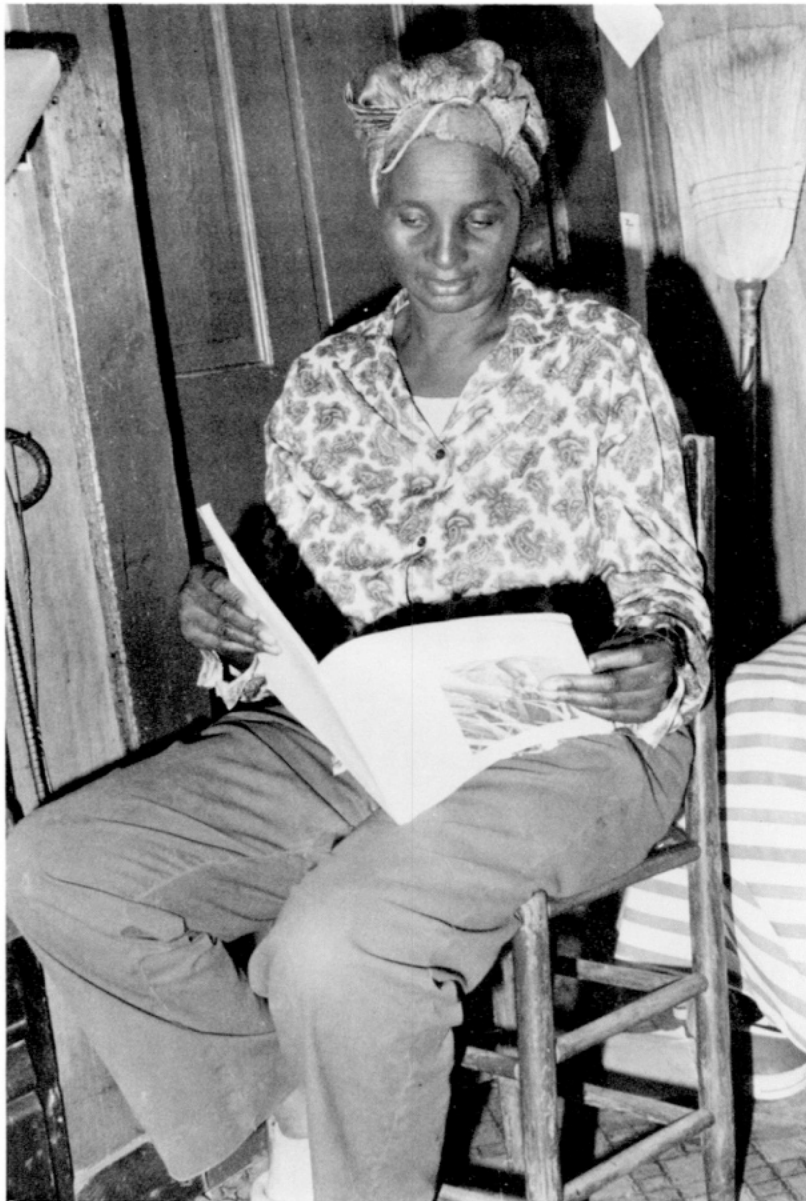
first wife to bring a woman into the house.

He met his first wife at a frolic. It was a dance in an abandoned house. Someone played blues songs on a guitar and they had a round dance.

When Mr. Johnson first went out on his own he had money saved up. He saved most of the money he earned but he does admit to shooting a few dice on occasion. He took his money and bought a car. He remembers, "I bought me a little car. 'Bout a '23 T-model car. That took all my little money. I never could keep up my money after I got that car."

Mr. Johnson joined the church some time in the 1930's. He remembers the occasion very well. "Everything was new to me there when I joined church. I didn't just join it like most of them do today, just go and shake the preacher's hand. My hand looked new to me. Everything looked new around me when I joined the church."

Mr. Johnson's second wife lived in the same neighborhood as he did. "I just knowed her all the time. She's not as old as me. I was just 'round the road when she was a girl. We stayed on the same



Mrs. Flora Johnson, Mr. Johnson's second wife, who bore him eight children after they were married in 1946.

place." He did most of his courting at her place on Sundays. "Best thing I think ever happened to me was when I got my last wife. I think that was the best thing that ever happened."

Mr. Johnson married his second wife, Flora Johnson, in 1946. He was quite a bit older than she was and he was 40 years old when his first child was born. Mrs. Johnson had all eight of her children at home with a midwife. Mr. Johnson moved to Claiborne County in 1961. In 1964 he bought the house

he is living in now and sixty-two acres of land. "Things were getting tight and I couldn't find a home and I just had to buy my own place if I could."

Mr. Johnson found raising eight children very difficult. "You've got to feed them. You got to put clothes and shoes on them. It's just really difficult. But I did a whole lot better than other people because I didn't throw away nothing. I rose a lot of my food. I had some hogs and I had a few cows and they got on pretty good."

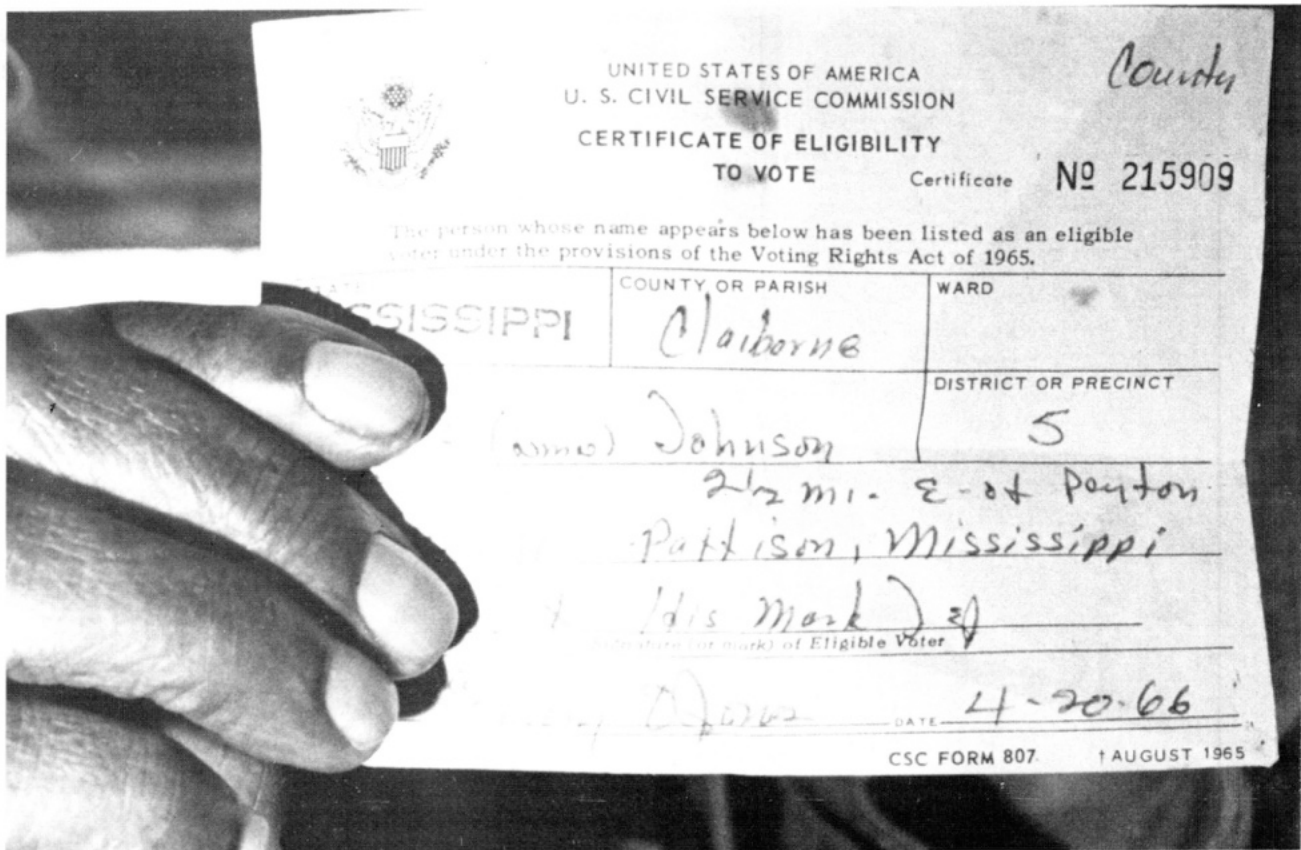
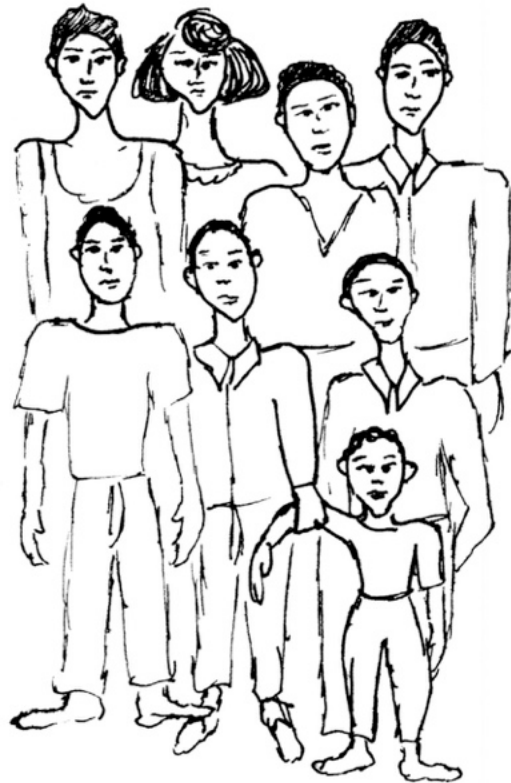
Mr. Johnson thinks that things have changed since he was young. "This is a new world we're living in. The

world is faster than it used to be. I worked about four miles away and I had to walk. Now a person, they have to have somebody to come get them or take them to work. I walked to school and to work."

"This is a new world we're living in. The world is faster than it used to be."

Mr. Johnson registered to vote in 1966, a year after the 1965 Voting Rights Act was passed by Congress and signed by President Johnson. He registered upstairs above McFatter's drug store. He still displays the certificate he got when he registered. "I just said [it] was the right thing to do."

Mr. Johnson has some advice to give young people to help them live better lives. "Well, they could pay good attention to their parents. Just join the church and be a good citizen to this country."



Mr. Johnson received this certificate when he registered to vote in 1966.



Mrs. Thelma Wells at her home in 1983.

Thelma Wells

Interview by Sharon Windom
and Jessica Crosby
Transcribed by Jessica Crosby
Edited by LaTrina Holmes

I've never met Thelma Wells in person but I feel I know her. Last summer I began editing the transcript of an interview with her that I AIN'T LYING students did back in February, 1983.

Thelma Wells attended Pine Grove School where her uncle was superintendent. After graduation from Pine Grove she went to Port Gibson to high school through the 10th grade and later as an adult got her GED. Education continues to be important to Mrs. Wells. As a member of the local PTA she works to improve the public schools.

Mrs. Wells was a part of the civil rights movement in Port Gibson. She remains active in the community as a member of the Missionary Baptist Aid, NAACP, National Council of Negro Women, and the Claiborne County Community Health Center Board. She is a founder of the Cancer and Terminally Ill Fund.

Now in her 80's Mrs. Wells drives friends and neighbors to the doctor and to make grocery. She is a strong woman who continues to make her presence felt in the community.

--LaTrina Holmes

I was born in Claiborne County, Port Gibson, Mississippi, on July 25, 1908.

My father's name was Anthony C. Williams. My mother's name was Fannie E. Williams. I had one sister and three brothers. We played together and played with children in the neighborhood. We went to the same school where I was born on my grandfather's plantation.

[My] grandfather's name was Balam Wil-

liams and my uncle's name was George Williams.

My grandparents were slaves and they told us they were mistreated. They farmed and they owned the store and the gin. They were very cooperative. Real nice to people and God just blessed them. I very well remember it was a lady passing through the community and my grandparents, their house was on fire, and this lady knocked and she

awakened them. And when they built--it was a two story building they built--a corner was given to her. And they bought her a rocking chair, and we as children we were never to disturb this chair. And Frances, whatever she said we had to do.

[What was her name?]

Frances Powell. She was out wandering. She didn't know where she was going and she saved the life of my grandmother and grandfather.

[What do you remember about your grandparents?]

I remember that my paternal grandmother used to cook gingerbread and we loved it. I remember quite well that she raised peanuts

Superintendent Mack Jones said I was too young to receive a diploma. I had to repeat till I was 12 years old.

and she was kind to us. But we didn't think that was good enough. They had all gone to a funeral one day and when they came back we had went in her little container and ate the peanuts and hid the hulls. We threw them down in a bluff and she missed them when she came in. She told my father and he questioned us about them and I told that the ducks ate the hulls. He scolded us and made us go to the bluff where we threw the hulls.

My other grandmother she told me a story. She had been visiting. She was riding her horse and she got lost in the woods. And she said that she could hear birds and bugs or what have you. And every once in a while she said she would call the horse, she would say, "Come Jim, come Jim, the sun is falling." Eventually Jim brought her out of the woods. Jim was the name of the horse.

[Did you go to school?]

I went to Pine Grove School and I was eleven years old when I finished eighth grade. You got what was called a diploma.

Superintendent Mack Jones said I was too young to receive a diploma. I had to repeat till I was 12 years old. My teacher would let me teach the class because I was still up to par on the assignment. I went to Port Gibson to high school. They didn't go any higher than tenth grade so we said we finished tenth grade. Following that I was married and had three children. They are precious yet.

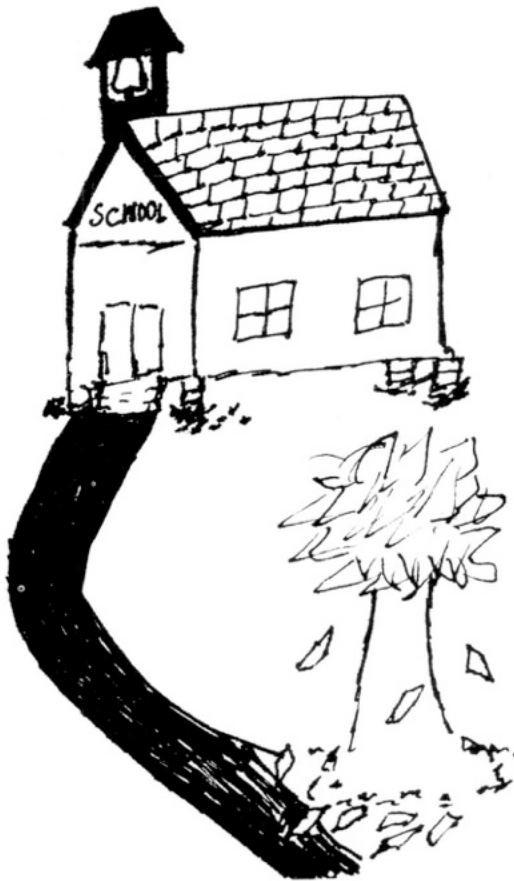
[Who was your teacher in Pine Grove?]

I had several teachers. My first teacher was Professor W. W. Blackburn, the next was Professor J. B. Green--they both were from Port Gibson. Then Mrs. Georgia Franklin became a teacher.

[What was it like at the school?]

It was very interesting. It was a wooden building and I tried hard. If I couldn't be at the head of my class, I didn't want to be below third. The school I went to was torn down and they built a Rosenwald School. I





was finished by then. They had one at Pine Grove.

The school that I went to had only one room. Eventually, the parents [and] the superintendent would have meetings: they got together and built another room. My father served as superintendent. I don't know how long. Afterwards was Mr. A. J. Stampley. He was a cousin of mine. Local superintendent of Pine Grove school. The overall superintendent when I was going to school and afterwards was Mr. Mack Jones.

[What games did you play?]

Well, we played hop scotch, merry go round, chick-a-dee. We have to sing it:

Chick-a-dee-dee-dee,
 Chick-a-dee-dee-dee,
 Here I am.
 Chick-a-dee-dee-dee,
 Chick-a-dee-dee-dee,
 Here I am.



We were in a circle and who-ever I wanted to drop my handkerchief behind--not only me, any of us--we drop a handkerchief, then that person would get in the ring and say the same thing. And it's some other words but I have forgot it.

We used to have what was called box lunches. Chicken, pie, cake and maybe macaroni. Didn't hear much about salad. The girls would give the boys a ticket to buy their box. Some would buy the box and they would sit down and eat.

I used to play ball. I played baseball. The girls, we wore white middy blouses and black satin bloomers. They were the big legs. They were pleated on the waist. The legs were real wide with elastic in them. I played baseball in them. I couldn't pitch but I could hit and run. I held a base. I don't know what base it was. We changed around. They tried to teach me how to pitch but I just could not pitch. Overhand pitch. All girls. They didn't allow the boys to play with the girls. The girls had a team and the boys had a team. Girls and boys can play together now.



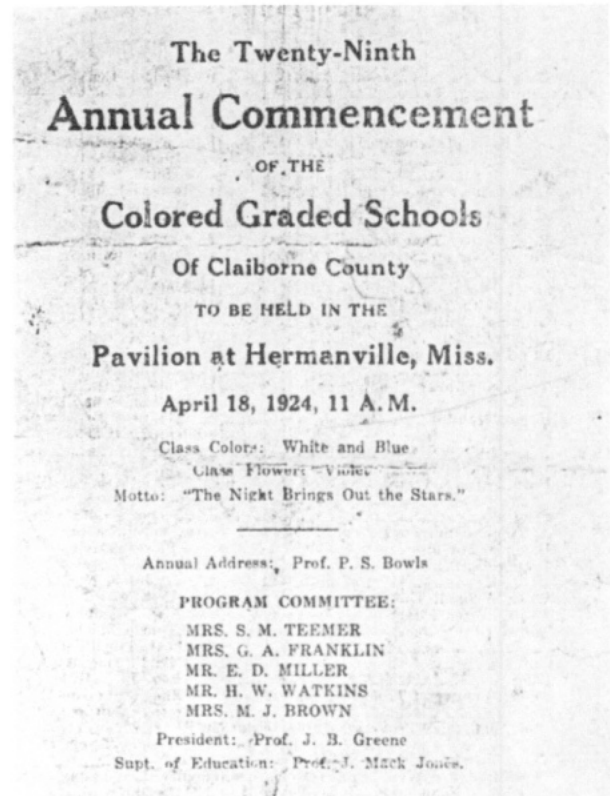
I used to play ball with Mary Agnes Williams, Johnny Lee Jenkins, Estella Barnes, Lou Gusta Barnes, Ruby Lee Hill, Thelma Hill, Mary Ella Parker, Everlyn Parker, Mary Eliza Jackson, Otie Rowan, Lucille Jackson, Viola Martin, Lily Jackson, Romollia Page, and many others. Those names that I called were from the Pine Grove neighborhood--[the] school where I went. But we

would visit other schools and they alternate visit us. We played on the diamond at school. Visiting schools would come and play our school, we would go to play by wagon. We were not allowed to go too often. Just be so glad to go.

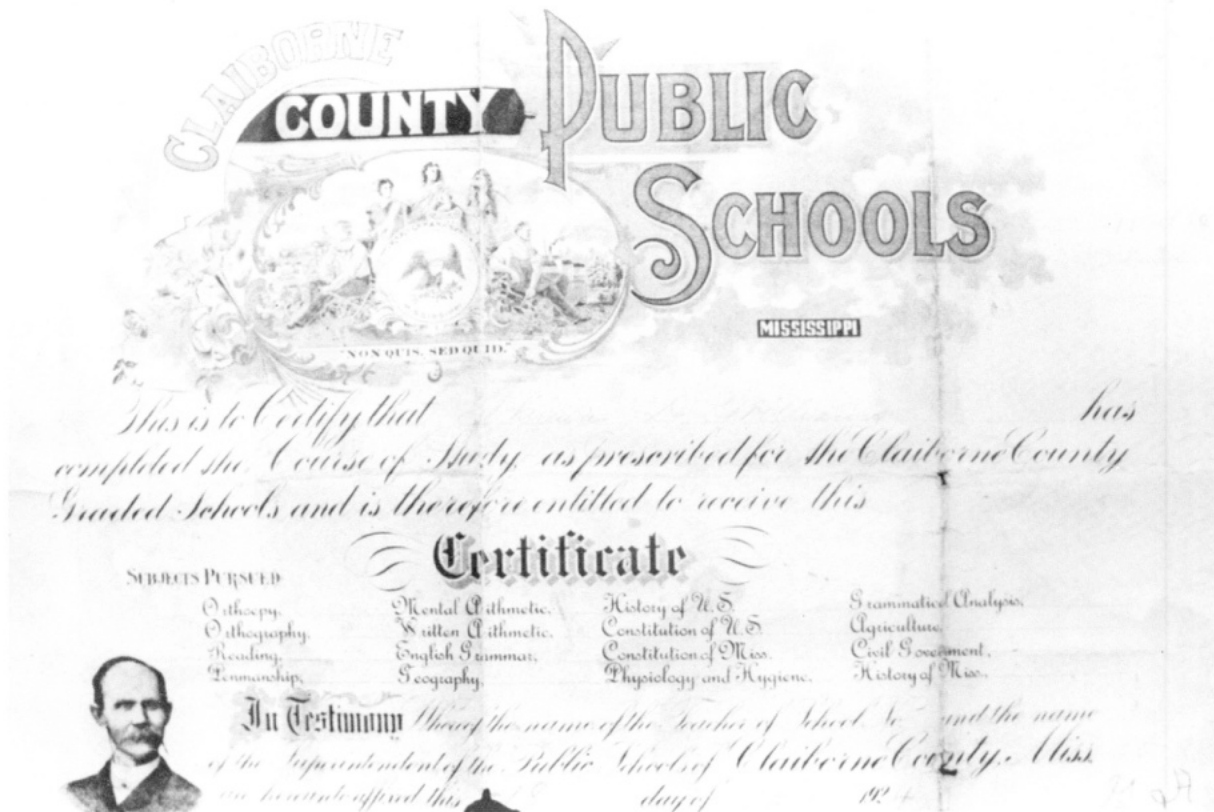
And we had dialogues and rallies, its just exchanging words. We used to have that in school all the time. And other young people spoke and sang. And, of course, after the rally we would usually have serving. It was lemonade and cake. It was good. In a barrel. It was made in a barrel. And a we'd break the ice into hunks of ice. My father done cut up a many lemons in Pine Grove Christian Church. It's the church where Lydell Page was a member. My father was a founder. That land out there belonged to my grandparents and they gave it to the church. And we raised money--money for various debts.

[Did you ever have school closings?]

Yes. When I finished tenth grade we had a commencement out to Hermanville. And



Commencement Program front cover.



Thelma D. Williams' [Wells] diploma from Pine Grove School, April 18, 1924.

Program	
Song	School Center
Salutatory	Etta Jones
What the Future Demands	B. T. Atchison
To Thine Own Self Be True	Mamie Bradley
The Evils of Ignorance	Cleo W. Blackburn
Climb Though the Rocks Be Rugged	Elnora Barnes
	Susie Byrnes
	Rebecca E. Byrd
	George Bryant
	School
	Bethel
	Annie B. Camphor
	Charity Cornish
	Pearla Lee Cooper
	Nathaniel Deal
	Freddie B. Davis
	Estella Devine
	Fannie M. Gaines
	Jimmie A. Greer
	School
	Salem
	Blondelle Hayes
	Eula Mae Hedrick
	Elnora Howard
	Cathlene L. Hedrick
	Mary E. Johnson
	Arnetta Jones
	Georgia A. Moore
	Panecia Moore
	Rosetta Myles
	Dollie Green Myles
	Jessie Neal
	Alice M. Novel
	Claudia M. Stampley
	Georgia Shields
	Raphael Trevillion
	Zaidie Turner
	School
	Lick Hill
	Ethel Wilkerson
	Dorothy Warfield
	Law, Education, Religion
	Winnie Mae Watts
	Thelma D. Williams
	Gertrude Walker
	Bertha Wilson
	School
	Pine Grove
	Jimmie Walker
	Minnie Lee Washington
	Bertha Washington
	Bertha Wilson
	Mose Watts
	Freedman Hall School

Class, 1924

Allen—J. B. Green, Teacher. Sadie L. Turner, Dorothy Warfield
Bethel—L. D. Weddington, Teacher. Georgia Shields
Beechland—H. W. Watkins, Teacher. Charity Cornish
Baldwin—S. S. Blackburn, Teacher. Mamie Bradley, Cleo W. Blackburn
Bannock—M. J. Brown, Teacher. Mose Watts
Center—S. A. Miller, Teacher. Estella Devins, Ethel Wilkerson, Alexander Warner
Greenwood—K. R. Turnipseed, Teacher. Blondell Hayes
Ingliside—S. A. Smith, Teacher. Elnora Barnes
Jeffersville—Z. A. Watkins, Teacher. Georga A. Moore, Annie B. Camphor
Lick Hill—Victoria Gaines, Teacher. Jimmie A. Greer
Lark—Alberta Watts, Teacher. Jessie Neal
Mt. Olive—E. H. Jones, Teacher. Etta Juanta Jones, E. H. Jones, Jr., Arnetta Jones
Mt. Bura—J. B. Travillion, Teacher. Eula Mae Hedrick, Catherine Lerlene Hedrick, Pearla Lee Cooper, Rosetta Myles, Dollie Green Myles
Patton—A. C. Snodgrass, Teacher. Elnora Howard
Pine Grove—G. A. Franklin, Teacher. Claudia Mae Stampley, Panecia Moore, Winnie Mae Watts, Thelma D. Williams
Pisgah—E. D. Miller, Teacher. Gertrude Walker, Jimmie Walker
Rumels—V. A. Bryant, Teacher. George Bryant, Nathaniel Deal, Freddie B. Davis, Raphael Travillion, Bertha Wilson, Susie Byrnes
Salem—A. M. Martin, Teacher. B. T. Atchison, Minnie Lee Washington, Fannie M. Gaines, Mary Kate Johnson, Bertha S. Washington
Freedman Hall—E. L. Greer, Teacher. Bertha Wilson, Alice M. Novel

[What do you remember about the Walcott* show?]

I remember the Walcott show coming into Port Gibson, and they had many actors. They had many instruments and they would play. And sometimes people would be out there next to our house at Walcott shows.

[I sewed for Walcott.] Sometimes we would take two garments to make one. I sewed on a machine. And I darned a many suit for it. Also I have washed quite a few garments.

[Did you make new costumes?]

Yes, I did. I can remember that green shadow lace. Yes, I made a few. But most of his costumes, they were old and he just gave them, to do the best we can. Maybe put two together and made them beautiful.

[What did you get paid for fixing the costumes.]

Different prices. It depended how big a job it was. Sometimes this garment is 50 cents. I mark that say 50 cents. Thirty-five cents would do that. This 90 cents, or what have you.

[Where did they perform?]

Near where Lightfoot Washeteria is [down the hill from the corner of Market and Carroll Streets in Port Gibson]. Crowds and crowds and crowds of people would be there.

Inside of Commencement Program. Thelma D. Williams spoke on "The Value of a Well Trained Mind." A total of 43 pupils graduated in 1924 from the Colored Graded Schools.

some of us would speak. I can show you my programs. Twenty-ninth commencement in the pavilion up [Highway] 18, on the right hand side about a half a mile. I spoke in a white organdy dress with a Bertha* collar, a round collar and a blue Rosette. The best seamstress in the community made my dress. Her name was Mrs. Phyliss C. Reed. White stocking and black shoes.

[So you had a program where you all sang or read a piece. Did you write your piece?]

I wrote it. We had to write it. I wished I could find it. I don't know where it is.

* Editor's note: a deep, wide collar, often of lace, that covers the shoulders of a low-necked dress. Named for Queen Bertha, mother of Charlemagne.

* Editor's note: F.S. Walcott owned and operated the Rabbit's Foot Minstrels, which was based in Port Gibson.

[What were the shows like?]

They be out on the floor dancing, cracking jokes and sometimes pitching kidney or popcorn—a bag of popcorn out there.

[How old were you when you went to the shows?]

About 12 years old. My parents had to take us. My three brothers and my sister.

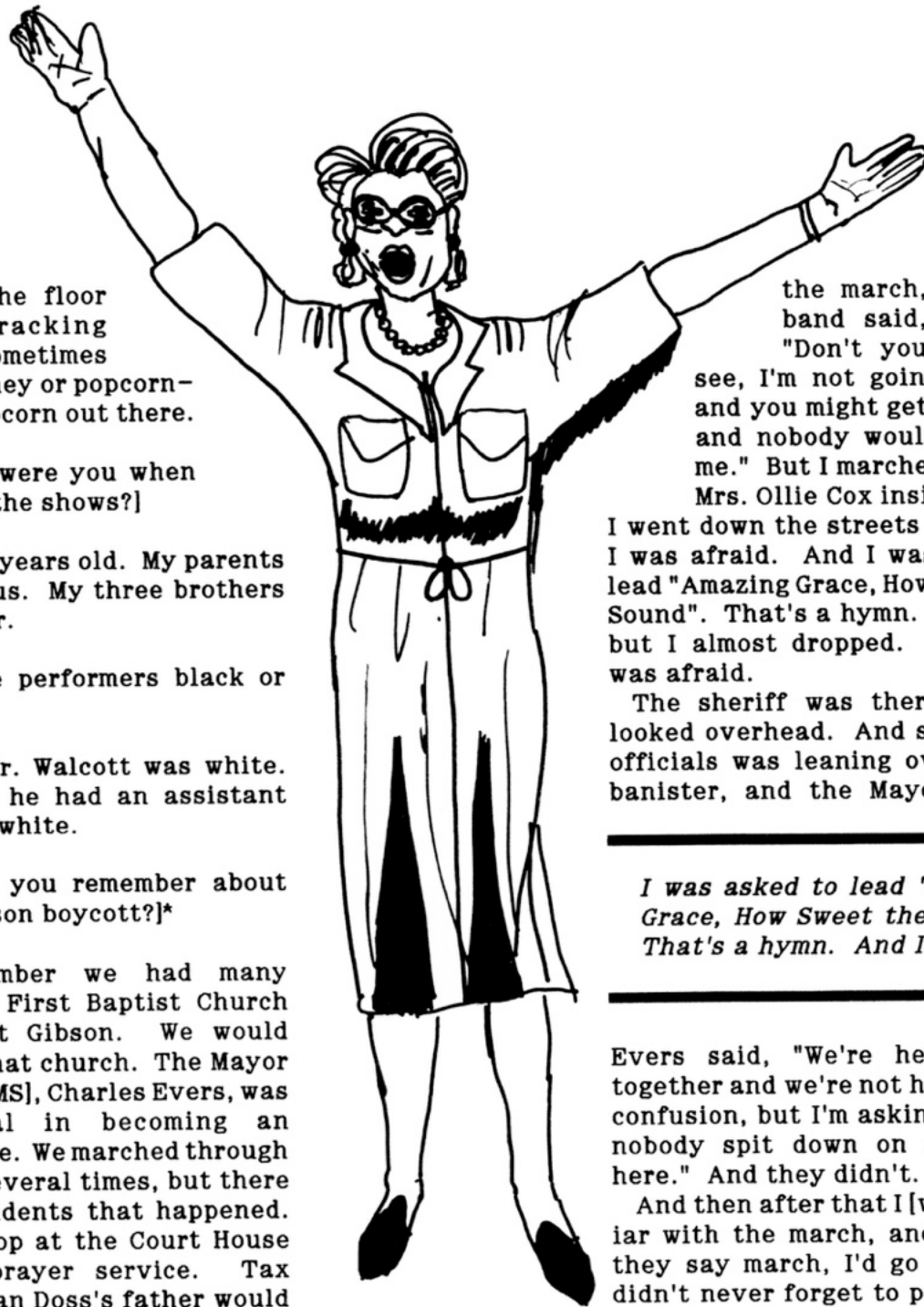
[Were the performers black or white?]

Black. Mr. Walcott was white. At one time he had an assistant and she was white.

[What do you remember about the Port Gibson boycott?]*

[I] remember we had many meetings at First Baptist Church here in Port Gibson. We would overcrowd that church. The Mayor [of Fayette, MS], Charles Evers, was instrumental in becoming an assistant like. We marched through the street several times, but there were no incidents that happened. We would stop at the Court House and have prayer service. Tax Assessor Evan Doss's father would lead them on to a strong prayer.

*Editor's note: in the late sixties, a group of black citizens organized a boycott of merchants in Port Gibson. The merchants sued a number of the boycotters for damages and won an initial judgement in Chancery Court. On July 2, 1982, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the judgement, ruling that the boycott was legal.



And I very well remember the first night of

the march, my husband said, he said, "Don't you march-- see, I'm not going to help, and you might get locked up and nobody would care for me." But I marched anyway.

Mrs. Ollie Cox insisted. And I went down the streets shivering. I was afraid. And I was asked to lead "Amazing Grace, How Sweet the Sound". That's a hymn. And I did, but I almost dropped. Because I was afraid.

The sheriff was there, and he looked overhead. And some of his officials was leaning over on the banister, and the Mayor Charles

I was asked to lead "Amazing Grace, How Sweet the Sound". That's a hymn. And I did.

Evers said, "We're here to get together and we're not here for any confusion, but I'm asking you that nobody spit down on any of us here." And they didn't.

And then after that I [was] familiar with the march, and any time they say march, I'd go on. But I didn't never forget to pray. And I don't know how far my prayers got, but I prayed.

And we were successful in gaining membership [for the NAACP]. I believe the membership was two dollars per member, I think, and we had over 5,000 members. We gained those 5,000 members.

[Why did you march?]

I thought it was important to march. They had meetings with the whites, and we

had hoped we could get together and have a better relation. Because relation was very very bad and still is. And we had a committee of blacks to meet with the whites. The purpose of meeting together [was] to give each person the right and privilege. If we could spend our money and they were not

Some people went out of business before they'd allow a black person to work.

hiring a black person in their business... We didn't want to be hired just to sweep the floor. We had prepared blacks to work the register as well. Because, as you all know, the percentage of black is greater than white.

It didn't work, so then we decided to march. And through the marching and all the other thing too, I guess, that's why we achieved as much as we did. For some people went out of business before they'd allow a black person to work.

I can't remember too much about it, but I remember some grievances was presented, and because many of those grievances were not accepted, boycott was put on, and instruction was given by different individuals that was to help make conditions better. We were asked to stay out of certain stores and I did abide.

I was sued. Not for a good reason. I was placed on the list. I was called to Jackson to testify, and did. I was asked many questions. Where I bought my clothes, my food, and what have you. So I told them the truth because some of the apparels I was wearing come from a store in Chicago. Said, "I

don't want to hear that." Where did I trade in Jackson and the stores in Port Gibson. I named the stores.

Then I asked the judge for permission if I might speak. He said yes. I asked him why would he allow the lawyer to ask me about my wearing apparel. "You allowed him to ask me that, I would like to make this statement. I am sued and I am sued illegal. I haven't broken anybody's windows out their car nor their house. I haven't burst any grocery. I haven't asked anybody not to go in certain stores. It is left to their own discretion. Therefore, I am sued illegal." The judge then excused me and I wasn't asked any more questions.

[Do you know why your name was put on the list?]

No, I sure don't know. I don't know why.

[Were there ever any repercussions for you from marching?]



One thing, I used to sew for a few white people, and after that, some of them had [given me] material, and [then] asked me to bring them their material. I told them no, I wasn't gonna bring it--they want it, they come to my house and get it. But one of them asked me why I couldn't bring it. I said, "Why you couldn't get it? You asked me to make a dress for you, so it's yours." And I gave it to her.

I haven't had any trouble with the banker. I had borrowed money prior to that, and anytime I need money, even today if I need money, my record is up there in Mississippi Southern Bank. They

never turned me down. I heard others say they were turned down but I haven't.

[What did you feel like the day the Supreme Court said that people had the right to boycott a store if they want, and the suit was dismissed against you?]

I began to feel like a complete human. I was concerned by not only that lot, 75 by 150, but I thought of many, many of my sisters and brothers, who had acres and acres of land and had cattle, and nice homes, houses, and I was quite a bit concerned. They had more to lose than I did. And I always looked forward to the person who had more than I have. But that was my concern. I was so happy. I tried to hold back my tears but I couldn't. I had to let them down.

[Do you remember when you registered to vote?]

Oh, we had three of us from Mercy Seat Missionary Baptist Church, where my membership is, and we decided we were going

She looked at it and said, "Ah, you didn't make enough sentences." I said, "You didn't tell me how many sentences." And she just balled it up and threw it in the waste can.

over to see if we couldn't register. And Mrs. Easley was there. And she gave each of us a pencil and a sheet of paper. Asked me, I can't remember what constitution it was, but it was easy for me to write a few sentences, because that particular subject, prior to that Monday, it was in our Sunday school lesson, and I did it. And she looked at it and said, "Ah, you didn't make enough sentences." I said, "You didn't tell me how many sentences." And she just balled it up and threw it in the waste can. And we reported.

Yes, Jesse Johnson was on that committee. Mr. Jesse Johnson, Mr. Roscoe Johnson, and Mr. Alexander Collins were in there when we were informed we would meet in the Hall. Two white men met us there. We

went upstairs and we were questioned individually [about] what happened, and I told them the same thing. Although I told them, I felt reluctant in telling them.

I said, "I live here and you'll be gone," I said, "and relation is real bad here."

He said, "Everything I'm asking is confidential."

So I told him the same thing. And within a short span of time we went on down to the courthouse, just singing, because now many people--they were real experienced, some officials that came down--and they got us registered.

[When you went back to register, were you asked any questions?]

No, no questions. She gave me the slip and I signed my name.

[What happened that caused that change?]

I would dare say it was pressure. Maybe some better consideration was given.

[What was the first job you had?]

The first job I had I was working for the federal government--Mississippi Action for Progress. We had an opportunity to go further in school and I took advantage of it. I went to Lidell High School. From there I went to Mississippi Valley State. I furthered my education there.

[What was your job like at Mississippi Action for Progress?]

Well, the first time I was a social worker. From there I was promoted to classroom, which increased my pay. From there I was terminated and I called the board's attention to give me a reason. They didn't give me a reason. And eventually they set up a meeting for me. My supervisor was there and when they returned I was informed to write a letter to the state board. The state board set a meeting, [and] they found that I was qualified for an even better job. A job was created for me, food specialist, and I served in that capacity until I retired. I worked for

Franklin County, Lincoln County, Warren County, and Claiborne County Headstart centers.

[What did you do as a food specialist?]

Prepare meals. My supervisor was in Jackson, and I would prepare menus and send them to her, and those that were good she accepted. Those that she didn't think were fair she would not accept them. I played with the children. I had workshops with the cooks and workshops with the parents, training them to the different types of food that we should eat.



[Did you enjoy that work?]

I enjoyed it. I got along just fine. Just fine. I loved the people and the people loved me. Of course, we were integrated. We all got along.

[When did you first join the NAACP?]

In the early 60's. At that time I didn't

belong to any organization. I read a lot. I watched the television and I became interested and I joined. I read about the NAACP, its organization. It's integrated. I learned to work better with people regardless to race.

[Why did you help start the Cancer and Terminally Ill Fund?]

It seemed like the cancer had began to be such a widespread disease, and there were so many of us who would not be able to defray the expense. And with the assistance of the cancer drive it, would add quite a bit of inspiration and help to an individual who become attacked with the sad disease.

[How do you feel about life today?]

I feel happy because I must say I had a Christian foundation. I don't dare say I am the best person in the world. I make

I don't ever think I'm too busy to stop to help someone.

mistakes like others, but with a Christian foundation it enables me to reach out and help others. I don't ever think I'm too busy to stop to help someone. I meet Sunday School. I'm in church every Sunday practically, somewhere. Presently I am a member of Mercy Seat Baptist Church. I been a member there since '45. My first husband was a member there. I wrote my membership with him. He passed. His name was Scott Crowder.

Since I've been there I served as president of the choir, secretary of the choir, and secretary of the building fund and financial committee. Presently I'm a Sunday School teacher. Have been for a number of years.

[Have there been many changes in Port Gibson in your life time?]

I have seen quite a few changes. We can have meetings without interference. I have

seen and heard of interference at our meetings. I don't hear of it now and I don't see it. So something has happened. It might be that I have come to a better realization or to a better world. Others have come to a better realization, saying we must work and live together.

[What is the most important thing that has happened in Port Gibson, do you think?]

I wouldn't like to say the most important thing. I would just like to name what's important to me. Seeing the children going to and from school by the busloads, trying to get an education is very, very important to me. I walked.

[Was there someone who influenced your life?]

Well, yes, I came from a family, in that day and time, they were educated. They went to school and would hear the discussion

about school. Some of them were teachers and some were musicians, and I was inclined to continue on and go to school that I may be able to be somebody.

[What experience have you had that students could benefit from?]

I went back to school. [I was] 58 or 59 when I got my GED. I felt I hadn't gone far enough. I encourage young people to go to school, study hard and work. After working, don't spend all that money. Save that money cause there will be another day.

[What advice could you give young people that will help them to live a better life?]

My priority to young people is first become Christians and be kind. Respect yourself and quite naturally you will have the chance to respect others. Be obedient. Go to school and regardless who your instructor might be, be a good listener.



Mrs. Wells stands against the pillar on her front porch on Wilson Street in Port Gibson.

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a community educational and cultural organization
sponsoring programs for people

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