



Interview with Cleaster Mitchell

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Brinkley (Ark.)

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Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University

Behind the Veil: Documenting African American Life
in the Jim Crow South

Interview
with
CLEASTER MITCHELL
[DOB 12/11/22]

Brinkley, Arkansas
July 16, 1995
Paul Ortiz,
Interviewer

Ortiz: Mrs. Mitchell, could you tell me when you were born and something about this area that you grew up in.

Mitchell: I was born in 1922 at a little place called Coal, about two miles from Blackton, Arkansas. Coal was never on the map. It was just a little house there, and the reason why they called it Coal was because the train took on water and coal there, and they called that Coal. That was just the place. It never was on the map. But originally we was from Blackton, Arkansas, and that's maybe twenty miles from here. I grew up around Blackton and I knew all of the merchants and everything and I lived on various different farms. We was farm workers, we was sharecroppers, and we lived on, oh, we lived on a place Tom Bonners [phonetic].

My father was fired Blackton gin from, I know, in 1927, and he used to fire a sawmill, Lester's [phonetic] sawmill at

Blackton. He started working there before I was born at Lester's sawmill. But he was the timber man. He made ties. That's how we learned to make ties, I and my sister, because my father, he used to take us with him and he learned us how. So we used to make ties just like him. Railroad ties is what we are speaking of. I learned how to--it was all manual work. I learned how to saw, cut timber, to plow, to pick cotton, and my whole youth life come up was simply working on the farm or working in a home or something like that.

Ortiz: Had your family always lived in Blackton and Coal?

Mitchell: Yes. They haven't always lived right in this little town, but in the vicinity, from Clarendon. We lived in the country. We used to go to Holly Grove sometimes. But my whole life in the South before I went to Chicago, I lived in the South, I lived on a farm.

Ortiz: Your grandparents also lived in Blackton?

Mitchell: Yes, my grandparents. My grandfather on my mother's side lived here in Brinkley. His name was Honey Hair [phonetic], and he lived here and died here in Brinkley. My grandmother, her name was Nora, and she lived out below Blackton out there. They had a farm. My grandparents on the Smith side

had a great big farm out there. They owned land.

Ortiz: When you were growing up, did stories or experiences that your grandparents have, did those pass down from the family?

Mitchell: They did. My grandmother's great-grandparents, they was really slaves. My mother's great-great-grandparents, they was slaves. So they told us all about our older ancestors. Their grandparents, they were Cotton, and they were both born in slavery time.

My grandmother's great-grandparents, they were born to half-white people. Their father was like white and their mother was like half-white. I saw the pictures of my great-great grandparents. They looked white as anybody. You couldn't tell the difference. So this is one thing they discussed with us, sort of how this come about, you know. They told us how come we had like light and dark people in our family and how we got to be that way and everything. It come up through the part of slavery, things that went on during the slavery.

It wasn't anything you could do about it, really. That was the time. I don't know how to tell you. You couldn't do anything about it, I'll put it like that. It really wasn't anything you could do at that time. But they would tell us about this history, what they come up through, how they worked

and what it was like for them, and at the main time, it made it a little easy for us.

They quite often wonder how black people lived through this time. It was because we were taught different. We were taught not to hate. They had an answer. If something come up that was displeasing or you knew was wrong or something, and you know children, they would say, "Well, don't worry about. The Lord will fix it. Vengeance is God." They meant you couldn't pursue it. They knowed. We didn't know, but they knowed you couldn't pursue whatever it was, and they taught you in a kind of way that it did not cause you a lot of trouble, because you could get in a lot of trouble then.

What I'm saying, you would have to know the South to know what I am saying, and maybe in the other interviews you found out some of the things that I'm telling you is actually true, because if we went to a grocery store and a certain lady come in the store, a white lady come in the store, anybody white, if they was waiting on you, they just push your stuff back and say, "Come on, Miss So-and-so," and you maybe walked ten miles to get this dime's worth of something that your parents sent you at. But that was like the law of the day. You just got back. You understand? It wasn't anything you could do about it. But it did not bother us like it would today. It wouldn't have the same effect on us, because we was raised to expect this and everything. They taught you this.

If you were going down the road, and maybe before you leave from this area you will go down some real narrow roads that was here when I was kids. It was only enough room any way for--it was just like a wagon road. But when cars come in to where people had cars, those that had the car, if you was walking, they had no respect for you. They just drive. A lot of times you got in a ditch. A lot of time the dust just covered you. That's why you see a lot of colored people walk then with their heads tied up, and you see them sometime with something them, an old dress or something over them, because they had on their Sunday clothes and they were going somewhere. In order to look decent, they thought, when they got there, they did all these things to themselves. Then they'd take this off when they get ready to go into church or go into town or something, because they knew all of these things happened to them.

It's really something that a person would have to experience sort of themselves to really see how this went, because that was no law actually governing anything. You didn't have no place to go. And look at our schools. See, our school was one room. My school that I went to school to when I was four years old is still standing. It's in use and everything. And the church that I went to is still in existence, and I often go down there to see it. I think I have a piece of wood off of the school over to the other house as a souvenir. But you would really have to know it to see. Now, we only had like five

months schooling, and out of the five months you probably went three, because if there was work and different other stuff, they'd just come by and tell you, "You have to keep the kids out. They've got to work." Or they sent up and said, "I got work for the kids to do." And it wasn't no law to make them let you go to school then, so your parents done what they told them.

Ortiz: Would the plantation owner come to the school and take the children out?

Mitchell: What they would do, they would come tell your parents, "You go down and get the kids. I got something for them to do. They got to cut vines or do this or do that or work on the [unclear]," just whatever they want done, and our parents would do it. Now, he would a lot of times--most of them rode a big fine horse, and they'd come down there to the school and they would say (my oldest sister was named Marylee [phonetic]), "Mary, the lady said for you all to come on. I've got some beans for you to chop. I've got this or the other." That was it. You went.

See, because we didn't grieve over it, it really wasn't as bad to us as it seems, because we didn't know anything else. You see what I'm saying? So that was the way of life. It was really not a problem. It was a problem to our parents, but we didn't know it. See, a lot of times our parents grieved and

worried over and prayed for better conditions, but we didn't think very much of it.

Ortiz: Did your parents try to shield you from some of these indignities?

Mitchell: Yes, they did.

Ortiz: What would they do?

Mitchell: Well, when some things just really got out of hand, you know, they would sit down and talk to you and tell you, "Now, this is wrong. But the situation is that your father can't do anything about this and I can't do anything about it. This is just the way of life." They would tell you, "We're going to move." A lot of things they would tell you to keep you from getting to the point that you come to be hateful and mean and think about doing a lot of cruel things.

We didn't grow up with a lot of hate, and I'm proud of that because I don't know anybody I hate today. Because I know a lot of people--we worked and we never cleared a dime. You know, you expect something when you work all the year, and they give you a little what they call a do-be [phonetic]. They'd just written something down on a piece of paper. Like it was five of us, five children, and my mother and my father. They give them a

\$10 month furnish, as they call it. That was not money. They give you an order to a store, and then you go here and you spend this \$10 worth of credit. You had a little ticket. But in the fall of the year, they didn't go by that. Everybody went up with these little tickets. They said, "Well, I don't need this. I've got it on my book." They never checked the book by what you had. They settled off with how they wanted it. And if you made fifty bales of cotton, you didn't get out of debt; and if you made ten, you didn't get out of debt. That's just the way it was.

It wasn't nothing you could do, because you didn't sell your own cotton, you didn't keep--you know. See, you had no way of knowing exactly how much cotton sold for, how much a pound. They would go sell it for like 20 cents, and they come back, "Well, we didn't get but 7 cents, Mary. That's all we got." And you had no course, no way you could dispute his word.

Now, you could say, "Well, I heard in Clarendon they was getting 20 cents."

"Well, I don't know about that, Mary. I didn't get 20."

That's the end of it because--I don't hardly know how to really explain this to you. It sounds terrible when I talk about it to you, but that's exactly what happened. I experienced all of these different things, how they settled off.

And you could work by the day, and if they didn't want to pay you off, he would just come out and say--we was on Jack Palmer's

place. He'd say, "Don't come up here. I'm not paying nobody off today." You was getting 50 cents a day for ten to twelve and sometimes fourteen hours. If he decided not to pay you off for that 50 cents a day, he'd get in his car and go [unclear] somewhere.

But you know today that wouldn't work with too many people, don't you? But then it worked. You'd go home and you would cry. You'd be mad. You'd be expecting to go to town, and you thought you could do a lot with it. Children planned on, like your mother said, "We're going to give you 50 cents." That was a lot of money to us. We was going to buy everything with 50 cents, because we was going to get some candy, some chewing gum, we'd get a cold pop, we would get ice cream, and those was the nice little treats that your parents would give you to at least make you feel good about yourself for working 50 cents a day. All of these things was very important to us.

Now it don't mean anything because they get that any time, any day. But then when you didn't get it, then you'd go home and cry, and they had a little remedy. They'd say, "Oh, don't worry about it. I'm going to bake you all some teacakes and I'm going to make some homemade ice cream." See, they would go to work and go all out of their way to do something a little special. That is to keep you from being so down and so mentally depressed. That was what it was.

I see it today, but it wasn't anything any of them could

do. So at one time, I will tell you, the South was a tough place to live if you didn't grow up here. It was just a lot of things. I've had good experience here and I've had terrible experience here.

If you lived in a house--like the Christmas of '36, 1936. My mother worked for all the people in Blackton. She cooked for those years of 1925 up until 1936. It was on a Christmas Day, and she was cooking our Christmas dinner, and Mr. Roberts came.

He was one of the merchants, too, and he came out about 10:30 and said to my mother, "Mary, I come after you to go up there to serve for Miss Roberts."

My mother said, "Well, I can't go today, Mr. Roberts, because I am preparing my children's Christmas dinner, and I always fix them a Christmas dinner. If I had of known, I would have tried to make some kind of arrangements to have gotten started early and maybe I could have come served for dinner for you all."

He was so mad. He was riding in his son-in-law's car. I think it was from Ohio or somewhere. They left. About an hour later, he came back out and called my mother to the car. My mother lived in his house. "I want my house. I want you to get out of my house, and I want you out of here tomorrow."

Those Bennetts still lives down there on that road. After my mother got through with Christmas dinner, she just told him, said, "Yes, sir," and when she got through with Christmas

dinner, she went down to see Mr. Bennett. He had a house out here right off of Henderson [phonetic] corner, and this house was their horses and stuff. It was just an old vacant house out there, and the horses and things would go and stay in it when, I guess, it was bad, because we had to go out there and clean it out. But that's where we moved, all because she refused and didn't go because she was cooking our Christmas dinner.

See, that's what you had to contend with. You done what they say do or else you suffer the consequence. It was always a repercussion. It was always something.

Now, if your child said something, they do you any kind of way. If you said something, they go to your mother and take the spite out on her. "Mary, I can't use you no more because I was talking to your little old gal (that's what they called you, your little gal), and she stood up there and looked me. She didn't say nothing, but she stood there and looked at me and rolled her eyes." You see the repercussion? That's what she depended on, working for various people. After my father died in '35, then she just had to depend on these people for a living, you know, to work. She would work, wash, iron, done everything, cook.

This is why they teach you what to say, how to say it, and sometimes don't say nothing, don't have no emotion at all, because even just your expression sometimes always cause you a lot of trouble. You couldn't react to anything. It was bad.

Ortiz: You might feel angry, but you couldn't show it.

Mitchell: You couldn't show it, no. I've cried a many day. They accuse you of something, and if you try to say I didn't do it, they say you're lying, you did do it, and then here you stand and you know you didn't do it. I wanted to say, "I'm going to tell my mother," but you couldn't say that. Yeah, I cried a lot of times, because that happened to you, too.

Miss Miller, I was working for her. I was just a kid. I must have been approximately about I think twelve. I was about twelve, eleven or twelve. And see, they test you to see will you steal something. So she goes in and she puts 35 cents down on the floor. So I goes in and I cleans the room. Well, I swept up a kernel [phonetic]. You know what a kernel in the wood is? It's wood in the pine wood. Sometimes it's a knot in the floor, and the kernel will break out and make a hole in the floor. So I had a dust mop, going up under the bed. And then when I got here and I pushed it over, by the money being heavier than the net, it went down through the house. I never saw it. But she just swore by all means I took the 35 cents, and I just cried and cried and cried. She said, "You're going to get that 35 cents," and she just raised all kind of [unclear]. I kept telling her I didn't get it.

So that evening we went in there, and I was to change the

dresser scarves on her dresser, and it got a way with her so bad. She just stepped right over the hole and looked and she saw that 35 cents. She couldn't move. I come to see what she was looking at, and she said, "What you do, sweep the trash through the hole?"

I said, "No, I don't sweep no trash through the hole. I take it up with the dustpan."

"Well, I see the 35 cents down here through the hole."

I said, "I guess it just fell in there when I was sweeping."

But see, she had really hurt me so bad about it. Yeah, you know, you get angry and stuff, but since you know, you come up in this, you expected a lot of this, so you didn't let that make you a bad person. The only thing I can say, it did not make you a bad person.

Ortiz: Mrs. Mitchell, earlier you told me the story of how when the boss tried to get your mother to leave your family on Christmas Day, he had pushed her to the point where she wouldn't go and she said no. Were there other times other than that, perhaps you yourself, that there was a breaking point where you would say, "No further."

Mitchell: Yes.

Ortiz: What were some examples?

Mitchell: Well, I was working for a lady, and she still lives in Clarendon. Her name is Hettie Beatles [phonetic]. I nursed her son in '36. I took care of him. I helped raise him. I worked back to work for her, I think it was in '43, '41, '42, in 1942. I came down with a cold, and I went across the bridge to Dr. Bradley. But the catch was, Dr. Bradley, I got to tell him to send her a note what was wrong with me. See, she told me, "You go over to Dr. Bradley's and see can you get a shot or get something for the cold because I don't want Wayne to come down with a cold." Wayne was just a kid and he played with me and everything. So I said okay.

So I went over there. I didn't tell him that she said to send her a note. So when I came back, she said, "What did Dr. Bradley say?"

I said, "He said that I have a summer cold."

"That's all?"

I said, "Yes, ma'am, that's all he said."

So I went out in my little house. I lived in a little--it was just a little storage house, but we had it fixed like a little cottage. I stayed out there.

So the next day I had to wash, and I washed and I was hanging the clothes out, and Wayne shot me with a BB gun. But he shot me on my spine right there, right up here. Right where

that dot is, he shot me there, and I tell you, he done me so bad. I don't how that felt. He might have been real close on me when he shot me because it was bad enough, my arms just went like, you know, numb or paralyzed or something, and in a few minutes my face was gone just like this and just like the blood shot. I don't know whether he ruptured a thing. So I just left and went straight to the doctor. I didn't wait to tell them. I just left and went over to the doctor. I went over there, and he gave me a shot.

Well, I had my own money. It was \$2.00, about \$2.50, and I went over there and I just paid him. So when she seen me coming back, she said, "Cleaster, where you been?"

I said, "I've been to Dr. Bradley."

"Did you get that letter?"

I said, "No."

"What did you go to the doctor for?"

I said, "Wayne shot me with that BB gun."

So I just kept walking, because I was really sick. I went to the house, and then she came to the house. "When you get ready to go to the doctor, you let me know. Don't go over there and make no bill."

By that time, that was all I could stand. I just walked right out and got me a change of clothes and I just walked right out, and I walked from there to Jack Palmer's place, which is about four and a half miles, because my sister was living on his

place.

Yeah, there come a time you can't cope with it anymore. See, too much looked like had went on, and I just, I don't know, it looked mentally I couldn't deal with it. But I couldn't say anything to her. I just left and I never went back. When I went back, I went back to move my things. But I'll tell you what. I have gone to visit her since I've been back here to Brinkley, and she has come to my house since I come back here. At the time I left, I could not go in her front door, but when I went back to see her, when I went to Clarendon to visit her, me and Miss McNeil [phonetic], I walked straight in her front door and sat down in her living room. You see, this is how times have changed.

Yeah, there comes a breaking point. And I was in Marvell, and I had gone to the doctor then. See this finger. I had hurt it on some rose bushes. A dog got at me, and I grabbed the rose bushes. He wasn't a bad dog, but he run out from under the end of the little bathroom, see, and he run right out on me, and I just was kicking. Zella English [phonetic], she was coming out to help me, but I just cut the whole hand real bad. When she went in there and taped it up, she taped up one of those rose buds in my finger right there, and I had a problem. This thing set up an abscess. Everything happened to it.

So I finally went to the doctor, and Dr. Norton [phonetic] lanced it. But he cut it down here [unclear]. That night, I

don't know exactly what the date was, but it was close to Christmas, they were shooting firecrackers and stuff. I come out, and they didn't allow you to park cars. The black people didn't park their cars on the main street in Marvell. It was one street then, and it's one street now. But no black people parked up there.

I was waiting for the driver to come and get me when I come out of the doctor's office, and two little boys come along and they was with their father. So he lit this firecracker. I said, "Don't light that firecracker. Don't throw that firecracker." I can't stand impacts, like guns and firecrackers and stuff.

So that sort of tickled him, and they went over to the side and they lit their firecracker. When he throwed the firecracker, the firecracker went in the little doorway. So I broke to run, and they just fell out laughing. So the other little boy had a firecracker, and he got near me. You see, I had lost it. When he got near me, I had grabbed him. So when I grabbed him, his father took it up. He was saying, "Turn me loose, you nigger." I just had him. I couldn't let him go, I was so mad. I just couldn't take my hands off of him, really.

And so his father run up, and he was just cursing and everything. I could hear him, but at the time I don't think it made any difference with me, because I was already terribly ill, and I didn't have but one hand no way. I couldn't hit him with

this hand. The doctor done lanced it and had bandaged it all up. And I just had it.

It was two white men. I never knew what their name was. So they came up and they said, "What are you all doing to that gal? Let her alone." They just kept talking backwards and forwards to each other, these other two men and him. So that man, he got mad, and so they were saying a lot of stuff. And then it was the law there, Blankenship [phonetic].

You see, what it was, I was so mad, I guess, I couldn't turn the boy loose. So when the other two men got into it, I think that stopped him from attacking me, when the other two men came up. And then shortly after that, the little law come up, Blankenship, and he said, "What's going on here?"

See, I'm trying to tell him that this boy spit on me and I'm crying and I'm crazy by this time, and I was saying that he spit in my face and he threw firecrackers on me and everything. He had a bad mouth, too. "Get the hell away from here. Go on. Get up there and let her alone."

He said, "Where are you trying to go?"

I said, "I'm waiting for them to come pick me up. I've been to the doctor."

So he said, "Well, come here." He stood there with me until John Henry drove around and picked me up and seen me in the car, because he knowed that they were mad. The other two men wasn't mad. The two men got to arguing with the one what

was trying to make me turn his son loose. So the law just waited there with me. He was the little sheriff or something. And then I got in the car and went on off.

But, yeah, you lose it sometime. But so many times you want to lose it, you don't. It was tough when I come along, and I imagine it was worser when my foreparents and them come along.

Ortiz: Before you began working, doing private household work, did your mother ever tell you, ever kind of sit down with you and tell you about things you should watch out for?

Mitchell: Yes.

Ortiz: What were some of those things?

Mitchell: Well, one thing they taught you was honesty. They always impressed this in you, "Don't you take anything." They'd tell you, "Don't talk back." They would tell you to do a good job and all these things.

But the catch was, I had been, from the time I was four or five, I went to work with my mother. See, you grow up in this.

It's not like waiting and saying, "You're fifteen now. You can go do some work." You done all of this work time you get fifteen years old. You done worked for everybody in town almost, because I've been self-supporting ever since I was

really twelve years old. I've been earning my own living. I know how to work. At twelve, I knowed how to take care of myself. I could work for anybody at twelve, because I was taught.

But they'd tell. They would sit down and show you examples about them, say, "Well, you know, it wasn't easy for me, and if they say thus and so, just don't say anything. You just go on and do your job. If you go up and do a good job and you be neat and you be clean and don't take nothing don't belong to you, you will not have a problem."

We automatically knowed you went in the back door. You didn't have to guess about that. You could work in the house all day. You could never come out the front door. Only way you come out the front door, you swept the front porch off. If you swept the front porch off, you come out of the main door and swept the porch off. But to just come up the main walk or something, no. You was just trained like that. That was never a qualm with us. That's how come I tell you, in some ways it was easier than people think it was, because it was just understood at a early age what you do and what you don't do.

Now, like the little town we went to. You go up and spend all of your cotton picking money and everything else. But a certain time you left that town. They didn't allow no black people there after dark. Now, that's just twenty miles from here.

Ortiz: That was Blackton?

Mitchell: Blackton, Blackton, Arkansas.

Ortiz: Did they have an ordinance or some kind of a law that said no black people or was it just understood?

Mitchell: No, they didn't have no sign up there. It was just the attitude. They had the attitude, and heard what would happen. You learned early. Some of them would get half drunk and they would start saying, "You don't want you niggers caught up here after dark. Don't be up here." That was a common word. Nigger was a common word. It was not insulting. You know what I'm trying to say? You did feel bad, but you'd heard it all your life, so you didn't go crazy.

But, yeah, you knowed to leave, and if you was going to be there, some white person had to tell them, "This is my help. They are going to be here, and I want them to do this and to do the other." Once who you worked for said you was going to be there, then they didn't bother you. But otherwise, you wasn't up there.

Ortiz: Mrs. Mitchell, did you ever hear stories of any black person who accidentally was caught there after dark?

Mitchell: Oh, yeah. They had a beer tavern up there, Miss Pease [phonetic]. It was three of them. It was, I think, R.D. and Vinny Wade and Richard, and they worked for a family. Well, she used to be a Banks, but she married a Westbrooks. They had bought lots of feed and groceries, and Miss Thelby's [phonetic] daddy, Mr. Banks, he'd get drunk early. She don't want to worry with him. She would have them to stay out there and watch him in the wagon, keep anybody from bothering it.

Now, Vinny and R.D. and Richard and them all lived on the farm. So they left them up there to just see after him, watch him, you know. So I think some of them, they all got drunk up there. Then they'd come out there and run Vinny, R.D., and Richard. But when she come out there, they done already run them away from up there, because they come out there throwing bottles and cussing and all that stuff, so they left. Yeah, they'd attack you. They would attack you, sure.

If you talked back or anything, if you talked to one, just like if one come up here and said, "Get out from up here." If you said something back, okay, you leave. There would be five or six of them go down there and beat you up, see. So you know not to say nothing, and it wasn't going to be anything done about it. They'd take your property, and you couldn't do nothing about it. I don't care what it was you had, if they wanted it, you couldn't do nothing about it.

Ortiz: Did black farmers or landowners have a hard time holding on to land?

Mitchell: Yeah, because it was hard for them to farm until the government sort of started coming in, where they could get individual money. So they know they could go to somebody that had money, some of the other rich merchants, and they would borrow money. But it was a little catch to it. They would encourage you to borrow the money, but they would put so much interest and everything on it. So like your first year they would say, "Well, don't worry about it. If you didn't do good, go ahead on. I'm not bothered." But the results was, after a certain length of time they took a lien on your property, and they would do at the ill-convenienced time. If you couldn't find somebody else to pay it off and let you pay them, then you automatically lost it. Yeah, that's how they got a lot of folks' property. They would hunt you down to loan you some money if you had some land and was doing pretty good.

Ortiz: Thinking about your experiences working in private households, did you ever hear or did your mother talk to you about watching out for abuses from white men in the household?

Mitchell: Oh, yes. That was taught to you very early, sir,

because it was so--well, it was terrible at one time, and it wasn't nobody to tell, because sometimes the wife knowed it, but they was scared of their husband, too. You could go to the wife and she'd say, "Oh, just don't pay him no attention. Just don't pay him no attention," because she's scared. You go to her because you think you were doing something. Most of the time, they know they was doing it, but they wouldn't tell you. They'd say, "Oh, don't pay Mr. So-and-so no attention. He was drunk. Don't pay him no attention."

Sure, they meddled, but that was one of the things that they instilled in you was about being approached by the young mens.

[Begin Tape 1, Side 2]

Mitchell: A lot of people that worked and had jobs, they left on that account, because it wasn't something you could--like I say, you had no alternative. To go to the law didn't mean anything. There wasn't no law against you go to them and say anything. And I'll tell you, one time in the South, it's bad to say, white men was crazy about black women. They would come to your house. They would attack you.

And see, my mother and my father and my grandparents all told us, like I was telling you early, about how these people in my family was looking like white people. You couldn't tell

them. They had long straight hair and blue eyes. But when they would say, "This is my grandmother's great-great grandparents," you know, they had the pictures to show you, I couldn't believe it. I really couldn't believe it. And then they go to tell you how in this family you have some light children and some dark children. They tell you this come through the bloodline. All this happened through slavery and different other stuff. But it was terrible. But today I don't think they'd let them touch them, because the way I hear them talk on the TV. They act like they didn't know this went on. I was looking at this guy that was on "Geraldo," the grand wizard of the Ku Klux Klan of Mississippi. Did you see that?

Ortiz: No.

Mitchell: I was watching it the other night. It was rather late. Well, one of the things he said was--they asked about the O.J. Simpson case, and he just said an ugly word about Nicole. He called her an ugly name and stuff and said he should have cut her throat. And he called these children little mongrels.

Another black lady was sitting on the end, and it made her mad. She said, "Well, I didn't see you complain about none of those little mongrels your foreparents got by the black women. What about them?"

I laughed. It was funny. But she was so angry. But I

could see what she was talking about. If they did it, never said a word. And a lot of them had children and rode right by them and didn't speak to them, and they knowed that was their children. Now, some of them, if the person was working for them and they had this baby, I know in a couple of cases that baby was actually raised in that house. You see, that's how come I know their wife couldn't do nothing about it. The lady he got the baby by couldn't leave and the wife couldn't do nothing about it and had to let the baby stay there.

Yes, every bit of that went on back then, only it was worser than now, because the thing about it, there wasn't nothing--it started so far back. Back then, they was tough. In slavery time, if they liked your daughter or liked your wife, they just come there and tell you go some place, don't come back until such and such a time. And you know what was going on, but nothing you could do. See, our parents told us all of that. So then this come up through that. They took it for granted when they saw a black lady that they could just approach her, that it was not an insult to her for them to approach her.

But my mother taught us what to do and everything. She had to leave us at home a lot of times, and she said, "Okay, you all stay in the house. You see a white man or something coming up here, fasten the door. Stay in the house. And if they knock, don't let them in." See, she had alternatives for you for you to sort of protect yourself and stuff.

Ortiz: What would she tell you, Mrs. Mitchell, if you got in that situation when you were working in the private household and the husband indecently approached you? What was your recourse?

Mitchell: When I got up, I didn't have the experience out of no grown person when I was really a kid. Now, I had it out of another kid, but not out of a grown person, and I could sort of handle this one.

So when the grown person approached me, I just told him not to do it, don't put your hands on me, because I'm not here for that. And then if they kept it, I said, "I'm going to tell your wife." I had a lot of alternatives. When I got up grown where I could really speak up for myself, then I had a lot of things I'd tell him. Like I told Mr. Brown down here. See, he just took it for granted because I worked there for Miss Heddy [phonetic]. He could just walk right in, and he'd just walk right in, and I was putting up some glasses in the little shelf thing up there, and he'd just walk right up here and just--he just walked up and he just put his arms around me.

I was so mad. I told him, I said, "Listen, I been knowing you all of my life, Mr. Jim. You never knowed me to meddle you, flirt with you, or anything. I've been working here with Miss Heddy almost four years. You never seen me approach Mr. Billy

or nobody, have you?"

"No, I was just--

I said, "No, you wasn't playing. But don't you do that. As long as you live, don't you put your hands on me no more. I'll tell you why. Because if a black man done that to a white woman, you'd be the first to get here and find a limb to hang him to. So if you would hang the black man about doing it, you think I'm going to let you do it to me?"

From that day to this one, I had no trouble out of him. That really stopped him. He said, "I wouldn't do it."

I said, "Yeah, you would. You can't tell me what you would do."

But see, when you got older and you was one on one, then you sort of told them that that wasn't--no.

Ortiz: That happened during the 1930s?

Mitchell: This happened to me in 1943. Yeah, this was in 1943 this happened to me. But you see, I'm seventy-three years old, so in '43, I was a young person in '43, but I was definitely grown.

Now, before with the boys, the little boys, they used to call theirselves getting fresh, trying to get fresh. I'd take care of them, too, because I didn't have much respect for them. I'd take care of them quickly. See, they was afraid to go back

and tell their parents if they meddled me. And I said something to them that they didn't like, they was scared to go back and tell their parents, because they taught them against black people. And see, they didn't want to say, "Well, I was doing this," because you know how they taught black people is this and black people is that and black people was everything. So if they go to tell their parents, they would know right away they was doing the very thing they told them not to do. So I had the advantage of that little bunch down there. See, I could tell them what I thought. I knowed that, see.

But every bit of this went on. That was no joke. But a lot of people, the children and stuff coming up now, they don't know anything about that, and they wonder about--black people is a strong nation of people, because a lot of people don't really see how they survived under these conditions. But in 1930 during the Depression, you did not see black people committing suicide, and they learned how to feed themselves. We didn't go that hungry. My parents knew how to pick certain weeds and things to eat, like they call them wild greens. Has anybody ever said anything about wild greens in any of your interviews?

Ortiz: I think so. Wild greens?

Mitchell: Wild greens. They grew in the field, in the yard, everywhere, and we knowed all of the different ones you could

eat. We would get them and cook them, cook them just like you do regular greens, and they was very good. But it was a way that we stayed healthy, we stayed fat. We didn't have doctors.

You see, the black people really didn't have no doctors. For a long time, long time, you didn't have a doctor that you could just walk in their office and they'd wait on you, because most of the babies was delivered by midwives, and if you got sick or got cut or something, you didn't see no doctor. Your parents had to doctor on you.

Ortiz: Did your parents use home remedies?

Mitchell: Yes. Like I said, they'd doctor on you. You go to the hospital for them now. If you broke your ribs, they knew how to bandage you up and everything. If you had pneumonia, they knew what to do. They would make a mustard plaster and plaster you up, and they would take cornmeal and heat it and make a plaster for pleurisy.

See, like this scar here, if you would have seen that, you wouldn't have believed it. This one on the top of my foot, this glass went clean through my foot. You can't even hardly see the scar. There it is right there. That was on the bottom of my foot, but as I grew it went up on the top. Now, I don't know what they done about the lockjaw business, because none of us never had lockjaw. But they doctored on you for the average

something that happened to you, because you didn't have no doctors, really; and if you did, you was so far, if you got cut or something you'd probably bleed to death.

Now, if you got cut real bad, they would just run and get the sugar and just pack it full of sugar and bandage it up, and sugar will stop bleeding. It seasons the end of veins. It closes up. It's waxy. See, the blood is hot and it just makes a thing, and that's the best thing. If you get hurt real bad and you're not close to a doctor, that is the best thing to do till you get to a doctor if you don't know how to stop a bleeding otherwise.

They made their own medicines, cough syrups, everything.

Ortiz: Earlier you were talking about how black people survived even the hardest times. When you were growing up, was there a sense of neighborhood, community, sharing?

Mitchell: Oh, yes, it was. Everybody shared with each other what they had. Some had one something and some had the other. Like some people raised a lot of potatoes. They would share with the people who didn't have a lot of potatoes, and maybe this person raised corn, had lots of corn, and they would give you corn. And we made our own cornmeal, see. They took it to what you call a gristmill, and you made your own meal. They would share everything, their food. If they had lots of cows

and you had lots of children, they would let you have a cow to milk. They wouldn't give you the cow. They'd let you have a cow to milk where you could have milk and stuff for your kids. All you did was took care of the cow.

Yeah, it was different. It was really nice. That's one way you survived, and it made you very close. That's how come everybody, in a sense, thought they were sort of kin to everybody, because if a person was a certain age, we had to say "Auntie" and "Uncle." You couldn't just walk up and say, "Hey, Brown" or "Hey, such and such." You always had to give them that respect, you know, and that's something that's lacking today. There's no respect. The respect is gone. But we respect. Yes, we did.

Ortiz: Now, the neighborhood that you're describing was in Blackton?

Mitchell: Yes. We lived there for a long time. Let me see where the next--we lived around Blackton longer than we did any other place .

Ortiz: Thirties and forties?

Mitchell: Yes, I was still around there in the forties. We moved down out below Marvell, but I was only down there a few

years. But in that community it was the same way, because it was just a black community. See, that was the catch. All the communities where we lived was black. Now, white could move to our community, but we could not move to their community. But I know we had several white families to move in our community, but they were in the same shape we was--extremely poor.

At that time, if you was extremely poor, regardless to what color you was, if you was really, really poor, then you was treated like you was poor. So they had to live in a little shotgun house like we did, and my mother fed them. See, they could come to our house and eat, and their children would come to our house and eat, and his little wife. She really wasn't nothing but a kid, you know, but she had two children, and my mother worried because she said she didn't know how to take care of the children. So my mother would take her and show her how to care for her kids and sew for them and take things, and my mother made everything. She made all your clothes. And so she would make things for her little children to show her how, and teach her how to cook, because my mother was an extremely good cook, and she would teach you how to cook common food that you could eat. She'd just put on some peas and boil them, put some lard in them and maybe some salt or something. But my mother would teach her how to cook and stuff just like she did my sisters, and maybe the little children wouldn't have survived if my mother didn't help her, because if they was sick, my mother

would doctor on them and stuff. They was down there with us about two years, right at us. But the catch was, if they pull up a little bit--they have to get out from down there. They can't stay, because then they won't be recognized, you see, They got to get to where they can sort of be recognized. It's tough. See, to get recognition--I worked for one that was poorer than I was, but to get some recognition, some status among the white people, then he got somebody to work for her. But she didn't have any more than what I had.

Ortiz: Was it different working for somebody who was as poor as you were?

Mitchell: No. I had more fun working for the one that was as poor as I was than the one that was rich.

Ortiz: What was different?

Mitchell: Well, because the one was poor was more down to earth. We had something we could talk about and things, and she knew what hard work was. You worked, but she didn't worry about you killing yourself.

See, some of them you worked for, they worked all day, and said, "When you get through with such and such, I want you to do so and so and so." Time you get through with this, "I tell you

what. You know what I want you to do? I want you to do such and such a thing, and when you get through with this, do so-and-so." It was something all day long. They made sure if you was getting \$1.00 or 75 cents or whatever it was--in '43 when I was working up here, you know I was only making \$2.50 a week. I washed, I ironed, I took care of the baby, I worked the garden, I mowed the yard, I took care of the chickens, I pumped the water for the animals, I done everything. I got \$2.50 a week.

But at that time, I knowed how to maneuver. I worked in the field. I'd get through with my work and I'd go to the field and I would work. A lot of times when I'd get off in the evening, this one lady close, I'd go over there and chop maybe like now I'd go over there and chop until eight o'clock or nine, and I would get paid by the hour and I would make extra money. And on my off day, I would go and work. So I always found a way to earn myself something to care take care of my own self, support myself. I'd get off in the evening. I'd go and I'd pick cotton. I could pick 400 pounds of cotton. When I got through with my work early, there was a farm right there. I'd go over there and I'd pick 100 and 150. I got maybe \$2.00 a hundred. That was a lot of money then. I got my room and my board there, and I didn't have to spend my money for anything.

Could I ask you a question? Where were you born? I mean, what's your home?

Ortiz: I was raised in Washington state, Bremerton, Washington.

Mitchell: Now, all of this seems real foreign to you, don't it?

Ortiz: It does. I've been doing interviews for two years now. Even though there are general themes that are the same, every person has a unique story.

Mitchell: Yeah, that's true.

Ortiz: I'm still amazed.

Mitchell: I went to Illinois in '45. I left here and I went to Chicago in '45, and I stayed there thirty years before I came back here. But I really like the South. I like the quietness of it and everything. When my husband retired, I wanted to get somewhere. Chicago had gotten so bad, because when I first went to Chicago, you could walk anywhere, do anything. It was a lovely place to be. But the last years I was there, it was real bad.

Now it's different. When you come back now, it is different than it was, in some cases. But now I want you to know. There are a lot of things still happens right here in this place. You know, it's different with me now. I've got a lot of grit in my crow now. I think it changed me about how you

speaking up for yourself. But you have opposition right here now.

It's not an open society here today. You ever looked at Brinkley, how Brinkley is? Have you learned anything about this town since you've been here?

Ortiz: About the living patterns and segregation.

Mitchell: Yes.

Ortiz: Today.

Mitchell: It is still segregated here today. But I'm different. A lot of them are not different, but I'm different. So things they used to try, they don't try all the time. Mr. Rush [phonetic] up here in this bank, he tried some of his 1930 tactics on me, and it didn't work. They used to say, "Get out of here. Get out, get out, get out," and that's all you could do was get out. So he made the mistake to me to "Get out, get out," and he had a problem. I said, "Get Chief Buffalo [phonetic] over here and get him some help, because if you puts me out of here, you're going to have a whole lot of help. I ain't going nowhere."

See, [unclear], I wouldn't have said that to him. I would have went on out the store. But after all, I done got grown now, and I've learned there's another side of life, and you just

don't have to--today I avoid a lot of things because of segregation. I can see it. I know it. I know it when I see it. A lot of times I avoid it because I would like to think now that I am too intelligent to stoop to a lot of those little levers, and I just rise up above it and go ahead on. But it's not easy now all the time. It's not easy.

Ortiz: Mrs. Mitchell, earlier you were talking about school and the fact that the white landowners would take the children out of school to work in the fields.

Mitchell: Yes.

Ortiz: How much opportunity did you have to go to school, and where were you going to school at?

Mitchell: You honestly want the truth? I do not read or write today. Now, all of my sisters, they succeeded me in going to school. I had dyslexia, so it was very hard, you know, the problem. I had this problem, so I couldn't adapt as easy as my sisters could. I went to school with them, but I guess--well, what I learned to do early was to camouflage it. I was supposed to have been in fifth grade. I was in the fifth grade. But in the fifth grade, I couldn't read or write in the fifth grade. A lot of people just have that ability to do it, and so I just

said--I got away with it, because if I didn't want them to know I couldn't read or write then, they necessary didn't know it. So, no, I could have been in the first grade.

You see, the had a seven months school. The white had seven months. The colored had five months, but out of these months, you did not go to school those five months. In all, you might have went three. They started giving the free books, I think, in '32 or '33. Those Rosenwald [phonetic]--now, all of this is before your time.

[Someone enters the room.] Come on. Hi. That's my sister, Mattie [phonetic].

Mattie: How are you? My name's Mattie. I'm Miss Mitchell's sister.

Ortiz: I'm Paul Ortiz. Pleased to meet you.

Mitchell: You can ask her something when you get ready. She knows as much about this segregation as I do.

I think it was around in '32 they started issuing free school books to the schools. But you had one teacher had to teach from the first grade to the eighth. The school had two little doors to it. The boys were on one side and the girls were on the other.

I wish I had a picture of my school. I would give it to

you. It is still there. And the church I attended is still there. The regular school is still there, but they done rebuilt the church. But the original school is still there, and they have church in that school. You're sitting in the same place and everything. They still have some desks. You know what the regular school desks. They're still in that school over there.

She knows what I'm talking about. They had the five months school, but you couldn't go to school.

Mattie: Two in the summertime and three in the winter.

Mitchell: And then we couldn't go all the time. Some days you went a half a day. Some days you didn't go at all. You know how it was? See, you might go twenty days out of this month. The next month, you go fifteen. You see what I'm saying? It's according to what was going on. If they needed you to do something, then you took your kids out of school. In '35, we walked about what?

Mattie: Seven or eight miles.

Mitchell: About seven or eight miles to school, and that was children was going to school that was four and five years old. The oldest ones a lot of times have carried them. You leave early and you walk to school and you walk back. We had no bus

or nothing. And when it was cold and bad, they make you a thing what they called a little fire bucket, and the two olders carried them. When you get too cold, you stop and warm your hands. You had some coals and stuff in it to warm your hands over. The original road is still down there where I'm talking about.

What else? Let me see.

Ortiz: You talked earlier about the church, and I was wondering, what role did the church play in your family's life when you were growing up?

Mitchell: Well, I'll tell you. That was the lifeline of the community was the church, because they never had telephones, a lot of them couldn't write and everything, but they would gather up on a Sunday. That's when they prayed together, they visit together, they talk, they caught up on everything that was going on, and I guess they shared recipes. That was a glorious time when they got together on a Sunday.

We used to have a Bible class called BT Youth [phonetic]. A lot of them would stay out under the shade trees there, and they would visit and talk and everything, and then we would go in later and have this Bible class, and we played with all the other children.

When things was bad, they prayed, and when things was

wrong, they'd go there and pray. They was really sharing in all kind of ways with each other. But the church was the heart of that community, because if anything went wrong, somebody would go to the church and ring the bell and somebody would go to the church to see what was the problem. Then we would go if somebody died or something happened or something. That was the way we got the news out. Yeah, the church was really very special, and I think it does have a very special--I told you I still go down there. It still has a very special place with I and my sister today. We still goes back to visit this church, and we always try to do something for this little church down there. I really don't know why it really stays there, because everybody's gone. It's not a family in that community now.

Ortiz: That's in Blackton?

Mitchell: Yes, Blackton, Arkansas.

Ortiz: What is the name of the church?

Mitchell: Pine Ridge. Now, this is about two and a half miles out of Blackton. It's not right up in the little town. It's two and a half miles out there.

Ortiz: What denomination is this?

Mitchell: It's Baptist, Missionary Baptist Church.

Ortiz: You moved to Chicago in 1945. You were about, what, twenty-two?

Mitchell: Yeah, twenty-two years old.

Ortiz: What led up to your decision to make that major move?

Mitchell: Well, I'll tell you. One thing, I was tired of working for nothing. We had made a crop and never cleared a dime, and I just said to myself, "It's got to be something better, got to be something different, something you can do."

And that was one thing I think my mother taught us. She used to always say, "I would know how to make a living if I was in England." England must have been a popular thing, foreign country. Maybe that was an easy name for her to name was England. She said, "If I was in England, I'd know how to feed myself. I'd know bread in anyplace." She'd tell you like don't be afraid to try something or to do something different. And so that was one of the things. I said, "I'm not going to starve to death, so I'm going."

I got on the bus, I got on the Greyhound bus, and I went to Chicago. I got there on a Easter Sunday morning of '45, and I

stayed there thirty years. I worked and I learned how to do a lot of things. I accomplished something that I dreamed about when I was a kid. I like to design things, and I just went and had an opportunity to put into action my thoughts and my dreams.

I designed hats, and I had my own store, custom-made hats and everything. So I did get a chance to do a lot of things that I like to do, yes.

Ortiz: Did you have relatives in Chicago?

Mitchell: When I first went there?

Ortiz: Yes.

Mitchell: Well, my sister went first, the one that was in here.

She went first, and then I went. She went, I think it was in February. She must have went in February, and I went in April, I think, because I think Easter Sunday was in April. She was there, but that's only somebody I had there was her.

Ortiz: Had you talked with her about moving or had she talked to you about her--

Mitchell: We first both left and went to St. Louis. We both got on a bus and went to St. Louis and didn't know nobody. But

when we got there, and we missed the lady that was supposed to meet us didn't meet us, then it come to us that another lady, we knowed her name and she was in St. Louis, and we looked in the telephone book and found her and called her up. Her name was Doll Harris [phonetic], and she came down and got us.

We didn't have but \$7.50. We had \$7.50. But, you know, we made it fine. We were job crazy. We got there, we worried everybody about a job. She said, "Just give yourself a chance. You're going to get a job."

We went down to 8th and Vine and got our Social Security card. She went to work at one laundry, and I got an advertising job, and then we both wound up working at the same laundry. She worked about a month, and she left and came to Chicago, and then I came up. I left and went back, come back on the other side of Blackton up here, and then I left and went to Chicago in April.

But so many people was leaving the South at that time, because it was during the war and a lot of people had left. See, a lot of them had left and went to shipyards and different other things, you know. A lot of people left the little small jobs they had and went to bigger jobs, and all these little jobs, you didn't have no problem getting no job working at a hotel, laundry, restaurant, nothing. All those little jobs was just there for you. You really didn't have to have a lot of education to find a job to take care of yourself, to make yourself independent. You learned how to survive easily.

When I first made \$20 a week, I was just shocked, because I had just left a job making \$2.50. That was a whole lot of money. See, that's how I looked at it. You know, a slice of that was kept. People saved money, because you don't see how nobody save anything out of \$2.50 a week. But things was much cheaper. And then they had a little something they'd fix and they put it in, and they would keep it. They just wouldn't spend it for nothing. You had to be critically ill or something or other for them to spend it.

Ortiz: After you and your sister moved to Chicago, did any other family members move up?

Mitchell: Every one of them.

Ortiz: Every single one of them?

Mitchell: Every one of them.

Ortiz: To Chicago?

Mitchell: That's right. Even I brung my mother there. I bought a home in Chicago, and I came and got my mother and my kids and brung them there. That's where my mother died is in Chicago. Then when we all started coming back, it was the same

difference.

Ortiz: Around the seventies?

Mitchell: I came here in '74. I came back in '74. My sister came back in '84.

Ortiz: I was wondering, earlier you were talking about what really pulled black communities through difficult times was the resourcefulness and also the sharing of things. Were there people in the community that weren't so quick to share?

Mitchell: Yes. It was some of all kind. Some of them were selfish. They lived to themselves, and what they had was theirs. They didn't share nothing with anybody. Some of them was so selfish they did not even share with their own families.

But what was nice, when you run up on somebody that was selfish and didn't share, nobody really pointed him out and said he's a bad guy or he's this or that or the other. They just said, "Don't bother Mr. whatever his name was. Don't bother him. Go over to Mr. So-and-so and tell them I said let me use the hammer or whatever it was." Because it always got around who shared and who didn't share, see.

But if they had somebody in the community that did not share with their own family, other people shared with them. The

church family shared with them. They would get together and say, "You know Miss So-and-so really needs this. She is sick and this and that," and they get through.

We had something in our church was like the consecrated offering. We called it the poor sick. When anyone got sick or something, they always had somewhere to go. It might be a small amount, but it was always something that that church could share with someone. When we were small, we didn't know really how the sharing came, because they didn't talk about it. If they done something for somebody, it was like a big secret. They didn't say like they say now, "I gave them such and such a thing and I done this." That was very personal. They would get together and do something, but you never heard them say a word then. Twenty years later, you'd find out that this happened.

Yeah, it was a lot of people there that didn't--well, it wasn't a whole lot, but you did have some. Then some that lived pretty good, they had an attitude towards--and they were black, too, and they had an attitude towards black people. They'd say, "They ought to get up and do this. They ought to do that." Because a lot of them, parents left them a little land and different stuff they come into. Well, if you had some land, you was considered rich. So you could have some land, and you was really rich. If you didn't have nary a dollar, you was rich.

And nobody was voting. We didn't know nothing about no voting, like you go to the poll to vote. We didn't vote. But

they had something, and I wish I could understand it today. They made my father go up there, and they pay something call poll tax. Have anybody ever told you about that since they been here about that poll tax? Now, I'm grown. I never did figure that poll tax business out. But I know a lot of children did not get--when they took census, they didn't turn their children in, because you paid according to how many children you had, and a lot of people would not turn their children in when they was taking census on account of they thought they was really trying to make--

[Begin Tape 2, Side 1]

Mitchell: I can ask you this question. Did they sense you in to what poll tax was?

Ortiz: What I've been told is people have said that it would be something designed to keep black people from voting, and they would charge--it was what they called retroactive. So if you didn't pay it one year, then they would charge you for that year. So if you maybe hadn't paid it for ten years, you'd owe every single year. And if you didn't pay the tax, you couldn't vote; and since the tax was so high, it kept most black people from voting. Now, that's what I've been told about it.

Mitchell: That probably was the gimmick, but they didn't have anyplace for you to register. The wife didn't go down; the husband went down. And they had it based on how many children you had according to how much money you paid. If that's what they were using was to keep you from voting, then I guess that was what it was.

But it kept a lot of people from registering when they took census. They'd never turn in all of their children. Then when they got older and come looking for a birth certificate and go back to get when you were born, a lot of people wasn't registered until ten years later. You see what I mean? They could only go by when they took census. That's the only record they could get. But in the family Bible, you looked in there, he's ten years older than what they have a record of him, but that's in your family Bible.

But they would have children and wouldn't say. They'd say, "No, here come that census man. You all go around there." They thought that when the census people came that they were trying to find out how many was in the household so they could know how much to charge them when they go to pay poll tax.

I don't know about it, but it was always strange to me that they never made any qualms about it. I'll tell you what they made us do. In 1940--let me see what election year this was. Our boss came out and made all of us pay campaign money for the election, but we never voted. Now, he'd tell us, "I'm going to

vote for you. You can't vote for nobody. I'm going to vote for you all, but you've got to pay." That was campaign money, help him raise his big campaign money, what he's going to pay into the campaign. If he was going to pay \$500, then all these people working on his farm is going to pay that, because he's going to take so much out of everybody's thing, you know.

Ortiz: What would he say? Would he say something like, "This is best for you"?

Mitchell: Yeah. He said, "Well, you know, a president election is coming up, and we want to do this and that and all. I'm going to take \$10 from each person, and that is to help elect President Roosevelt (or whoever he was voting for), and that way it will go on record that you all voted for him." But that was not true. That was a gimmick to get our money. I found out that wasn't a vote, because you can't go vote for nobody.

Now, every bit of this stuff went on. Somebody else is going to run up and tell you of the same things. A lot of things went on, like the welfare. They had a little thing what they called the commodity, where they just gave you something like motomeal [phonetic] and oatmeal and sometime peanut butter and stuff like this. They had it at Clarendon. My father walked from Blackton to Clarendon in the wintertime. They would go up there to get the commodity, and if they was just mean

enough, they would say, "We're not going to issue it out today."

But all these folks that walked from all these various places, from Monroe, Blackton, and just all these little places, they would go to the train station there and they would let them stay in the train station out of the weather. They would go out and get cardboard boxes and pick up limbs and stuff to try to be warm in the bus station or the train station. The next day, they might open it up and serve until twelve o'clock or something and say, "We're not going to give out no more until Wednesday." Some get some and some don't.

But see, that's what bothers me when they talk about giving all this back to the states now, because I know what the states does. But you see, they were giving away, the elder white people and stuff that was poor, too, they were getting something like \$12 a month. That was money, a whole lot of money. Then my father--and I really don't know. He was probably about twenty-five miles from Blackton Clarendon, and he walked all the way back with whatever they give him. You'd go like once a month up there to get it. It would take him two days.

I guess we learned what hardship was, and it never really bothered us. Hard times is something that never bothers me. I don't fret about it. Being broke never bothers me. I guess I never had a great desire to be rich, for one thing. I wanted to live comfortable, but I never did want to be rich, because if I was rich, there would be so many things I would do with it,

until I would soon be poor. It's a lot of things I would like to try to correct if I were rich on how people live or they have or what, even until today. So I know that I wouldn't be rich very long if I come in possession of a lot of money, and there is some people who's just naturally going to be poor.

See, those are some of my mother's words. She'd say, " Oh, don't worry about money. It's always going to be some poor people in the world." Then she would show you where the Bible said, "Be mindful that the poor should be among you always," and she would always show us where we was one of them to where, you see, it didn't bother us. We just said, "Well, we're one of them that the Lord have poor." You see, you didn't go crazy. They had beautiful techniques that they done that helped you kept your sanity.

Ortiz: Mrs. Mitchell, did you ever marry?

Mitchell: Oh, yes, I got married. See, that's how come I'm a Mitchell. I got married to a beautiful man, Robert Mitchell. We were Deals before. Our family name, we was Deal, D-E-A-L, Deal.

Ortiz: Were you married in Chicago?

Mitchell: I got married in Helena, Helena Courthouse.

Ortiz: How did you meet your husband?

Mitchell: I met my husband while I was picking cotton. I came down and I met a cousin of mine and we was in the field picking cotton. I was picking in his field and didn't know it, see, and that's how we met, really.

I told you about this farm we lived on, Jack Palmer's. He was working for Jack Palmer. But I was in his field when I met him. And it was just a casual meeting. He came by and said some kind of flirty word or something, you know, and I probably said something very smart back to him and didn't pay it no attention and went on. I didn't pay it no attention until about maybe five or six months later that I really found out he was serious about talking to me. Then we courted. That was in '40.

We kept company, and I left and went to Chicago. He came to Chicago, and we came back and got married, come back to Helena and got married. My mother was living in Helena, and we came back.

Ortiz: Your husband moved with you to Chicago at the same time?

Mitchell: No. I went to Chicago, and he came to Chicago. When I left, then he came up. And then after we got to Chicago, we decided to get married, and then we came back to Helena and got

married. We had one son, and he was born in 1951.

Ortiz: When you think back now over your life, what have been the things that have changed the most? Why don't we back up? Maybe I should ask first, when you moved back, after living in Chicago for so many years and you moved back to Brinkley, what had changed in Brinkley and what hadn't changed?

Mitchell: Well, let me see, what had changed and what hadn't changed. Segregation had changed to a certain point. It was not so openly. It still is concealed, but it's not so openly. Things had changed that I could vote when I came back here. I could go to the same doctor anybody else could go to. I could drink out of the same fountain anybody could go to. I could ride on the same bus. I didn't have to get out of line when I bought something and somebody else come in.

I could use the same facilities. I could go into the same restaurant and eat, because there was a time you couldn't go to the restaurant. They had a little hole. You'd go there and they'd put your food out. You'd go to the back and they'd give it to you out the little back window. You couldn't go. But now, when I come back you could just go in any nice restaurant and sit down and eat and enjoy yourself.

Then they had removed the sign out of the bus station and train station where it said "white only." They didn't say

"black over here" and "white over here." They said "white only." That meant, don't come on that side at all.

A lot of things had changed when I came back. And then when I came back, I didn't necessary have to work for anyone. I really didn't come back to get any job and stuff. I knowed something to do outside of--I didn't have to come back to do the things that I used to do. That part of it had changed.

But I knew that a lot of it had not changed. Honestly, some of it I can't ever see it just changing, just vanishing, going away, because when hate is seeded deeply into people, enrooted in people, it is very hard to do anything with that. What's in a person's heart, you can't do anything with that. If you've got that kind of thinking inside of you, nothing will change that but the Lord. It is going to forever think that way, so that don't bother me. But I wouldn't let the Ku Klux Klan set his tent up in my back yard. Now, he couldn't do that. He'd have to go someplace else with it. But I know when they come and just done everything, anything they wanted to, and it wasn't nothing you could do about it.

It's really trying to come back just like it once was. This government is changing, and you can see what they are asking for and everything. They say, "Give it back to this and give it back to that," but when they would change it all around, it would be back just like it was. But what would be bad, it would be so much worser, because even for me, I have seen

another side of life, and what was that I accepted before, it would be hard for me to do that, because at that time I did not know any better. See, I didn't see the brighter day. They just told you about the brighter day. I could see going to Chicago.

I traveled a lot, lots of places. I couldn't see that. It would be very uncomfortable for me now if it went back to where it once was, because it would be miserable. Because if it went back like it was, you still wouldn't have any protection, would you? You wouldn't have anything. If you'd speak up, you would just be in the world of trouble all the time. But the catch is, if it turns, this time it's going to be all over. See, you're starting up at the upper now. Now it's coming all the way down, and it's not going to be easy, because people will die now. People that never thought of dying for something, they will die now before they do it, because you've got a whole generation of people here don't know nothing about what I'm talking about. So you see, they're not going to lay down for it. And the generation that lived through it is not going to accept it. So it's going to be very hard.

I can see Mr. Newt Gingrich and a whole lot of them, they're at it daily. They want to change all the amendments. They want to do everything that has stood for all these years, and they think people--I really don't know what. You can see all these other people now just coming up out of the woodwork. What good is it to have all of these malicious and all of this

stuff? Everybody's so cruel-minded now. See, we used to thought that people were cruel and different other stuff, but we've got people now that are just as cruel-minded as those people is, and you would have a harder time surviving than we did. It would be much worse. I don't know. But I don't even know why they are trying to--what is their purpose? Now, you are young. Do you understand it?

Ortiz: I agree with you. I think that they are trying to roll back to the way things were, but for them, because they're in power, things were good to them because they were in power.

Mitchell: Yes, that's true. But they're living better than they ever lived, too. You get anything you want. You've been in this office for years, and every taxpayer has supported your salary. You make millions of dollars doing nothing. They give you \$50 million to speak at the university and everything. What are you kicking about? You've got your own flower bed of ease. Now you want to change the whole world.

But I know a lot of it is going to change. I know a lot of it is going to change. But it's not going to be easy as they think it is. They're going to have some ethnic cleansing. They're going to have a lot of stuff right over here in this place just like they got over there. That is terrible. I cry and I pray for those people over there just like I know those

people, because I just know it's horrible and I'd hate to be--I think about what I come through, but I didn't come through anything like that. See, that's worser. Like that man came and put us out of the house. My mother went on down the road to somebody else. But those people can't even go to nobody else.

Now, how did we get into way over there talking about those people?

Ortiz: Mrs. Mitchell, I know I've taken a lot of your time.

Mitchell: I've enjoyed it, though. I have never really given an interview, and it's a new experience to me. I have talked to a lot of people, though. But just to sit down and give somebody an interview on what I know, my point of view. And then I'll tell you, you cannot put in a lifetime of experience in an hour's time, because there have been so many things have happened. You see what I'm saying? But you just get some of it, just get some of it mentioned or some of it written somewhere or something, that is something. You know, a lot of people never had that opportunity to just get recorded on anything just to get his thoughts or his views about something, put down on nothing. He died and he lived here, and nobody know what he thought but just his family. I bet some of those people would have had some of the most beautiful stories to have told.

And we was great people, I can tell you that. There was

some great black people in this world. They were smart, they were intelligent, and they had a lot of sense. We knowed how to care. We could make syrup. We could can anything. We could cook and couldn't read a recipe. We could save our own meat. We knowed how to peel potatoes and keep them from one year to another. But you see, all of this is just mother where they come up out of slavery, when people, they had lots of things. It was a lot of smart black people, and most of the patents and things that come up out of--like the cotton gin. A black man invented that. The stoplight, a black man invented it. They had a man greasing wheels on the train, and he had a job. I don't much blame him. That axle grease, that stuff he come up with to grease that train, he invented that, because I guess he got so tired of just having to do whatever they had him doing every night with that stuff. That's what is hard to see, how these people knew so many things, yet they were uneducated people. You ever seen a broad axe?

Ortiz: Yes, ma'am.

Mitchell: I had one, and I picked it up the other day. I said, "I wonder how in the world did I ever [unclear] with this thing?"

Ortiz: It's heavy. Well, the irons were heavy.

Mitchell: Oh, yes, the iron, the real iron, they were heavy. Some of them, the gas iron was much heavier than that.

Ortiz: I never looked at a gas iron. How did that work?

Mitchell: They used to burn natural gas in it, I guess. It was a little thing, and it had a little thing you lighted, and a little blaze come out of it. But it was real heavy. Some of them weighed sixteen pounds and some weighed like--so different weights of iron according to what you were pressing.

My mother used to clean clothes, press suits. She had a cloth, and they'd dampen this cloth and they put it over here, and then she'd press this serge and stuff, just like they do when they come out of these cleaners. But she had a gas iron. You'll see some of them in an antique shop or something. It's got a little thing up in the top, and when they light it--it ain't a spark. It's a little bluish blaze like where the gas burn comes out of the back of it. All of this stuff just goes on. They don't use it anymore, but it's still around. If all of these things hadn't been invented, they never would have had what they have today. They just improved on a lot of stuff what other folks made.

Ortiz: Mrs. Mitchell, during your life, what have been the

things that have inspired you the most to keep on striving to attain your goals and all your accomplishments? What have been the things that have really pulled you through?

Mitchell: I'm self-ambitious, a lot of courage and dedication and a lot of willpower. Anything I want to do, I've always had this from a kid. I always told myself I can do this and I can do the other. So I'm self-motivated. Don't nobody have to motivate me to do anything. See, I'm a dreamer. I've got ideas and dreams and things, and if I study it long enough, I will automatically know it will work before I try it.

I don't know, I'm just ambitious, an ambitious person, and I'm not so ambitious, really, for myself. I'm a great team worker. I like to work in a lot of community things and do things to help other people, children. Like I work on this scholarship. I work because I know the disadvantage of having no education. I know the disadvantage. So anybody that is trying, I want to see them make it if they can. See, an education is something that no one can ever take from you. You can buy a house, and they can take it for taxes if they want to, or somebody can find a way to fraud you out of it. But an education, no one can take an education from you. It would have to be some disease or something. You've got to get hurt to take an education away from you. But anything else you have here, somebody can take that. Clothes, anything else, I don't care

what it is. They'll steal your car, they'll do anything. But education is something that you take with you everywhere you go.

It's like your church. Your church is in your heart, and you take it with you everywhere you go. You just go to the building to worship, but the church is in the heart. I'm saying that that's why education is really important to me, because I know once a person gets an education, I don't care how down in the dumps he gets, he has something that he can help himself with, that education. It's a lot of angles to it.

I really did have a desire to be educated, but I had a hard time because of--see, like I said, I had dyslexia, but nobody then knew anything about this. They didn't know how to help the child. They just whooped you when you couldn't get your lesson. They said you wasn't trying.

And then I had a vision problem all my life, and everything I had to have right up here. And they said, "Get your head out of the books." When I started wearing glasses, I was, what, twenty-four years old, but I should have had glasses from the time I was probably three or four. My sister and I, in '27 we exploded a dynamite cap. She lost her eye, and I got shot up pretty good, too. I guess we sort of overcome all of this and stuff.

It's a lot of things that really makes me want to--I'll tell you, I'm a dreamer. Sometimes I lay down, a lot of times I wrote a whole book. I write a beautiful story. But that's just

a story I've written in my mind, because I don't type and I don't have--I don't think it would sound, if I put it on tape, I don't think when I play it back it would sound to me like it is when I'm doing the story, you see what I'm saying? Because when you listen to your own voice, it's strange.

I really don't know what all makes me, as the folks say, tick. I don't. But I am an unusual person in some kind of ways. I don't mean no mystery, nothing, but I am unusual about a lot of things, about how I think about things and my view on things. Now, anything that I am interested in I want to learn, I can learn it. I'm a good Bible scholar. That is amazing. I'm about as good a Bible scholar as anybody that really reads, takes it and reads it like this. I acquired this. I wanted to know that, so I applied myself to it, because that was knowledge I really wanted. I wanted to have that knowledge about the Bible. But other books don't fascinate me as much as the Bible does, so that's why. I know how I got motivated into that.

I'm a good seamstress, but you see, I don't read the pattern. I look at the pattern and make it. But a lot of people have to look at it. That's where by learning a lot of things. I learn a lot of things by--well, by [unclear] and an example. I don't have to really look at the word or the letter.

I can spell anything, but I don't have no sense of pronunciation. I can name the eight parts of speech and I can give the definition to it. A lot of things I can do. But when

you say to a person, another person don't accept that of you. If you don't read or you write, it's hard to cope, I can tell you. You might know a lot of things. A lot of things I know, and I listen. Some of it you can put in words and some you can't.

I do a lot of public speaking. I go to the schools and I speak at Brinkley High School. I speak at a lot of churches. I go to conventions and a lot of things. Because early I applied myself to this, to public speaking, and see, I never was afraid.

I never was afraid to do it. But it's because I didn't have fear. Most people have fear and say, "I can't do this." Crowds excite them and stuff. It doesn't bother me.

But now, if I had had an education, I might not have been as good with this as I am without the education, because I see a lot of people who are highly educated and they lose their train of thought and they cannot capture an audience, they can't hold a subject. They can start off talking about it and then just lose it. But it's how you perceive yourself doing it, and if you don't ever put it down on paper, if you record it in your mind, then it's there.

Is there anything else you want to ask me? I think I done told you--

[End of Interview]