Interview with Cora Randle Flemming

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Transcript of an Interview about Life in the Jim Crow South
Indianola (Miss.)

Interviewer: Paul Ortiz
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Ortiz: Mrs. Fleming, could you tell me when you were born and something about the community.

Flemming: I was born in 1933. The town seat was Stallo, Mississippi, but in the rural community on Chapel Hill. There were ten children born to this family, six girls and four boys, and back in those days, whenever people had a hard time, they hadn't anywhere to live, our parents, anybody's parents in the hills, would always take people in, no matter how much room you had in your house, because we only had two bedrooms for husband and wife and ten siblings, and we took a lot of people in off the street. They were sick, had sores that couldn't heal, my mother would always take them in and heal them.

We were reared in a community where we cared about others. We didn't take anything for granted. We took one day at a time. And with ten children in the household, we didn't have sufficient clothes like other young ladies had or young men had. We had to do the best we can. People would send a box from the
North, and we survived that way through our arrangements with war. But yet, we survived and learned to care for others.

**Ortiz:** Mrs. Flemming, which count was this in?

**Flemming:** Oktibbeha County. Since I've been to the Delta, I found that our life was a whole lot different in the hills than they were down here. We were raised to be independent, not dependent. We wasn't raised on the plantation. We had our own home, our own land, and that made a big difference in our upbringing and the way we feel or felt about the conditions of the Delta, because I didn't have many problems a lot of people having down here, because we never went to town where the white folks were. We didn't hardly ever go to town. My mother used to take us to town with her to peddle vegetables.

One thing has always stuck in my mind mostly about when I was a child growing up. When we went to sell these vegetables to the white people downtown, they had dogs and they never called a dog back off of anybody went to the houses to sell the vegetables to them. We run a many day from the dogs. We didn't sell any vegetables because we was afraid of the dogs, and that hurt me to today. I couldn't understand why they would let a dog chase or bite another human being. I didn't know then, because I wasn't raised up around white people. I would always grumble and complain, because I always had a big mouth, and I was grumbling and complaining. Mama said, "Just shut your
mouth. One day you'll understand." But I didn't understand then.

Like they told us my great-grandmother was raped. Well, in those days you didn't rape. You just took what you wanted from the women. My grandmother was conceived through that rape, and they always told us that it was cold. It was so cold [unclear]. He raped her in those woods. I always did--they wouldn't talk about it too much because we was young.

Ortiz: That was a white man?

Flemming: Yeah. They didn't tell us too much of that kind of stuff. We'd hear them talking. They're very protective of us, for one thing. So he raped her, and one child was born to that woman, my great-grandmother. Her name was Eliza, I believe, very pretty woman, they say. She could sit on her hair. Her hair was so long she could sit on her hair, braid it up. She was a very nice person. She gave birth to, I believe, eleven children. That one woman who was raped, later raped, she had eleven or twelve children. That made all of us come in from that rape.

We were mixed on both sides, my mother's side and my father's side. My mother's side was Irish, and my father's side was Indian and Caucasian.

Ortiz: Mrs. Flemming, did that incident happen in Oktibbeha
Flemming: Yeah, early 20th century. But we survived.

I left the hills in 1951. I went to the North. I lived in different states—Ohio, Michigan, Illinois—and I learned a lot. I didn't learn too much growing up, to be honest with you. I didn't finish high school at that time. I just finished the ninth grade. At that time, I was so [unclear] in the field, in that hot sun in the field, I married the first somebody that came along, and I left my home.

My parents moved here in the Delta in 1952, and I came back here in 1961. I had learned a lot about segregation, integration, hardship, living pretty good at times and the rest of the time living rough. I came back here in 1961, I believe, '60 or '61, and I detected so much difference in the way people were treated down here than they was in any place I ever been before. There was sharecropping, nothing but sharecropping. I didn't understand what sharecropping was till a while I'd been in the Civil Rights Movement, and I found out people work for little or nothing, pick cotton for little or nothing, from sun to sun, can to can't. I can understand that kind of stuff.

But eventually, by the grace of God I found out what it was
all about. A lot of people didn't have any place to hardly sleep that was decent, and I got involved in the Civil Rights Movement. I was living in this house here then, right here then, and I'd be complaining to my husband all the time that I couldn't buy a new dress every week. I'd be raising all kind of thing about a new dress. At that time, I loved to dress. I had got accustomed to dressing in the North. 

The Head Start program came in and the Civil Rights Movement, where I'd do door-to-door canvassing to recruit children for Head Start. I was going to different people's homes, and I looked in some of these people's houses I went into. In my household, we had the glass plates and things. Some people had died, my aunt had died and left us quite a bit of stuff. I thought everybody lived like that, you know, had the couches and pretty nice furniture, nice dishes and stuff. But I began to go in people's houses to enroll children in Head Start, and I was absolutely shocked at some of the things that I saw. That's the sixties, in the sixties. I went to their homes, and they had their beds on the floor. Some of them had shirts in them, some had rags in the bed for mattresses. Some of them ate out of tin pans and stuff, the adults and the children. I didn't know that people lived like that. 

I came home that evening and I told my husband, "You know what, John?"

He said, "What?"

I said, "As long as I live, I'll never complain again about
not having a new dress or new shoes, because I saw a lot of people today. I'm a rich woman compared to them. I live like a queen compared to those people." They didn't have anything.

**Ortiz:** Was this when you were working in Washington County Head Start?

**Flemming:** Sunflower. Later I worked in Washington. I helped to organize Sunflower, Washington, Issaquena, Bolivar. I was one of the main organizers of the federal program here, Head Start here.

We organized here and Indianola in 1965, I believe. You couldn't get a church. We had got everything already together, had the money funded through CDGM [phonetic], an organization that came through down here and organized in Mississippi all the counties around. We got the program organized, got all the children enrolled and everything for school, and come to find out we thought so sure we'd have the Head Start in Belle Grove Missionary Church [phonetic] down here, in my church, our church, family church. By them being from the South, down in Mississippi, down in the Delta, they were different from us. They're fearful of everything. I never was too fearful or anything like that. I set my mind to something to do, I'm going to do it. If I get the opportunity, I'm going to do it. So they didn't let them have the church. When you leave Sunflower County and go to Washington County in Leland, Mississippi, and
get a church over there to have the Head Start in. We transferred our children in Indianola from Sunflower County to Washington County.

**Ortiz:** They had to go all the way over.

**Flemming:** To Leland in Washington County, because they wouldn't let us have no buildings here. They were fearful, too afraid that they're going to burn that—they had burnings here anyway, so they were afraid of being burned down or something. Now I look back, I can't really blame them, because that's the way it was in those days. I can't blame them they was afraid.

**Ortiz:** Mrs. Flemming, I wonder, to go back a little bit, you talked earlier about your mother and she was a healer. Can you tell me about that and how she learned.

**Flemming:** She came from a praying set of people, a religious set of people. Her background was very religious. Just from that, it came natural with her. It came natural with her. She'd pray for you. If you were down, she could get you to walk. That's the kind of person she was.

**Ortiz:** Would she lay hands on people?

**Flemming:** I can do that, too. Yeah, she laid hands on people,
and by the grace of God, something happens to them. Yeah, she was very good. She did more taking people in, like if somebody come in. I remember we had a uncle. We called him Uncle Prince or called him Prince or something or other. Anyway, he had a lot of sores, and she would heal. She'd work with those sores, work with them and work with them, until he was healed. That's the way she was. Anybody, she didn't care who you were. You could be white or black, didn't care who you were. If somebody came by and needed her, she would go. That never did happen to the white, though. I'm just saying, if it would have happened, she would have done it.

When I was a child growing up, I was talking about this man that raped my grandmother, my great-grandmother. One old white man lived down the road from us, way down the road, and I thought he was the one did it. He'd pass by and I'd throw bricks at him.

Ortiz: You'd throw bricks at him?

Flemming: Yeah, and hide behind the tree. I thought he was the one that did it. That was the only one we ever knew that passed by there that close to us. But it wasn't him. It was somebody else had did it. My mama told me, "You stop doing that. That wasn't the right man that did it to your grandmama. You quit that." I got a good whooping, though.

They were very strict. They raised us strict. My mother
always told us, even if somebody had done something, you don't fight them, you pray for them. I told her it takes prayer too long to be answered.

**Ortiz:** Mrs. Flemming, it sounds like sharing was a really important part of your family life.

**Flemming:** It was.

**Ortiz:** Was there other people in your neighborhood--

**Flemming:** In the community, everybody acted the same way. Like if we had chopped our farm and laid by, we had to go to the next person's farm and help them out. The same with the next person. Everybody get laid by, they help the next person.

**Ortiz:** Mrs. Flemming, did your family own land?

**Flemming:** Yeah, we owned the land up there.

**Ortiz:** About how many acres did you farm?

**Flemming:** I don't know. I guess maybe about fifteen or twenty, I guess. I think it was 100-and-some acres all together with the family, everybody together there. Maybe it was twenty-five, twenty acres, somewhere around there. We had our own--a little
more, I don't know. In those days, I didn't know what that was. I never had a big part of land.

Ortiz: Mrs. Flemming, can you tell me about your father's side of the family?

Flemming: I never knew about my father's side of the people. I asked him before he died. He tried to tell me about his people, who his people were, and I think that they got their land and stuff through the white man. That was our great-grandfather. I think he sold it to him for a little or nothing, like $5.00 an acre. Really just wanted to give it to him, let him know what he was doing, it gave it through like a small amount of cash for the land.

They were all very independent. They all worked. Some was smarter and had more than others, because they worked harder, had more children to work. We didn't have to work that hard, because my daddy wouldn't make us work that hard. He didn't make us work that hard. He was kind of on the sleepyhead side. But my mother, she was the splint of our household. She was the backbone of the household, of our family. My mother, she taught school for a long time. My mother, she was very smart and brilliant, but he didn't finish school, but the principal and everything from the school was sending him to work the problem from the school. He was very smart, but he just didn't get a degree behind it.
Ortiz: Mrs. Flemming, did other stories about your ancestors pass down to you about their struggles and where they had come from?

Flemming: Mm-hmm, all of them. My daddy, on his side, they never had it too tough, not to my knowledge. They always had everything. Like when the summertime come, after the winter is over, in the spring of the year, you used up all the food from the summer in the winter months. There's always somebody around to help the other one out. I never went hungry. I never went barefeet unless I wanted to. I never did go without any clothes. It might have been too big or too long, but I had clothes on my back. We all did.

Ortiz: Were other children in the community less fortunate, Mrs. Flemming?

Flemming: Some, uh-huh, and some much more fortunate than we were. I had a cousin, a lot of time her father—well, he was kind of rich, I reckon. I wore her clothes many a day. She would get her a dress. He'd go buy her them nice chiffon dresses, blue nd white. She'd be dressed in blue and white, the blue-and-white shoes, bag, and everything to match, and she'd wear it one time and give it to me. It would be secondhand, I know it would be hers, but I was proud to have it. That was a
little hurtful during those days, thinking back on it now. But I realized, too, my family didn't have it. They didn't have it. If they'd have had it, they would have given it to me, too. But they just didn't have it.

Ortiz: Mrs. Flemming, were there people in the neighborhood or community that didn't take part in the sharing, that shared less than others?

Flemming: Not that I know of, because those that had it, they just helped the ones didn't have. My cousin, her father, he and my mother were first cousins, so that made him always would look out for the family, our family as well. My father's side, too. They all helped each other out, all of them did. My daddy was always kind of slow. My mother was pushing him all the time. But he made it. He lived longer than she did. She had the burden on her shoulders trying to take care of everybody, and him, too, sometimes.

Ortiz: Mrs. Flemming, when you were growing up, did your parents use signs to plant by?

Flemming: Yeah. I do it, too, today.

Ortiz: What are the kinds of signs your parents passed down?
Flemming: It's the way the moon. The moon would be on full, first quarter, second quarter. You don't plant on the full moon or dark of the moon. You plant when everything's growing.

Ortiz: Okay. You plant when the moon is getting bigger.

Flemming: Right, yeah. When it's a full moon, you don't plant. When it's on dark moon, you don't plant on dark moon. You plant different things different times. You have a sign for the top of the ground and have a sign for under the ground, like potatoes and stuff like that. Use the almanac. It's kind of hard to remember. I get the almanac and I can tell you exactly what to plant and day to plant on. You plant when the moon's in Scorpio, Cancer. You don't plant in Gemini. It's a barren sign. You don't plant in Sagittarius, I think it is, or Leo. You don't plant in those signs. You plant in Cancer, Libra, Pisces, Scorpio, Aires today.

Ortiz: I'm Pisces, so that's a good planting.

Flemming: Yeah. It's not as fruitful as others, but it's a good sign. My sign is completely barren. That's in Gemini, the twins. Don't plant nothing during that time. Get rid of weeds on some signs.

Ortiz: Were there examples, Mrs. Flemming, of people that
didn't use the correct signs and their crops kind of messed up?

**Flemming:** Mm-hmm, I imagine so. I did one time. I didn't know till I had planted on [unclear] day. A lot of other folks had done that, too, planted on a bad sign and the crops didn't do anything. I planted on [unclear] day. I had beans running everywhere, prettiest beans you ever seen, green as they could be. Nothing but blooms. Everything that came on it fell off. So I don't plant [unclear]. I never tried that again. Never guessed it.

On my mother's side, they were mostly educated people on my mother's side. They taught school down through all of them. Uncles and fathers and things taught school. They were great church workers and stuff like that. They're the ones that had the cars and things. I don't have no car.

**Ortiz:** Mrs. Flemming, I have to ask you this question. Since I've been an adult, I've heard people talk about something that people would do to try to ward off storms, and it had to do with planting an ax. Have you heard about that?

**Flemming:** I heard that, too. I seen my mother do that. My father, too. Which way the storm was coming, they'd stick the ax in the ground to split the storm. If it come from the south, they would face the south and stick an ax in the ground to split it. In recent years, I seen them use the Bible, the 91st Psalm,
the first two verses of the 91st Psalm.

**Ortiz:** Now, I've heard about that being done in the Delta, but that was done in the hills?

**Flemming:** Mm-hmm, in the hills, too, uh-huh, yeah. It's kind of tradition. But they don't do that ax too much anymore, I don't guess. Most folks use that 91st Psalm and the 17th chapter of Isaiah.

And that 91st Psalm works, too. I was at my window one day about two years ago. There was a tornado coming. My window was up in the room in there, so I went to let the window down and close the curtain. That wind got in that window and got that curtain and twisted that curtain around. All I could think of was the 91st Psalm. I got that Bible, opened that Bible, whoosh.

**Ortiz:** It was gone.

**Flemming:** Just like that. It went around the house and cut the top out of the tree around there. Sure did, it cleared out. I couldn't get that Bible opened up fast enough. I was scuffling to get that Bible, get that window, too, because that thing had my arm twisted in that thing, too.

**Ortiz:** Like the window shade?
Flemming: Yeah, uh-huh, the curtain, because the window was up. It was just that strong.

Ortiz: That was when it was really blowing.

Flemming: Yeah, uh-huh. That was about two years ago.

Ortiz: I see you have your Bible open.

Flemming: Yeah, I keep it there. I hear them storms coming, I keep that Bible open all the time in here.

Ortiz: What is the special significance of the 91st Psalm for that?

Flemming: It's protection, the first and second verse [unclear].

Ortiz: The first and second verse?

Flemming: Mm-hmm.

Ortiz: "He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. "I will say of the Lord, He is my refuge and my fortress;
my God; in him will I trust."

**Flemming:** That's it. Nothing come now can harm you.

**Ortiz:** I'm less familiar with the 17th chapter of Isaiah, but that has kind of the same--

**Flemming:** I am, too. I always use the 91st. I have read the 17th sometimes, but I learned about that one.

**Ortiz:** What you do is, you just say those aloud and you have the Bible with you?

**Flemming:** You memorize it and say it, but I usually read it. I open it to that. It's open and let it lay there.

**Ortiz:** That is kind of now in place of the ax.

**Flemming:** Right, revert to the 91st Psalm.

**Ortiz:** Did your mother ever tell you, Mrs. Flemming, about the origins of the ax, of people using the ax?

**Flemming:** The only thing she would say was it split the storm. If a storm was coming, it was split and it would go around you. It might have done something in the hill. We had a lot of
storms in the hill.

They say one time when my mother was carrying me they had a storm that year and it blew the house up a block, and they say I was a praying child when I was growing up, because she was praying, she prayed real hard. It was a stormy year that year.

When I was a little bitty child, I was around there praying and singing the spiritual songs and things. I guess she marked me with that. I'm still that way sometimes, not as I used to be.

Ortiz: Did she learn how to use the ax from her mother?

Flemming: Her mother, her ancestors, yeah, her father and stuff. I think a lot of it might have come from the Indians, too, because we had Indian in our family, too. They believed in stuff like that. It might have come down through the generations, you know. I guess every generation it became less significant, I guess.

Back in those days, we had cattle and stuff. We raised chickens, we raised cows and hogs, we raised turkeys and guineas. Whatever folks use on a farm, we raised them. Not the goats and the sheep. We never had no sheep and goats. We farmed, raised cotton, corn, cane for your syrup, make your syrup from, grind our own meal.

Ortiz: Did your family market your own crops?
Flemming: Yeah.

Ortiz: Mrs. Flemming, what was your first experience with segregation, the first time you really--

Flemming: Realized about segregation? I guess about those dogs, wouldn't get the dogs off of us. I guess the first time I really realized there was something wrong somewhere, people could stand and see a dog eat you up and don't get him off of you.

Ortiz: And it was their dog.

Flemming: Yeah. I guess the first time I really experienced real segregation, it was down here in the Delta in the sixties. Or I can go back farther than that, because in '55 Emmett Till [phonetic] was killed, I believe. I wasn't here at that time. I was in the North. But I learned a lot through reading the papers and the news just how bitter people really could be towards one another. That's when I really began to understand about the evils of segregation and the hatred that go along with it.

It's a strange thing, I don't know. I used to hate that kind, hate people, but somehow I changed. The Lord changed me. He changed me. We're all human beings, we're all God's children, and I can't see my Maker hating you or anybody else.
I can dislike your ways, but I can love you still. I have learned how to put that stuff behind me.

**Ortiz:** Back in those days, you really--

**Flemming:** I really hated, I really did.

**Ortiz:** Did you decide to move North, Mrs. Flemming, to escape the Southern--

**Flemming:** Really to escape that field. That was my only thought in those days.

**Ortiz:** The fear?

**Flemming:** The field, the field, chopping that cotton and corn and stuff. That was my only thing at that particular time.

When I came back here to live--see, I had been there where everything was, I wouldn't say perfect, but it was better than it was here in the North.

**Ortiz:** Did you say where you went?

**Flemming:** Chicago, then Detroit; Cleveland, Ohio; Akron, Ohio; Toledo, Ohio; Dayton, Ohio. But I learned a lot. When I came back here, it was such a difference here.
I was working for a lady here one time, domestic work, and the girl, she gave her goddaughter $400. She said, "Elaine."

She said, "Yes, ma'am."

She said, "Let Cora see that $100 bill, because she's never seen that before."

I said, "Honey, where I came from, we made plenty money. That $400 ain't a damn thing to me, don't mean a damn thing."

[Unclear.] I forgot where I was. I got mad. "It don't mean a damn thing to me."

So later on, that same woman--now, I don't mind today helping anybody do anything. This particular day she brought some clothes over to this woman's house that I worked for, wanted her to wash them, wanted me to wash them for her and fold them. I said, "Sure, I'll do it for you."

When she came to get her clothes that evening, I didn't want her to give me anything, but she handed me a dime.

Ortiz: A dime? In 1961?

Flemming: '64. A dime. I said, "Honey, you take that dime and go buy you a cup of coffee. You need it. All the money you got, you need that dime. Go buy you a cup of coffee. You need it. I don't."

Ortiz: So she was trying to kind of insult you.
Flemming: Yeah, insult me. Well, she did, but I kind of got her, though. She looked out at me and she was wondering, "Who the hell does she think she is, talking to me like that?" But see, she didn't know who I was, either. I would have knocked her out. I would probably have been in prison today. I would have knocked her out.

Ortiz: Were there other ways that employers would try to kind of belittle you or try to put themselves on top?

Flemming: Yeah. One day, people came from up in the hills to visit their sister down here in the Delta. When they came in, everybody spoke and shook my hand, because they treated me like I was family, the people I worked with, like I was family.

But this man came in there. Mr. Willie said, "This is Cora. Meet her."

He looked at me and turned his head, like he didn't see me.

I said, "Okay."

So they were getting ready to have coffee. I fixed everybody a cup of coffee. I didn't give him a drop. He looked around at me. Mr. Willie knew what was happening. "I'll give you some coffee." He didn't say nothing to me, because he knew I was going to raise some things.

Ortiz: You were angry.
**Flemming:**  Right. You don't do me like I'm nothing but dirt. Don't do that to me. I'm going to treat you with all the respect there is. Regardless, I'm going to treat you nice. You hurt me, [unclear] your house, I'm still going to treat you right. That's my job. Do my job there.

**Ortiz:**  Mrs. Flemming, were there other ways that you could assert your dignity working in the white people's house, other ways that you could stand up?

**Flemming:**  Mm-hmm. Many times things would come on television, like I remember one year the summit. They had the summit somewhere overseas, and they got to fighting. The white, black, and everybody was fighting each other. I was in the house. I forgot where I was again. I said, "Tear their white ass up."

That woman just looked at me. She started to laughing. I at there and laughed myself. She said, "Cora, you're getting [unclear]."

I said, "I sure do. They're fighting them folks for nothing."

**Ortiz:**  That was the summit?

**Flemming:**  I think it must have been about '63, I believe.

**Ortiz:**  Was that a sport?
Flemming: No, no. That was one of these big United Nations meet together. I think it was a summit. I think they called it a summit. They had a summit that year. All of them met together, like the Russians and the Japanese and Germans and everybody met, had this big meeting. They have one every year, I think, but I haven't seen them fight them folks since that time. They were sure fighting, just going to town, tear them up, knock them out. [Unclear.]

Ortiz: So there were ways you could--

Flemming: Yeah, express yourself.

Ortiz: Were there other ways?

Flemming: No. A lot of time we got to talking about different things, and then sometimes—yeah, uh-huh, because this same family, they didn't want to be known that they did these things, because they'd probably still be hurt today from it. They'd go to the library. We didn't have a library to go to. So this lady got this book from the library. She checked it out for me, all about the race, race relations and how they had killed people, the black people, and how they had murdered and all that kind of stuff. She let me read that book, and I discussed that with her.
And then like she would tell me a lot of things. She would tell me, she told me never to mention it, because they would kill her, too, about how many rich millionaires we had, black people. We didn't know that then. We thought all black folks were about the same. We had a lot of millionaire black folks. We just didn't know it. As a matter of fact, a lot of my people, they say, are millionaires down in Texas, but I don't know them, very close kin people, like first cousins, stuff like that. We don't know them, though. We never met them. I think my sister met some of them this year in July down to a family reunion, and a lot of them were there, in Chicago.

**Ortiz:** Mrs. Flemming, when you moved back to the Delta--

[Begin Tape 1, Side 2]

**Flemming:** I lived in the house right down the street here at 507 Chandler Street. I lived right down here next to my mother at 404 Chandler Street, and then I moved in this house in 1964.

**Ortiz:** Has this area always been, on this side of the tracks has this always been the black neighborhoods?

**Flemming:** Yeah. We had some whites. They've all moved the other side of the railroad track now, because blacks are moving all back in that area over in there where it wasn't nothing but
whites. Now they're moving all across town. They moved everywhere now. The blacks ain't got no special place to live anymore. They're moving everywhere.

I never could understand that, though, and it's still kind of a mystery to me, because I remember times when people had a little money, and they couldn't buy anything. They couldn't do anything. Now since the worse time get, the more they progress. You ever notice that? The tougher times get with the black race of people, the more they progress. They see them moving up. They knock you down here, they move somewhere else. I guess the time is changing. The time is right for it. I know that God said that day would come, but it's still seems like a mystery to me, because everything you get, they take it from you. You try to accumulate. Like the federal programs and stuff. They take that from you. But yet they survive. I see them buying new cars. They just cut off their welfare. They're doing everything to them, they're yet surviving. I don't know.

**Ortiz:** Mrs. Flemming, one more question about your childhood, and then we can move to your adult life in Indianola. Could you tell me about the schools that you went to and what kind of experience you had.

**Flemming:** The rural schools, the one-room schoolhouses. They had one or two teachers, maybe two teachers in the classroom. Maybe they had 150 kids and maybe two teachers. They might
separate, divide that classroom, that one big room into two classrooms. We sat on benches. But they were times we learned. We'd go to school maybe eight, six months. We'd get out of school and go to the field and gather the crops. Then we'd go back to school when the crops and things were gathered, like a split session.

We had from pre-primer through eighth grade. To us at that time, it was good, because we didn't know anything different from that. But then when we went to high school, I found a lot of things were different from the rural community schools.

**Ortiz:** Your high school was in a different county?

**Flemming:** The same county, Oktibbeha County, but the high school was downtown in the city of Starkville, but the rural was out in the rural community, in the country part.

A lot of kids in those days, those young women and men, they finished high school and made something of themselves, they really did. I had a cousin. He finished at Jackson State, and I love him today. He's dead, but I love him today, because when he would come back to rural community, the church where we lived, where we were raised, he never came back there acting like he was Mister High and Mighty. He always dealt on everybody's level. If he said something and he didn't think you knew the meaning of it, he would break it down for you. I remember he used to use the word incomprehensible a lot. I
remember that. He told what it was, what he meant by that. I love him for that today, because he took time to instruct and teach, as he did everything else.

He had a brother who was different from him. When this other one, Lucius Williams, [unclear]. He died at Mississippi State. He was transferred from New York back to Mississippi State, Lucius Williams. He was a great teacher. He had, I think, a doctor degree, doctoral degree. He had about three B.S. He did real well. He was a smart man. He died. His brain I guess [unclear], cancer of the brain. He was very, very smart.

Ortiz: Mrs. Flemming, what was the name of your high school?

Flemming: OCTS, Oktibbeha County Training School. OCTS, Oktibbeha County Training School.

Ortiz: Mrs. Flemming, why did you decide to move back to Mississippi?

Flemming: When my mother got sick. I don't know, just something forced me to come back here. I came here to visit in 1960, and I went back to Chicago and packed my clothes and sold my stuff I had there, and I headed back to Mississippi. After I got back, my mother got sick. My mother always said the Lord sent me back here because he knew she was going to get down.
She got sick in '64 and she died in '64, and I was here during her illness and when she passed I was here, and I've been here ever since.

Ortiz: Now, in '64, you were also working, doing domestic work.

Flemming: Yeah.

Ortiz: How did you get involved in the local civil rights struggle?

Flemming: They had several meetings here. My mother was sick during that time, and we saw some of the people coming down the street, the civil rights workers coming down the street toward my mother. I [unclear]. And so I said, "Look."

My mother said, "All you need to be going to those meetings."

I said, "Ma'am?"

She said, "You heard me. I said all you need to be going to those meetings."

I said, "Why do you say that?"

She said, "Because there's so much that you all need to know that you don't know. You have to mix with people and learn the ways of life and learn how things are going. You see, I'm sitting here sick today. My pastor hasn't been to see me. Very few of the church folks come by to see me. You've got to learn
how to do things to help yourself, because when you're down, nobody cares anything about you."

So I went to a meeting that night. I got there, and I had a big time at that meeting. I had to make a speech that night.

Ortiz: At your first meeting? Where was it at? Where was the meeting at?

Flemming: On the Baptist school grounds. They burned that building down. So I made a speech at that building that night, and that meeting led to another meeting. They kept on meeting. I kept on going.

Ortiz: What did you say when you got up and spoke?

Flemming: I would tell them about the sharecropping and all the things they were going through down here and you could do better. I said you can learn about things. You can do better for yourself. I said, "Don't stoop to no man. Don't bow to anybody. Treat everybody right, but yet you be a man. Stand on your own two feet." The things that Mr. Farrakhan is talking about now, I talked that back in the early sixties, but it's just now coming to pass. It wasn't time for it then, but it's time for it, it's getting ready for it now.

I was talking about teaching the children, the boys, the young men, the daughters and things, tell the mother how to
raise her children, what it's going to take in this life to make them be strong. You've got to be firm with them. Don't beat them to death, but be firm, make them obey you, make them mind you. Don't let the child make you mind him, but you make the child mind you, because you're the adult.

I was telling the men to take time with their boys, the young men. Teach them things, do things with them, play ball with them, go hunting with them, do a lot of things with the children that you don't do. Take time with the children. Teach them things. They need to know these things, know you care. Take time to talk to them, teach them things about life and about adult life, about the young women they go out with and how they protect those young women from getting these babies and stuff, all this stuff. But they laughed at me then. I said, "The day is going to come you're going to wish you had listened."

And today, I can be in church sometimes right now. I was in church about five or six years ago out on the floor testifying, and the Almighty God took my thoughts completely from me, what I was talking about, and put his words in my mouth. Tell these parents to make these children obey them. A lot of killing, a lot of blood going to be running in the street. That ain't going to happen that you'll be surprised. Your children will be the one doing it. And sure enough, it wasn't two weeks before blood begin to run everywhere, killing one another in the street.
Ortiz: What happened?

Flemming: They got to killing each other, killing each other on the street, just shooting people down. That's somebody crazy. Just take time to teach them these things. It's important. Not how to go out there and steal. Don't teach them those things, how to rob somebody. They do wrong, do what you're supposed to do. Tighten a belt up on them. It ain't going to kill them. You save them. You can love your children to life and you can love them to death. If you love them to life, you chastise them. You love them to life then. You let them do what they want to do, you love them to death then, because death is sure to come if you don't chastise them and make them do right. You can love them to life and you can love them to death. That's where it's at.

Ortiz: Mrs. Flemming, you said the first meeting you got up and you made a rousing speech.

Flemming: Yeah.

Ortiz: Did you know people there who were at the meeting?

Flemming: I knew some of them there, uh-huh. I knew some of them there, but they didn't know me too well. I guess I'd
gotten here about three years earlier and I hadn't done anything in the community much because of the ills of my mother. But they learned me right quick. They found out right quick what I stood for. I learned how to rouse them up. I know how to rouse them up. I don't know, having to work in the private homes, bringing home $20 a week, seven days a week.

Ortiz: Is that what you were making?

Flemming: Mm-hmm, $15 a week, and some were making less than that. I knew how to rouse them up. How many quarts of milk can you buy for your children with $7 a week or $15 a week, how many pair of shoes they have, how many stockings could they buy or socks could they buy. You look at that $15, you ain't got nothing. But that's what you work for, earn it, but look to higher grounds. While you do that, that little money, keep looking for something better. Test yourself. Test your mind, your skills, your ability, things you can do to help yourself and help others in the community around you.

Ortiz: So Mrs. Flemming, part of your message was economic, like self-help.

Flemming: Right.

Ortiz: What kinds of movement activities did you get involved
in at first, in addition to your speaking at meetings.

**Flemming:** The kind of things we did? We marched with CORE folk, SNCC. We had a lot of involvement with different things in the community. Some went to jail. I didn't go to jail, but I helped get them out. We fixed food for those that were marching. Some of those marching, we fixed food for them. Bought pop and stuff and food for them to eat on a picket line somewhere. So we might have done all but going to jail, but some of it had to be outside. Everybody couldn't go to jail, so I tried to be one that didn't go to jail. [Laughter] A lot of people worked. A lot of people helped. Are you going to talk to Mrs. Giles? They had a great hand in everything, too, Mr. and Mrs. Giles, and a lot of other people. Reverend Porter.

**Ortiz:** Reverend Porter?

**Flemming:** Uh-huh. He's deceased now. We had a lot of elderly people that's dead that participated real well in everything. We had people from Inverness, like Mrs. Hood, Mr. Jimmy Herron [phonetic], killed in a tornado in '71. He was very active in the community. He was the chairman of our board. Mr. Damion Berry [phonetic] from Moorhead. Mrs. Eura Bowie. Mr. Berry's dead. Mrs. Eura Bowie's alive. Mrs. Fuller, she's dead, from Moorhead. A lot of people from Moorhead. And from Ruleville, Fanny Lou Hammer [phonetic]. They had Mrs. Dukes from
Ruleville, Mrs. Davis from Ruleville, Ruby Davis from Ruleville. We had Ora Dawson, Ruby Dawson, younger people. All those people are from Ruleville. They did a good job. Many others. I don't want to slight anybody. We had many others that was involved.

Ortiz: So there were a lot of local people.

Flemming: Right. Charles Maclorn [phonetic]. All those people were very active.

Ortiz: I'll talk to him tomorrow.

Flemming: He was very good.

Ortiz: Mrs. Flemming, in the beginning of the struggle here, the local struggle, what were the main hopes, goals, and aspirations?

Flemming: The main goal for me was to make tomorrow a better day for our people, and my goal was to try to see it happening, to do what I could to make sure. If I didn't finish it, I would have started it. Just give them food for thought and let them try to meet on common ground.

I see a lot of things that I hoped for come to pass. There's a lot of jobs that they didn't have. Of course, they
don't do quite as I think they should do, because once we get
the job, we forget about from whence we came. We get the jobs.

They forget about the stepping stone they went over to get
there, who helped them make the job they have. If it hadn't
been for some of us in the movement, they wouldn't even have
integrated schools yet, wouldn't have anybody working in the
bank and the gas and light place, none of those places. Our
struggles came, became our struggles. A lot of those that have
the positions in the community now didn't do anything for it.
They just stepped in and took over, you know. But that's all
right, too. They're moving up. But when they move up, don't
forget about the ones that they're passing by. Don't ever
forget about them, because they're the ones that caused you to
be there. That's my main thing. I just don't appreciate them
looking down on some people, because none of us is any better
than the other one. May live a little different because the
Lord has blessed us a little different, but you don't take your
blessing and criticize others with it, because he'll take it
from you that he give it to you.

**Ortiz:** Mrs. Flemming, did you and your family face dangers from
participating?

**Flemming:** Oh, yes, yes, yes, yes. That window there was shot
out.
Ortiz: Right here, this picture window?

Flemming: Yeah.

Ortiz: Was shot out.

Flemming: My bedroom window was shot out twice. People had laid in the ditch up there and watched the house. [Unclear] with different cans down the street over there. There's tall grass out there now. It was a cotton field, though. People been caught there laying in the grass trying to get to my house to do something to us. They shot in my house one time, and the glass flew all over my bed, and I was in the bed in there. It was all over the bed in there. And one time we were down at a civil rights meeting downtown, and they made me walk the chalk line, because they ain't never seen nobody black act like I act before.

Ortiz: Chalk line?

Flemming: Yeah. I had to walk the--they call it the drunk line.

Ortiz: Oh, the police pulled you over.

Flemming: Yeah. We were leaving the meeting, and they made me
walk the line, because they'd never seen a black woman acting like I act.

**Ortiz:** Assertive.

**Flemming:** Right, yeah.

**Ortiz:** So you questioned their authority.

**Flemming:** Yeah. Sure did, down at the big meeting. They had I guess about 200 folks there that night down at city hall. They couldn't stand that, no [unclear] policeman. I don't know how many there were. That man had me walk that line that night. Oh, I was so scared. I'm telling you, I was so scared. I didn't get scared until after everything was over, because I began to realize how they do people. They take you out and kill you like that. They'll murder you.

When the police stopped me, you wouldn't believe all those folks left that building, left me with those police uptown. All of them left me right downtown with the police, acted like they didn't see me over there. The police had me over there cornered off.

I was so disgusted. We left that meeting downtown, went to the church down here to Mount Carmel, and Wallace Dabbs, the newspaper reporter, followed us down to the meeting after I got away from them from downtown. I came on downtown to the
meeting, and they all got together and saying we should have a meeting. They were talking, discussing, everything, singing "We Shall Overcome." And Wally Dabbs oh, that man made me so mad. He tried to grab my hand and "We Shall Overcome." He made the mistake of calling me Cora.

Ortiz: The reporter?

Flemming: Uh-huh, called me Cora. They didn't call black folk Mister and Misses in those days. I said, "You don't address me as Cora. To you, I'm either Mrs. Flemming or don't call my name at all. I'm not your brother or your sister. I'm not related to you. I'm not that familiar with you. For me to you, I am Mrs. Flemming."

"All right."

"Now you address me 'Yes, ma'am' and 'No, ma'am,' like we do you all, 'Yes, ma'am' and 'No, ma'am."

He had it in the paper the next day. From that day on, people been called Mister and Misses in this town ever since, black folk, from that night on.

Ortiz: So Mrs. Flemming, that was a turning point?

Flemming: Right.

Ortiz: In '65.
Flemming: Right, in '65.

Ortiz: You kind of forced that through the newspaper.

Flemming: Right. "From this day on, I'm Mrs. Flemming to you, and 'Yes, ma'am' and 'No, ma'am,' just like we do you all. He put it in the paper.

Ortiz: Mrs. Flemming?

Flemming: Uh-huh. They carried that message in the paper. "I'm not kin to you. I'm not that familiar with you."

Ortiz: Oh, he actually printed that part, too?

Flemming: Yeah. He printed all of it. I've got a record of it somewhere now, in the Indianola Times.

Ortiz: What was his name?

Flemming: Wallace Dabbs, D-A-B-B-S, Dabbs. He was singing "We Shall Overcome." He was down at it, too. I got so mad at that man.

Ortiz: Mrs. Flemming, during that dangerous time, did you and
your family or other families have to arm themselves to defend their houses?

**Flemming:** We always did that, because we knew it was dangerous. At that time, we had white people staying in my house, too.

**Ortiz:** Civil rights workers?

**Flemming:** Yeah. Frank Glover, he was a very nice person. He worked with me and taught me a lot of stuff about the programs and stuff that we were involved in.

**Ortiz:** So you were armed?

**Flemming:** Right. We were armed, yeah. [Laughter] God have mercy.

**Ortiz:** If you don't mind me asking, what did you use to arm yourself against them? Did you have a shotgun?

**Flemming:** Shotgun, a pistol, and everything.

**Ortiz:** Did that some of the people that came from outside who were talking about the nonviolence, did you all ever kind of clash with them or, you know, just have kind of minor disagreements?
Flemming:  We had some disagreements, but I always told them like this, "If you can stand to be slapped on one side and turn the other cheek, more power to you. But you can't take it, more power to you. You can't take being slapped in the head, don't take it, but be sure you've got somebody to cover you, because they'll run off and leave you." I always had them laughing when I said they'll run off and leave you in a minute and think nothing of it. They'll leave you.

Ortiz:  Mrs. Flemming, there were other families here. I talked a little bit to--who I talked to here. But there was a sense that if you lived here, you had to stay here all year round. You didn't have the luxury of coming here and leaving. If you had to live here, you had to defend yourself.

Flemming:  Yeah, that's true. And I think most other people came in, they had some kind of something to defend themselves. Well, I don't know too many of them that had anything. The one that came, I don't think they had too much anything. But maybe SNCC might have had something. SNCC probably had something. I don't know about COFO. I don't believe they had anything too much. Too many of them got beat up. Too many of them got killed.

Ortiz:  It must have been real difficult, Mrs. Flemming, in this
town being the center of the White Citizens Council. What was that like? You were really in kind of the belly of the beast, in a way.

Flemming: It was tough. We were fighting against the chief of police. You've got some stuff out in a book written by Polly Green, *The Devil Has Slippery Shoes*. Like I say, I learned that stuff we were going through. I done forgot it. It comes back in bits and pieces.

Ortiz: That was written in that book?

Flemming: Yeah. A lot of stuff in that book about the movement in those days. And look like on it now, it is really fearful, you know, scary. Then all the time we had the federal programs first came in here, I wrote a proposal for the program and submitted it to the Sunflower County Progress, the CAP [Community Action Programs] agency to be funded. Then I had to write a proposal. They took my proposal and re-copied it and submitted it as their own. They still submitted ours, but they had cut our budget down to little or nothing, and they got our big budget, got our budget, got the whole thing we had.

Ortiz: These were the whites?

Flemming: These were black, but his superior was white.
Ortiz: School board?

Flemming: Uh-huh, police department. He was on the police department.

That's one of the things I always try to teach the black people. It's a hard job, though. Do for themselves. It's your black children they're teaching. It's your black children they're going to be telling them what to do, training them what to do, how to be still a little picking in it, you know, don't have a mind of your own. Use your own mind. Develop your own children, their own mind. Don't let them tell you what to do, how to live your life. You've got a life of your own. Be independent. Be progressive in your own thoughts. And when you act that way, you come out successful. Don't be dependent on anybody else's mind. Develop your own.

I can do it. I did it back in those days. Something I had never lived in my life, all this segregated stuff. I never learned that kind of stuff. Up in the hills I wasn't. But I came down here, and I saw how different it was, and I couldn't see myself living that kind of life anywhere I go. Ask you can I go to the store. No, no, [unclear].

My daddy said, "You're going to get yourself killed, girl."

I said, "Daddy, I'd rather die trying to do for myself than die doing something for somebody else."
Ortiz: Mrs. Flemming, what was the process that led you into working at Head Start?

Flemming: We had been in the Civil Rights Movement, and they had, I guess they were checking out in those days who had leadership ability. Now, these were some black people from COFO, I think some from SNCC, and different areas, and they decided, when they heard about this program, the Head Start coming through, through the CGM project, and they came and got me, Mrs. Giles, Miss Anna Mae King, and two other people. We got two more people to start the committee off.

During the time we were trying to organize, get organized in this area, we had a big meeting down in Edwards, Mississippi. About 2,000 to 5,000 people there at that meeting. They had to have a chairman of the meeting, that big meeting. They had about five or six different nominees to chair the meeting. When it ended up, I had to chair that meeting. It scared me to death. I had never been in no kind of stuff like that before in my life. I got up and chaired the meeting. I think I did real good. That meeting must have been done pretty good, because they had a tape of it they used in different universities.

Ortiz: For leadership?

Flemming: Yeah, leadership from Edwards, Mississippi, they had in different universities, that speech that I made at chairing
that meeting. A lot of excerpts from that meeting came out in this thing.

**Ortiz:** Mrs. Flemming, were you holding that with the federal government officials?

**Flemming:** Yeah, and the local. One thing I always remember, it was really getting down at that meeting. I didn't know I could talk that much, either. And I stuttered a lot. I have a speech handicap. But I didn't know I could talk that much, either. You know, when I was starting to get kind of dry, kind of dull, like things wasn't as happy as it had been, I'd always think of some funny joke to tell. That would bring them back into the realm of the meeting.

I did tell them, one time in Chicago I had to get up in the church. They called me to pray in the choir rehearsal, and I said I couldn't think of my prayer to save my life. The only thing I could say was, "Our Father, which art in heaven." I couldn't think of nothing else for nothing. I just stood there like I was going crazy. I couldn't think of nothing to say. Those folks would kill themselves laughing. That took their mind off of the meeting, getting bored, you know, give them something to laugh about. I couldn't think of another word. As well as I know my prayer, I couldn't say another word. That made them chuckle for a while. I jumped back into the meeting. I made speeches in Washington, D.C.
Ortiz: That was when Head Start really got off the ground.

Flemming: Right, first got started, uh-huh.

Ortiz: Mrs. Flemming, do you remember the night that the buildings around here were burned down?

Flemming: Yeah. By the time we got looking at one spot, another would break out somewhere else. That really put everybody on their P's and Q's then. Dudley Wilder's [phonetic] house was burned. You heard about is house, didn't you?

Ortiz: Whose house?

Flemming: Dudley Wilder. Mrs. Magruder's house was bombed and burned. That's Bernice White's people. And Mrs. Giles' house was burned.

Ortiz: That all happened in one night?

Flemming: Uh-huh. That was a terrifying night that night.

Ortiz: What as the initial reaction of the black community?

Flemming: Everybody was upset, as usual, and everybody did
quite a bit of talk that night about what had happened and what they were going to do and all that kind of stuff. They didn't do anything right then, but a little later on they began to— they got as bad as the white folks. They began to snoop around the bombed folks' houses, too, and burn up stuff, too. They got like the white folks got. They got slick, too, and started burning folks' stuff up, too.

Ortiz: To kind of get even.

Flemming: Right, yeah. So that soon [unclear]. After they started burning stuff, then the white folks stopped burning. They ain't burned no more since then that I know anything about. They kind of got back even. They were watching the black folks then, see what they were going to do. Instead of us watching them, they were watching us then.

Ortiz: So it sounds like, I men, the whites were hoping that they would just cause everyone to fear.

Flemming: Right. There's plenty fear. There's a lot of fear. I think a lot of old folks still fear now. We're very fearful now. It's not like it used to be. Things are better.

Ortiz: It kind of backfired.
**Flemming:** Yeah. Things are better now to some degree. One thing, all of them try to get along with each other. That's good. They try to get along with each other.

**Ortiz:** Mrs. Flemming, what was the long-term outcome of Head Start in Indianola or in Sunflower and Washington County.

**Flemming:** What happened to it? It's still operating, but most of the Delta agencies went out of business, because they took the program from us altogether.

**Ortiz:** The federal government?

**Flemming:** Mm-hmm. You had some folks that didn't believe in giving other folks a chance, an opportunity to prove what they can be or they can do. I think what the government did wrong, they wasted all this money training people like me, wasted a lot of money training us and turned around and took the program from us. That's money they wasted, see. Why are you going to teach me a skill, do your way of doing things, then turn around and take it from you? Why are you going to waste it? You've got to train somebody to do the same thing over again.

The government is very wasteful, I can tell you that. They're very wasteful. There's a lot of things they do wrong. I expect a little better. Then a lot of it, too, they don't want to let us do nothing. They'd rather give you a handout
than see you working and making a living. That's one thing I never was brought up on, no welfare or nothing like that. In our town where we come from, we didn't get no welfare when we were kids growing up. They gave us some kind of commodity or something or other, or tokens or something. I remember some tokens back there in those days, but nothing other than that. You had to work for yourself.

**Ortiz:** Mrs. Flemming, just a couple more questions. I don't want to keep you all night. I've taken a lot of your time.

**Flemming:** It's all right.

**Ortiz:** Throughout your life, what have been the major things that have changed for the black community and what have been the things that haven't changed?

**Flemming:** The major changes in the community? The major changes I think in the community was where you can go anywhere you want to go now to eat or sleep. You can go to any hotels, motels you want to go to. And you see black people in positions they hadn't been before.

I believe the best thing that I've seen so far really is black people can stand up for themselves. They will stand up for themselves now. Though they have these jobs and get ready to picket something or other or put on a boycott or something or
other, they don't mind doing it. But before, they wouldn't do anything. But this younger generation that's come up since the older people have gotten away, they don't mind getting out there, do anything they have to do to survive, because they have children to take care of, and they don't want their children see them be a weakling. That's one thing. They don't want to appear weak before their siblings, and that's a wonderful thing, because you can't let nobody come slap you in your face and you don't defend yourself, let your child see you be slapped. They'll consider you as being a weakling.

One thing I like most about the thing, because they begin to stand up for themselves. They don't let anybody run over them because they can, because I'm white or you're black, I can do you in. I'm black. I don't run from you because you're white. Or you're white. You run because I'm black. It's not that way no more. They're going to stand up for themselves, and I like that about it. I like that.

[Begin Tape 2, Side 1]

Flemming: And my biggest hope for today is to see our young people get off of drugs, stop having these babies, go to school, get an education, and better themselves before they decide to have a family, because that's going to be needed--it's needed right now.

If you must have a baby before you get married, get
something in your head first. Take care of that child when you bring him into the world. Stop begging. [Unclear] begging somebody for a handout. Be independent. Work and take care of yourself. If you've got enough sense to go out and have a baby, have enough sense to go out and take care of it. Don't beg Sally and Sue to take care of your child.

One of the greatest things I hate, and that come, I believe, from the movement. They got broken down in their moral character. It's gone too far. It's sad. Babies having babies. See, what the young ladies don't understand is, once you get a child, the woman get that baby, the man can get one every night, get that baby and go on about his business. Don't never see it no more. But that girl got the responsibility the first of that child's life. It's her responsibility to raise that child and nurture him and make sure he comes to the--try to be trained right. How can she train him when she hasn't taken time to be trained herself?

You've got to have a stopping point somewhere. We must. Not only for the black; the white, too. Its spans all races. They're going crazy with these babies, gone crazy. There's not enough people going to try to teach them. A lot of folks say they're trying to teach them. They're trying to teach them, but the peer pressure, peer pressure. They can't take care of themselves. They're new at mommy and daddy or auntie or uncle or somebody. They're the coming generation, and they're going to be out of sight and out of reach. What about their children?
What's going to happen to them?

Ortiz: Mrs. Flemming, throughout your life and the struggles that you have participated in [unclear], what have been the main things that have inspired you to keep on striving and struggling all these years?

Flemming: The main thing that kept me trying, the accomplishments we haven't made yet. There are so many things that we haven't accomplished yet, and to reach that goal, you must keep striving. You must keep moving.

Ortiz: Were there other experiences or stories that you wanted to share, Mrs. Flemming, that we haven't touched on?

Flemming: I think we've touched on everything, I think. I don't think so, unless there's something you want to ask me about.

Ortiz: Thank you.

[End of Interview]