



Interview with William Thomas Malone

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Cotton Plant (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
William Thomas Malone
[DOB 10/30/14]

Cotton Plant, AR
Interviewed by
Doris Dixon

Doris Dixon: Mr. Malone, could you state your full name and date of birth please.

William Malone: I was born October 30, 1914. My name is William Thomas Malone.

DD: And where were you born sir?

WM: Monroe County, Arkansas, a little over a quarter of a mile east of Cotton Plant here. I imagined you passed the place as you come 17 coming this way. Or did you come around?

DD: I came out 40 this way but I think I know where you're talking about. Have you lived in Cotton Plant all of your life? How long did you live out there?

WM: Practically all of my life. I won't say all of my life because I spent about three and a half years in the Army and I went to visiting several times and stayed awhile. But most of the time I've been right here in Cotton Plant.

DD: Were your parents farmers?

WM: Sure was. My father was the treasurer of the school teachers. That was before I was born and after that he farmed.

DD: Did he own his own farm?

WM: Sure did.

DD: How many acres did he have?

WM: Fifty-four.

DD: And how did he come to hold this place?

WM: Well I'll tell you, I guess I help pay for it. I'll tell you it was there when I was born. I was born there and I don't know whether he was out of debt with it when I got big enough to work or not. Anyway I was raised out there. I went to school right across the road here, this road. See that white house sitting right over there? It was part of the campus that I went to school to.

DD: What do remember about out there? What did it look like?

WM: At that time nothing but farmers. A lot of houses out there. A lot of people and some sharecropped and some rented the land.

DD: You said there were a lot of people. Were they black and white or black or all white?

WM: Well there were some black, mixed, some black and some white, mostly black.

DD: Are there still a lot of people out there today?

WM: No, not too many out there now.

DD: What happened to them?

WM: Well, these big farmers rented all the land and drove the little farmer off the land and use tractors now in their farming.

DD: Do you still own your father's?

WM: Sure do. Of course I still pay tax.

DD: How many people lived on the farm with you?

WM: Say what?

DD: Who was in the farm house with you?

WM: Oh one of my cousins.

DD: Out there now?

WM: No he don't stay out there. I've got a renter out there. He just worked the land.

DD: I meant when you were coming up how many people? Was it just you and your parents?

WM: That's all and my brothers and sisters.

DD: Tell me something about your mother.

WM: You want to know her name or something like that? My mother's name, she was Eugenia Scott before she married and after she married she was Eugenia Scott Malone. And my father was named, they called him Joe, Joe Malone. I had so many brothers and sisters you don't know nothing about them. It was some were close and some I didn't see. What I mean is they died before I was born or when I was a baby and I don't remember them. I remember some of them and some of them I don't. Want to know how many brothers and sisters I had? Eighteen brothers

and sisters. Now that wasn't by the one woman now. It was two wives and all of them are dead now but me. I don't have a brother nor sister living.

DD: What do you remember about the house you grew up in?

WM: House I was born in was a six room house with a hall in the middle. Of course you don't know nothing about no halls. I think it was a living room, two bedrooms, kitchen and dining room. At that time they didn't have no indoor facilities. Had a, of course you don't remember about that, a pump. I guess you've seen them by going through the country. No washing machines. Pumped the water from the pump to water the cows and horses. And then they had milk cows. We'd milk the cows. One time my daddy run a dairy, small one. He used a () at that time because cars weren't available, or you wasn't able to buy one. It's been so long ago I've about forgotten just about all that happened back there then.

DD: You say your father owned a small dairy?

WM: He run a small dairy. You've never heard of (). You've seen pictures of them I guess. He run a small dairy around here. Brought milk from out there and delivered it around town here.

DD: He operated it for someone else?

WM: He owned it with several cows, six or eight milk cows.

DD: And he owned them too?

WM: That's right.

DD: How long was it operational?

WM: Three or four years.

DD: Do you know when it started or when it stopped?

WM: That's been so long because my father died in 1940. No I can't remember. That's been what, fifty-five years ago.

DD: So it was before 1940. What about your mother? What kinds of things did she do around the farm?

WM: She was just I say a housewife and garden. She raised her flower garden and her garden. A flower yard I'd say and a garden. She didn't pick no cotton or chop no cotton as I know of.

DD: The children, what kinds of chores did they have to do?

WM: Help her cleaning the house. They picked cotton and chopped cotton.

DD: What did you like about working on the farm?

WM: When I was working I liked it good. My main thing was chopping the cotton. Me and my brother, the one that's younger than I am, we chopped the cotton. The one that's older than I am, I think there's a little over two years difference in his age and mine, he plowed because we didn't have no tractor at that time. He plowed and my brother and I chopped the cotton. And we used cotton sacks to pick the cotton. You might have seen or heard your mother or grandmother or great grandmother talk about cotton sacks. You don't know nothing about them. And we used a wagon and mule to bring the cotton to the gin.

DD: What gin did you take your cotton to?

WM: I done forgot the name of it back then but later it was the farmer's gin.

DD: A group of farmer's owned it?

WM: Un-huh.

DD: Were they black or white?

WM: They was white.

DD: Were there lots of black property owners back then?

WM: Quite a few. Quite a few black owners back then. I couldn't tell you how many because it's been so long.

DD: Did they have any gins or stores or anything?

WM: Yeah it was two or three black stores here in town. I guess you've heard since you've been here of Dark Corner. At one time they had a black theater down there and a black gin down there owned by blacks. That's been so long that's about as much as I can think of right now.

DD: Let's go over it some. You said you went to school over here?

WM: I went to Cotton Plant Academy.

DD: What grades did you go there?

WM: I went to twelfth grade.

DD: Over here?

WM: Sure did.

DD: Did you finish the twelfth grade?

WM: Well I was a dropout. I lacked three months finishing. My

brother was supposed to stay at the home and take care of my mother and father. He got burnt up.

DD: There was a fire?

WM: Un-huh and that throwed me to have to quit school to take care of my mother and father.

DD: Were your parents sick?

WM: My father was sixty-five or seventy, sixty-five. My mother wasn't very old but she was a weak woman I'll say. I don't say she was that sickly but she was weak. Back in those days a woman have six or seven boys, they tell me back there then that would make a woman weak. And my mother had seven sons, no girls. Of course, he and his first wife had some girls. That would make my mother their step-mother. But they didn't know no difference because they was young and you take when you tell a child that's your mother, they don't think about step or nothing like that. They thought of my mother as their own mother. My brother, my oldest brother, that was his step-mother. One day somebody asked him, asked my brother, his name was Luther, Luther, is that your step-mother. He didn't curse a lot. I won't say what he said because it's a bad word. No, that ain't my step-mother. That's my mama. Mama done just as much for me as she did Tom. I never will forget that.

DD: So she didn't make any difference between?

WM: The step children, no they didn't make any difference. And when my mother got sick, this hospital here in Brinkley, we

carried her over to the hospital and I was working every day. My sisters knew I was working and they told me said Tom, you're working every day. Says we don't want two sick people here. Said Mama's sick in the hospital. You go home and get you some rest. You know I'd work every day and go to the hospital and stay all night and go back to work the next day. Tom, you go home and get some rest, we'll take care of Mama. And they'd stay there all night. I'd go every day. I'd go over there to see her but I'd go home and go to bed so I could go back to work the next day. Said Tom, you go home. Said Mama's sick and we don't want two sick people and they stayed there all night long with their Mama and my Mama until she died.

DD: When did she die?

WM: My mother died October 13, 1958.

DD: You said you were working every day. Where were you working at that time?

WM: Southwestern Veneer Plant about a quarter of a mile.

DD: What did you do for them?

WM: I run the clipper. I clipped veneering different lengths for them to make panelling.

DD: You said you were at the Southwestern Veneer Plant?

WM: That's right.

DD: You run the clipper?

WM: I run the clipper.

DD: You said for panelling?

WM: Clipped veneering, that's right.

DD: Was that your first job?

WM: Well, no that wasn't the first one when I first went there.

That was the last one. I helped get the logs to put in the vat. We used tongs to cut the logs on each end and I stuck, I don't know what, I forgot what they called it anyway, and bring them to the saw. And they'd saw them in different lengths and put them in a vat so they'd peel the bark off of them and then we'd put them in the machine and make veneering out of all of them, out of the logs.

DD: How many years were you at Southwestern Veneer Plant?

WM: Twenty.

DD: Twenty? Where were you before that?

WM: Plowing a mule. (Laughter)

DD: So was this your first job outside the farm?

WM: Sure was.

DD: By the time you had finished farming or were you doing both the same time or how did that work?

WM: No I wasn't farming. My brother was doing the farming at that time. They didn't need both of us out there and he was doing the farming. I'd help out when I could you know. On the weekends I didn't work on Saturdays and I'd help him on Saturdays or maybe when I got off from work if I felt like it I'd help him. I'd work from seven until four and maybe I'd have an hour or two I'd help him when I'd get off work if I wouldn't

be too tired.

DD: When did you start working at Southwestern, what year was that?

WM: 1952.

DD: And before that you were farming full time?

WM: That's right.

DD: And when you were working there you would help out on the weekends.

WM: That's right.

DD: Okay. Was there a union at Southwestern?

WM: Not when I first went there. Before it closed it had a union. I even forgot the name of it.

DD: But there was a union somewhere between 1952 and did you retire?

WM: 1972. They retired me. It went out of business.

DD: Were you a member?

WM: Sure was. I forgot the name of it.

DD: And was it hard getting a union there?

WM: Yes it was but finally we got it in. Back in those days, now don't get me wrong we call them white, I have to because I, they didn't want nothing to help the Negro out at that time. And they didn't want it at first but we finally got it. You take a union, the boss men have to abide by the union's rules too. I don't know what they do now. Back there then they did.

DD: When did you come to the town of Cotton Plant to live?

WM: When I married, my second marriage. That was in 1974 or 1975. I've been up here around ten or eleven years.

DD: So before that you were still living out?

WM: That's right.

DD: But you probably came to Cotton Plant pretty frequently, every day?

WM: Yeah, sure did.

DD: What did it look like back in those days?

WM: It was pretty good sized, a lot of stores here during those days. We had two, I think it was two banks here at one time and we had two drug stores here and two or three doctors here.

DD: Were any of those owned by blacks?

WM: Blacks owned one or two cafes here and there was one black store here at that time right here in the town.

DD: What were the gathering places? Where did people congregate or gather together?

WM: They had two or three cafes here by colored and had a place here they called the Silver Slipper.

DD: Silver Slipper?

WM: Yes, right straight on down this street. And they had a pool hall here. At one time, of course I never got to go to it because I'd have got whooped if I had of went, had a gambling house here.

DD: That was owned by white people?

WM: Colored.

DD: Was Cotton Plant a segregated town?

WM: In some ways yeah back long years ago. At one time here they didn't want the colored fellah that had a car to park on Main Street. That's been quite a few years ago.

DD: So you couldn't park your car on Main Street?

WM: At one time you sure couldn't. Wasn't very many colored had cars here. It was two or three cars here.

DD: How did people protect themselves against violence, against racial violence?

WM: Our men would fight them, whip them if they could.

Sometimes they'd get whooped and sometimes they wouldn't. But most of the colored people knew not to raise no ruckus they used to say. They didn't get into it too much.

DD: Do you remember any times when they did get into it?

WM: Oh they had one or two fights around here among the colored and white but that's been so long ago I done forgot who it was now. But they done pretty good because you take the big landowners around here they wouldn't let you do too much because they wanted their farming people to work. They couldn't put him in jail or they'd have to go up there the next morning and get them out, Sunday. Get in jail on Saturday night, get out Sunday so they could go back on the farm Monday morning to work. That's just about all I can remember.

DD: Where did you go to church?

WM: I was born a Baptist, Ash Grove Baptist Church.

DD: What was different about those services than today's services? How were they different?

WM: Wasn't too much difference. They stayed at church longer then than they do now. The preacher would preach longer. I don't know, sometimes I think the preachers, now don't get me wrong about the young preachers, some of them don't live at the place they preach. The one we've got don't live here. He just comes and stays about two or three hours and go on back home, Back there then first they'd have Sunday school, preaching service, an eleven o'clock service and night service. They don't have no night service here now. And they'd have Wednesday night prayer service back there then. Now they don't do it. They might do that in the city but they don't do it here.

DD: Yeah they do it some places.

WM: Say they do? And they got baptizing pools now. Back there then we went down, I guess you've hear of the Bowel around here. We went down and baptized down in the woods back there then. I was baptized down in the muddy Bowel. I guess they've got modern religion now. (Laughter) And back there then looks like the people was more together than they are now. Sometimes I think the youngsters of today don't give a, hush boy, don't care nothing about his next door neighbor. I don't know whether it's that way in Memphis or not. It may not be. That may just be my thoughts. And again I could be wrong in this. I believe that why the people of today is so far apart, prosperity. Sometimes

the people make more today in a week than my father did in a whole year back there then. Some make as much in a day. I imagine they get fifteen or twenty dollars an hour now. You know what I got when I was working?

DD: How much?

WM: When I first started work I got sixty-five cents. You know when I quit work how much I got?

DD: A couple of dollars?

WM: A dollar seventy-five. That was common labor now. I got the maximum when I worked on the Green Thumb awhile. Common labor then was three dollars and a quarter I believe. But up until then them twenty years I put up down there at the mill I call it I got sixty-five cents when I first started and when I quit I got a dollar and seventy-five cents. I mean when it quit me because it went out of business. I guess if I'd have got as much or however the people get now I guess I'd have had a fit. I know I would have. Of course now don't get me wrong, things are higher now. You could buy more back there then with a quarter than you can for twenty-five dollars now almost. Of course what you pay for five sticks of gum now, it's five in a package, used to get it for a nickel. Costs you a quarter or thirty-five cents now, don't it?

DD: So when you say prosperity do you mean that everybody's prospered or do you mean that the division is caused by different people's prospering more than others?

WM: Prosperity as a whole caused the people of today to (), I could be wrong, to be so far apart. Because you take some of us, black and white, get a dollar in the pocket and we don't know each other. I guess that's the way it is. I don't know where it's among the people of your age or not. It might be some that get more an hour than you, turn their back when they see you coming. They see you coming, when we get close to them they turn their head. And some you've been knowing all your life don't know you. That's been quite a while ago I went to, some girls was raised here. I don't know whether all of them had a good pair of shoes on, there was four or five of them. They turned around and went to St. Louis. Their mother carried them to St. Louis. I knew them and they knew who I was. I went to St. Louis on a visit. I saw them and, you know, people you were raised around if you see them, you know them and you want to speak to them. These girls acted like they didn't even know who I was. You know what I said to myself? I said you all need to go back to the country because the city's done ruined you. I called them city stricken. Got to the city and they got a good pair of shoes to put on and they don't know you. I knew them but after they acted like they didn't know me I didn't know them either. That's the reason I said prosperity ruined the people.

DD: When you were coming up and then later into the 1930's and 1940's and even into the 1950's people didn't have much.

WM: No they didn't have much, un-uh, sure didn't.

DD: Well how did they survive?

WM: Well, things were cheap back there then. Back at that time you could take up there at these stores and pay for it in the Fall. That's the way most of them lived. And back at one time they had, they all get food stamps now, they had coupon books that they called them back there then. With your coupon books you'd trade out of that just like you trade out of your stamp books now. And you'd go to the store and get what you wanted. If it was a big family, well according to how many times you trade, if it was a big family you'd have to go every week but if it wasn't such a large family you'd go maybe twice a month to trade. Get enough to last you two weeks or a month. And when that coupon book give out you'd get another one. And sometimes they would trade on credit they called it. They trade now on credit sometimes now I guess and pay for it payday. Back there then you if you traded on credit you'd pay for it in the Fall of the year. I mean the farmers did. Sometimes the farmers would come out with some money, sometimes they wouldn't.

DD: Why would you make some one year and not make some the next?

WM: Sometimes we'd have a drought and wouldn't make as much on the farm. When you had a drought that stayed around for two or three months cotton and corn wouldn't make as much.

DD: Could you get loans back in those days?

WM: Yeah you could get loans. Some people did. And sometimes

you could pay off that loan. Some of them would pay it off in the Fall. Sometimes they wouldn't get out of debt and would have to pay it off the next year. And if the farmer stayed on there they'd charge interest on that loan if they didn't pay it.

It didn't pay off, that you didn't pay that year, paid next year, the interest just go ahead on. They'd keep charging it on debt you owed and that you'd borrow the next year. I called it double interest.

DD: So now if you were sharecropping or renting they'd get a loan from the landowner? Is that what you mean?

WM: Yeah.

DD: What about the people who owned their own?

WM: Oh they'd have to borrow a loan.

DD: From the bank?

WM: Yeah from the bank or some of these stores would give them credit here. If they wasn't able to carry themselves some of these stores would furnish them and they'd pay the store off in the Fall of the year.

transcribed by Cathy Mann