

Interview of Mrs. Essie Steadman. Interviewed by Francesca Davis and Rebecca Williams of the Crossroads to Freedom Project, Rhodes College.

Mrs. Essie Steadman was a bus driver for the segregated Hoxie School District. Mrs. Steadman drove the African-American students from Walnut Ridge-Hoxie to the African-American school in Jonesboro before the Hoxie School Board made the decision integrate.

This interview was conducted in 2006 to be included in the Rhodes College Crossroads to Freedom Digital Archive Project.

The transcripts represent what was said in the interview to the best of our ability. It is possible that some words, particularly names, have been misspelled. We have made no attempt to correct mistakes in grammar.

Francesca Davis: So could you tell us a little bit about yourself, what's your name, where you're from, and what's your current occupation?

Essie Steadman: Well, my name is Essie Barnett Steadman. I was born in '24, in the little village or town. I think back then when I was a kid, they called it Little Africa, Driftwood, Arkansas, way down in Lawrence County, and I went to school four months out of the year, two in the winter, and two in the, like – what would you call it – in the fall before farming harvest, if you know what I'm saying. You know, when you plant the crop, then you got to wait 'til they grow up and mature, and then get ready for harvesting, you know. So by the time you harvest it, then it's winter.

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Then we would go back to school for two months, and until way late, I got to go to seven months a year of school. That's after my father died, and my mother was ill, and my older sister had taken me to a little place called Tuckerman, Arkansas, and that was my last years of school. I got to go seven months of schooling, and from that day 'til early age, I married.

I married a boy that we was born and raised in Driftwood, Strawberry. I think my birth certificate says Strawberry now, and we grewed up together. Then in '41, he went to service. We had had three children by then, and he went to service, and he served in World War II.

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Then he came out, and we had another child, a girl, and we went back to the farm and farmed a year. Well, by the end, he was going through GI school, and he got in mechanic business. And that's where he grew up, and we moved to Walnut Ridge, Arkansas, and that's where I met Jeanne's mom. We both were –

both of our husbands was in service together the same time, and that's how we grew to be friends, and we were friends 'til other day, when she left us.

Her husband passed first, and then my husband passed, and I guess we thought no other body would be good enough for our kids, so we didn't look for a second husband so far, but I'm still looking. I'm still looking.

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(Laughter)

Francesca Davis: Okay.

Essie Steadman: So that's just about through the very beginning of my life, and now I go to church with my grandkids. I have a whole host of grandchildren, great grandchildren. What have I got? Three? I think I got three sets of grands, grand, great-grand, and great-great grands.

Essie Steadman: Yeah, I have about 14 or 15 of each. I have a huge family, so you see why I don't need another husband.

(Laughter)

He wouldn't be bothered with me and the children, and it's one thing about it. See, I'm from the old school. If you don't like my kids, you stay out of my face, you know? We won't go there together.

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So I don't want to go to jail. I'm too old. I been here too long to have to go to jail for killing somebody, and I will kill about my kids, you know? From the beginning to the end, they – and, unfortunately, just like a year ago, my oldest son passed, but thank God, we're still going on. He left me with some grandchildren and great-grandchildren, and the other three is two girls and one boy now. I had four kids.

Francesca Davis: You talked about your parents earlier. Could you tell us a little bit more about them, like their names and what occupation that they had?

Essie Steadman: I never – okay, my father was sick from the beginning of my life.

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Video Cut (.flv)

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Then, where we were, it was no doctors, and people lived a long time with complaints or disease. Today, it's cured like that, you know, but not having the living facilities like finance and medicine, the doctors, when you did – excuse me – find a doctor, he went around with all of his tools and medicine in a little handbag, you know. And some of the stuff, he might have knowed what it was, and some of it, he might have not, but anyway, and when my dad got so far along, it was too late.

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He had then, like, plain high blood pressure now, you know, but then it was called dropsy. It was, you know, if you have high blood pressure now, and you don't take medication, you'll soon swell up, okay. That's the way my dad did. I don't remember right now when I seen my dad lay down in the bed and take a nap, night's rest. He was sitting in a rocking chair, a cane bottom. You see them now in some restaurants. They have them on displays, the old cane bottom rocking chair. Well, at night, we had a block that –

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– and then that would cock the chair back, okay. This is the way he would sleep. My father died when I was seven, eight years old, and the only time I can remember that I saw him laying down was when he passed away in that chair.

And then, in the country, oh, Lord, have mercy, friends were friends. Those farmers would sit at night, a certain little group of them, and them that had to go to work in the morning, those would get up at night, and they would come. All right, the women, in the day, would come because we'd have to wash every other day or two.

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We had then in the country a big black pot, a huge kettle. We kids would go to the woods, and we would break up sticks in the woods, and, oh, heck, I could saw like any many you ever seen.

(Laughter)

Me and my brother, he'd be on one side of the saw, and I'd be – in other words, we'd bring that wood up to the house, and they'd be done went to the well, another little bunch of us, carried buckets of water up here and filled up the pot, make a fire under the pot, and

believe it or not, it wouldn't be too long before that water would be boiling like you turn on the gas stove now under a pot. And those women would come, and they'd wash for my mother, and we'd hang the clothes on the line. That went on for years, not months. That went on for years, because my dad was sick a long time.

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My mother was sick. Would you believe I seen my dad on the front porch sick enough to die, my mother in here in the bed, but I guess that's made me today, that you do what you have to do, big or little, and most of all, find somebody to be your friends. I don't know how you do that now. That's hard to do now, because back then – and you know what? I knew a lot of those old people lived to get old and never seen a doctor, you know, and right now, you can't do too much of anything without seeing the doctor first.

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Video Cut (.flv)
(10:07:00)

I tell my kids some of the stories sometimes, and they'll say to me, "Mama, do you know what you talking about?" Sure, I know what I'm talking about. I know exactly what I'm saying. These things happened.

In the spring of the year, my mama or my father, one, would go down in the – we lived in the clay hills of Arkansas. I mean, the red clay, boy. Bushes grew called sassafras. Have you heard of that one now? You can buy sassafras now in the – but it's not like that that we used to get, 'cause we would go in the hills and dig it up first. My dad – it's a white sassafras and a red sassafras.

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The red one is what we would use. We'd dig up the roots, take it by the well or by the pump. We had both of them then. Wash them off, and we'd lay them out on the top of the house, and it would dry. We didn't use it until it dried out, and oh, that would be the prettiest, reddest tea you ever seen. Put it in the old black tea kettle, set it on the stove, all of this kind of stuff. We'd use it in the spring of the year. Wasn't no sickness. Well, I got sick, and like garlic, now the garlic is something that we had all of our lives, because we raised ours. It grew up just like onions. Feed your kids a piece or two of garlic in the spring of the year, no stomach aches, no cholera, as they call it, or colic now.

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That all my life. Now, then, if I get a chance while I'm here, before I go back home I'm going by that little old doctor's down on some street that's got a old time drugstore. What's his name, Jeanne?

Essie Steadman:

I was here before. When I was here before, I went by there. I have a bottle of blue stone. You get a sore, put you a pill or two of blue stone in some warm water, soak your feet. Infection? Uh-uh. Camphor, I bought me a whole bag of camphor gum, and right now at my house in Maywood, I have a E&J bottle. I got four or five blocks of camphor gum in that with a bottle of, pint of white lightning liquor, you know?

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Oh, yeah, old corn whiskey? Yeah, I pour that in there. That's the best camphor in the world. You have a like a cold sore or fever blister, just dab it with that homemade camphor.

I head up young girls in my church that have babies. No young mother breastfeeds her baby now, you know, hardly. What's gonna happen? Your breasts is gonna fill up with milk, right? You gonna suffer like a dog, boy. Your breasts is gonna get so sore. It's gonna swell up, and if you're not careful, you're gonna have a problem. Two or three of those mothers found out, "Hey, Ms. Essie says she got something that'll cure up my breast."

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Girl, do you know every time I turn around somebody be there with a little bottle, wanting some of my camphor gum to – no problems. I mean, no problems, and right now, most of the mothers – of course it's not mothers now, like it used to be, you know, you see a few girls that's still letting their self go and have a baby, but most of them do not have babies anymore. They are going back to breastfeeding their baby.

Since I breast – "Since you breastfed your baby, Ms. Essie, how did you know about this camphor?" Okay, when mothers, when I was a mother, you know what? I never went in my kitchen. Now, this was in the olden days. I never went in my kitchen 'til my baby was four weeks old. My husband, that's what I'm talking about friends. Them old mothers in the country, they come down to my house.

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They stayed there. They would go in the kitchen. They'd cook. "Girl, no, you're not going in, coming in this kitchen. That baby ain't old enough." You know.

Video Cut (.flv)

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Francesca Davis: What was your husband's name?

Essie Steadman: Everett. Everett Steadman, yeah, the nicest guy in the world. You know, he had his ways, but he was better to other people than he was to himself, if you ever seen or heard of such a thing.

When my baby got five or six weeks old, then I could go out and go. I couldn't leave the house, girls. My doctor says to me right now, "Essie, you never had surgery?" "No." "You never had no kind?" "Never had no kind of surgery."

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They absolutely did not believe that as far as my – any kind of physical. I just had my complete physical here not long ago, just a couple or three months ago. When I stopped my menstrual period, it stopped. From that day to the day, no spotting, no. That was from, may I say, back yonder, where those old women did not let me get up, walking around, lifting my baby. No, I didn't. You don't. But hey, girl go to the hospital tonight, and she'll come home tomorrow.

Rebecca Williams: It seems like you learned a lot from the people in your community, kind of the concept of it takes a village to raise a child.

Essie Steadman: Raise a child.

Rebecca Williams: So can you talk about some of your role models growing up, the people that you looked up to?

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Essie Steadman: You know what? My parents.

Francesca Davis: What were your parents' names again?

Essie Steadman: My mama was named Carrie Montgomery. My daddy was named John Barnett. Yeah, and I wished I would have brought my picture from my grandmother. Now, I didn't meet my mama, my dad's

people, but I met my mama. Well, I helped take care of my mama's mama, a long time, and I was a child, a little child.

Francesca Davis: And what was her name?

Essie Steadman: Emma.

Francesca Davis: Emma?

Essie Steadman: Emma Montgomery. Grandma was a little Indian lady. I never seen my grandmother with a pair of glasses on, I'm pretty sure, and she made every grandkid back then that she had a quilt.

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She pieced quilts. I never seen her use her glasses to thread her needle. Never. Never seen it, and my grandmother could make some tea cakes that would make you drink a gallon of whole milk, you know, and that's the way she did, but all of those kids that would – and her, my grandmother, had 13 children, like she had five – I know she had five girls. The rest of them were boys, and she outlived a lot of those kids. Grandma died in '38. I married in '39. My dad died in '36.

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And a lot of those kids, and they were old, too. They were old. They wasn't like teenagers or young men or young women. They were grown, and my grandmother was 104 when she died, and she just laid down and died. I don't know if I ever seen my grandmother take a – she might have taken a little – what was that? Turpentine on sugar? They used to say when you get the stomach ache, take a little turpentine and sugar, you know. They doctored themselves.

Video Cut (.flv)

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I remember very well before I married, my sister, older, older than me, had married, and she had gotten pregnant, and they had babies at home.

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In fact, I had all my babies at home, had all my kids at home, but my sister had her first child, and we had the old doctor from up, back up the hills after then. This was in – because Aaron was born in 192__. That's right. Lewis, Lewis was born. Her oldest child was born in '36.

Francesca Davis: So how many siblings do you have?

Essie Steadman: Hmm?

Francesca Davis: How many brothers and sisters do you have?

Essie Steadman: Do I, or did I?

Francesca Davis: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

Essie Steadman: Okay, I had one whole brother and five sisters.

Francesca Davis: Okay.

Essie Steadman: And I had two half-brothers. All of them are gone now but me. My last brother died last year in July or August, my last brother.

Francesca Davis: And what was his name?

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Essie Steadman: Oscar. Charles. Charles Barnett. I had Charles Barnett and John Barnett from my daddy, and the rest of them were Sloans 'til they got down to me and my two sisters and my whole brother was Barnetts. John Barnett. My mother had three husbands. I guess that's the reason why I haven't run up on but one, because she had enough for us all.

(Laughter)

Francesca Davis: Okay, well, we're gonna forge ahead into –

Essie Steadman: Forge ahead. Go ahead.

Francesca Davis: – a little bit of our target period.

Essie Steadman: Go ahead, because we'll be ready to eat lunch directly.

(Laughter)

Francesca Davis: Okay, to about the 1950s through the 1970s, could you – and think about that period. Could you tell us two or three of the most memorable things that you participated in or that you were a part of during that time?

Essie Steadman: The school year?

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Francesca Davis: Yes, ma'am. Anything from that time.

Essie Steadman: Well, Faith and I were talking about that last night. I tell you the truth. In my book, it wasn't a whole lot of excitement excitement. Excitement excitement, you know what I'm saying? When this started about the Hoxie school, I was up to Walnut Ridge with my kids, and Rosemary was down to Hoxie with hers. Okay, well, I couldn't send my kids to Hoxie, because we had a school in Walnut Ridge. This is two miles apart, you know, one place to the other, and my oldest son was a good athlete, you know, and the kids liked him. They would meet in the park and practice ball, but he couldn't go to the school in Walnut Ridge.

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But the white kids at Walnut Ridge School could come to my yard, or we could go up to the, in Walnut Ridge, the colored school yard they called it, and play together. I tell you, I had an experience with a kid from Walnut Ridge School and my son, Everett, Jr. He come to my house one night and wanted to know if Everett could join the Walnut Ridge High School baseball. I said, "Yeah, as far as I'm concerned," but I said, "You know that Everett can't go to Walnut Ridge High School." "Why?" That was the – now, that was one of the most I ever experienced with kids I ever had. I couldn't tell him why –

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– that my son could not join Walnut Ridge High School baseball. The guy that was the principal of the school then, W.R. Glenn, we were all from out to Lynn, Driftwood, Arkansas, but he came all the way from out there to Walnut Ridge and got this job. My son lived in Walnut Ridge and couldn't go to school.

I told those kids – these were white boys that lived right up the street between me and my church – to ask. I said, "Ask your baseball coach why Everett can't come and join your club." "We did." I said, "What did he tell you?" "He told us that they were working on it." I said, "Okay. They are working on it."

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I said, "When they get it worked out, then we'll see." Well, if it had been left to me 'til today, I would have been there when it got worked out, but my husband wouldn't stay. He wouldn't stay, so

then we got into the Hoxie transferring the kids. They seen how many was in Walnut Ridge that would be going to Jonesboro.

Video Cut (.flv)

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So Saul Kreider, a guy named Saul Kreider, got the first contract to drive the – get the kids from Walnut Ridge – Hoxie, to Jonesboro, and the first turn, it soon fizzled out, because the kids didn't like Saul. That was the problem. Saul would be late, and my husband and Marshall, Rosemary's husband, would say, "Red." They called me Red then. "That would be a good job for you. That would be a good job for you. You should go."

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Henry Rainwaters was the president of the school district in Warner Ridge, so we went down and talked to him about me getting the job driving those kids to Jonesboro. So right away, he gave it to me for some reason. I don't know why, but he gave it to me, and I started for those last two years of driving those Walnut Ridge – Hoxie kids, and I was asked the question maybe a time or two, because I worked two or three jobs. This school bus thing didn't pay no money, you know. 'Course, gas was, what, like 19 cents a gallon, 20 cents, best, and we could make – my husband bought a station wagon, and we could make the payment on the station wagon, I don't know, \$25 or \$30 a month.

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Really, it just seemed to me like I get to thinking about it a lot now. It wasn't for the money. The job was not for the money, because Rosemary and I worked at a cleaning and pressing shop. You wouldn't believe I had worked three jobs in one day. That's right. Back then I cleaned and pressed clothes in the morning. I had a couple or three white families that I would go do, like, domestic work, and I did twice a day to Jonesboro. Twice a day, in the mornings, I'd take those kids. In the evenings, I'd go back and get them. I did all of this for the last school days in Arkansas.

Rebecca Williams:

So did you ever have any experiences in driving the kids where people bothered you or tried to –

Essie Steadman:

You know, that is – we have been talking about. Uh-uh. Uh-uh.

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In fact, I don't know if I ever heard words out of any one person's mouth but one, and that was Herbert Brewer, and I don't know.

He never did, and I was surprised, I guess, but listen to me. When somebody likes you, they like you. It was all of those white people in Lawrence County, Arkansas, liked those black people.

You know, wait a minute. Don't misunderstand me. They was one or two that didn't, but you wouldn't know it by words they said. You would probably catch on to it by they ways and actions if you was around them. Now Herbert Brewer would drive by my house, and he didn't live there. He didn't live up to Walnut Ridge. He lived in Hoxie, but he tried to get stuff started.

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But to my knowings to today, I think I heard since I've been away from there that during some of that time, there was a rock throwed through a window or something. Never, no, sir, and you know, I have been asked, "Wasn't you afraid to be coming from Jonesboro by yourself?" I will agree to this. If anybody make up any mind to get you, they'll get you, one way or the other. I don't care what, how you twist or turn. Never was stopped. Never was picked at. "Well, aren't you afraid that sometimes you'd come out and get in your car to go to Jonesboro, something will blow up?" No, sir. Never.

And I'm gonna tell you something. I'd drive my car from Jonesboro back to 212 East Hale Street, Walnut Ridge –

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get out of it and go across the railroad track and do my domestic work. All opportunities in the world for somebody while we were gone, while I were gone, while my car was parked, to hook something up to my car, and I'd go get in it and turn on the switch, and it would blow. Do you know, children, I never thought a thing like that in my whole life? Never did. It never ran. Or take your cap off of your gas tank and fill your tank full of sugar.

I never thought about that. I never, but you know what? I'm gonna tell you this, and this is the God's truth. You put God first in everything you do, he ain't gonna let nothing happen to you. The most of the problems that we have as black folks today, we create them ourselves is by overstepping what the good Lord has given you.

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We don't use this anymore. Think about whatever you do before you do it real good. I told you I was born in 1924. You about won't have no problems. Most especially, you won't have one that

you can't handle. You can't handle. I'm not gonna say you're not gonna have problems, you're not gonna have ups and downs. He didn't tell us the road would be easy, you know.

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Rebecca Williams: So before dealing with segregation with your children and driving kids back and forth to Jonesboro, did you have any experiences in your childhood or in your life before that time of segregation, separate things?

Essie Steadman: No, sir. No, sir. Let me tell you something.

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Getting from Walnut Ridge to this child's mama, Rosemary and I, we were in Little Rock when Central was in its worst. We were. My mother lived in Little Rock. Rosemary and I would come from Chicago and Gary and go to Little Rock and get my mother two or three times a month sometimes. Never was even stopped by the state police. We would hear before we left home what was going on in Central in Little Rock. We knew. Never. Never was we stopped by a policeman the whole time. Oh, I'd say we was blessed, probably, but I'm telling you what I know, let alone what I believe. You mind your own business. You take care of yourself.

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You do what you – do the right thing. I've had a whole lot. Take it from me. I had a whole lot more problems in Chicago than I ever had down South.

Rebecca Williams: Can you tell us about some of those things from Chicago?

Essie Steadman: That's the most, and it still is today, it still is right this morning, that's the most segregated place I ever want to go, let alone ever been. I've been in Mississippi and Georgia. We stopped on the highway and had lunch. Never been – only ticket that I ever had to pay in my life is because I wouldn't give in to a policeman, not sexually, but just go on and say yes to what he was saying that was true. I didn't. No, I didn't do that.

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You still say – I still say I didn't do it. "Well, you're gonna have to pay it." "Well, I'll pay a ticket." Only ticket I ever had to pay in my life was after I went to Chicago, ever had to pay in my life, and I've been driving a car ever since knee high to a duck. Never.

Never in Arkansas, never in Mississippi, never in nowhere until I went to Chicago.

But my kids were big kids after I went to Chicago. I was still able to keep them in school. I had a son to go to Wright College, and my younger son, he had the – the 20th day of this month, he graduated 45 years ago from Harrison High. The next three days, he was in the Marines, and he was gone, you know. He did two different duties overseas.

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And oh, I've had good times and bad times. I've had times that I'm proud of, and I've had times that I still think that I should have did something different, but thank God I didn't. Everything has worked out pretty good, real good, to tell you, as far as my kids are concerned. I never had to go to jail, get a kid out of jail. Never. Only had to go to school for my oldest daughter once, and I didn't go. I sent her. I fixed that. I'm thinking she's in school, and she's over in the park with some girlfriends of hers, and finally, the teacher at the school got in touch with me, because I was working eight days a week.

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I've worked eight days a week for years to keep my kids in school, you know, and when they did catch up with me, I said to her, I said, "Mary, what's wrong with you ain't going to school?" "Ms. So-and-So made me mad." I said, "Made you mad? Okay. Do you know you can't go back to school 'til me or your daddy one go with you?" "Yes, I know it." I said, "Well, okay. I'm not going. I got to work, so your daddy's going." And he fixed that real good. He got about two-thirds drunk and took her to school. From that day to this morning, we never had to take her back to school anymore, and all of my kids, they did finish high school, but we laughs at that. "Mama, do you know how Daddy embarrassed –."

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I said, "I can't help it. You're the cause of that." If I'd a went, I'd a went sober, and you'd a probably done it again the next day, but since he went, and I think they like to had to call the security guard on him, because he was gonna whip her butt after taking her back. That's what embarrassed her, 'cause folks then, and now it's worse, didn't believe in whipping your kid, you know.

Video Cut (.flv)
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But I still think, baby, if the butt needs it, give it to it.

You know, don't kill. You don't have to kill no kid. I never, as long as I was being raised up from then, you know, I never know nothing about nobody killing their kid until I came to Chicago, and it don't have to be a school aged kid now. What, they had a funeral two or three days ago for a man that killed his, what, four- or five-month-old baby, but I tell you something I think about that.

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We let – them in Chicago, I did. We didn't in Arkansas, because our parents taught us we had to work. You have to work. My grandmother owned more in Arkansas at 50 cents a week than a lot of people do right today at \$50 an hour, and they paid for a farm. We had a good farm out to Strawberry, out to Driftwood, out to Lynn, wherever you want to call it. But now, it's a different story, and I'd say a lot of white people is the cause of us black. They are.

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Rebecca Williams: Did you see a lot of that in Chicago? You keep going to Chicago as a place where you experienced a lot of these things for the first time, so what do you think were some of the biggest differences between, I guess, the city of Chicago and the smaller town feel of Hoxie and other places that you have been to in your life?

Essie Steadman: I'm gonna say this again. Parents aren't parents now, or when I come to Chicago, they weren't. Our parents, like I say, you're a mother and father in the South, in Arkansas, I'll say, see Everett, Mary Jane, Parvatee, these are my kids, doing something they had no business –

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– something that was wrong that they know that I wouldn't agree with or they daddy wouldn't agree with it, they would catch that little sucker right there. "Hey. Don't do this anymore. Now, if you do, I'm gonna tell your parents. I'm gonna whip your butt, and when you get home, you'll get another one." Kids believed that then. They don't believe that now. In other words, parents made them like that.

Look at what they do. A kid'll go to school with a gun, with a razor. You better not have done that when I was a kid. You better not have done that when my kids were kids. That's the difference. That's the difference today.

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And children, until it goes back, no, I don't want to go back out in the field to the toilet. You know, a lot of people say, you know, back to the old time way. Yes, some of the old time way, yeah. Some of it, no. I really don't want to go down the hill to a pump and prime the pump and pump water and carry it all the way up, but they's some things, I bet you, I can stay in my own family and talk to you all day long. I bet you I don't have ten kids, grands, great-grands, great-great-grands, and great-great grands that can repeat the Lord's Prayer. When I was a kid, when my kids were kids, we didn't open school without the prayer. Every morning, a different kid would have to lead the Lord's Prayer. They don't do that anymore.

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They've taken it out. Well, what got in? Drugs, guns. What is that they call it? I never heard it. Now, I knew of the WPA when we was in the country, down, out in the red hills. I knew of the WPA. That was a highway building thing. If you worked for the WPA when I was a little kid, your parents got substituted with beans and rice and potatoes and stuff with a small amount of money, you know, little dab of money. When I went to Chicago, baby, I got reborned. I would come in from work, \$7.50 up to \$12.00 a day, you know, doing domestic work.

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Video Cut (.flv)
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The girls would be sitting on the porch next door, dressed up, earrings down to here, makeup on, and I finally got enough nerve one day to say to my neighbor, "Girl, you know what? Where you going? Your husband coming to take you out? You gonna go out when he come home?" She made it clear to me right quick. She was married to the – what do you call that? Welfare. Welfare. And I didn't know what that was.

My sister had been living there a long time, and I said to her, I said, "Girlfriend next door said she was – ." "Oh, don't you know that that – ?" "No, I don't know what that – I never heard of that." But then when it come down to the nitty gritty, she was getting paid \$1,200 and \$1,500 a month –

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– to look like she was looking and go out when she got ready and not work. You know what I saw right there next door? Seventeen people living in the same apartment. The more kids you had, the more money you got. I said to the lady one day there where I was working, I said, “You all should be ashamed of yourself.” This was a rich Jew. “Of what, Essie?” I said, “Paying those parents, those mamas, those women, all that money. You have a baby, you get \$500 or \$600 more a month.” “Well, you see,” and this was one of the hateful Jewish women. Now, all Jews aren’t alike, either. They all aren’t alike, just like we.

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I said – well, she said, “Well, why aren’t you on the welfare?” I said, “I wouldn’t go down to that welfare office and sit on that concrete bench all day on my butt and wear corns for no money you would – .” “Well, you don’t have nothing.” I said, “You’re right. I don’t.” I said, “But I can work.” I said, “I work, and I’m making it on what I make.” “Well, that’s why the welfare was formed,” she said, “to give the black people a sense of feeling – .” I said, “Let me tell you something.” I would remember that lady if she was sitting right here in front of me today, and if she was here, she’d tell you I said that same thing.

Her name was Rosalie Cousins. I said, “Let me tell you something, Ms. Cousins.” I said, “That’s one of the worst things in the world.” I said, “And you all are gonna be sorry one of these days. Them parents ought get up off of their ass and go to work.”

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“They should make them kids, and stop having them babies every day.” “Well, that’s the way you see it.” I said, “That’s the way it is,” and before she died, I got a chance to tell her, too. I said, “Well, thank God for Jesus, my kids right now, one of them go to jail, they gonna stay. They’re old enough to know better or do – now, then, something happens beyond their control, I’m with them, but just to get to sit, you know, I ain’t coming.” I said, “I’m not coming,” and I had the chance to prove it to some of my grandchildren, too.

Their mother, well, you know, Lordy, you know better than to call me. I’ve had people since things has been going on like they are wanted to know how did I shape my mouth to tell my grandson I was not going to mortgage my house to keep him from going to jail.

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I said, "I have no problem with that." This girl right now, a grown woman, she's a grown woman. She works for the parent and something-something in Chicago now, dealing with parents with grandchildren, children and grandchildren, where they have lost their home, trying to keep their kids from going to the penitentiary, and still end up. So she has come to me wanting to know how did I – I said, "Yeah, they asked me. He asked me. He had his friends to call me and ask me." No. No. K-Mart is my house. I got other kids. I got little grandkids that I have to try to see that they have a place to stay as long as I live.

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How are you? You couldn't keep yourself out. How are you gonna pay me my money back and get my house out of mortgage? No. You know what? Bless his heart. He love me to death right today for that. He loves – I know he do. He's a grown man now, and you should see him pinching pennies. I wished I could just tell you how he pinches pennies.

See, there's another thing they'll say. If you've got a criminal record, you can't get a job. That's a lie. That's a lie. If you want to, you can. He pinches pennies right today more than I do. "Well you have to live within your means." I said, "Oh, bless your heart. Why, you couldn't see that when you was out there making \$1,200, \$1,500 a week or day sometimes." It's a struggle, but it's fun if you just make up your mind that you're gonna do the right thing.

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And yet, it'll work out. I'll promise you it'll work out. It won't be easy. What else you want to know?

Francesca Davis: I guess we can kind of begin to wrap up here a little bit.

Essie Steadman: All right.

Francesca Davis: In thinking about the past and how things are today, you touched on this a little bit. How do you think things have changed or where they've improved or gotten worse over time? It's kind of a difficult question.

Essie Steadman: Let me see. One of the things, I just said it, has improved for a lot of people that one – you know, let me see. For a lot of people, girls and boys –

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– it don't take as much to prove to you that, hey, this is really true. I can't do what I been doing and get by in peace, you know, peacefully, you know, and it's a lot of people that just are not, regardless to what happened, are not gonna improve. I don't know. I was so used to doing with little, and I always felt like I was doing what I wanted to do. I think that's a thing that you make up in your mind, that it just don't take all that you think to make you pretty, you know. I've seen some of the ugliest people in my life –

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– so beautiful, just so beautiful, because that's the way they maneuver. That's the way they handle themselves. That's the way they express themselves to just make you be proud, you know, just be proud of them. But then it's some people, I don't care how high or how low, just never, ever get better, never make it better. And we have better opportunities now for our children to go to school, to go to college, to get a job than ever in the history, and they're worse. Don't you think they're worse? They are worse. They're worse now.

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There are kids now wouldn't get up and go to school or go to a job if it backed up and sat down in their lap. Now, I wished I could answer this: Why? That's what I wish I could answer.

I have been back down South lately, down, down in Mississippi, way out down there. I was down there last year with a friend of mine in a community that anybody would have any sense at all would like to live. Oh, beautiful homes. Beautiful homes. They didn't get that gived to them. You know what I'm saying? Just backed up and give it. "Here, this is yours. You can have it." They didn't get that, but it's just about from people that old and older that has been in different states and worked and retired saved they money and went back down South.

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Oh, I'll say I really believe this the truth, too, to finish this right fast. If I had a husband, and, you know, and everything, I'd go back down South, you know, in a minute, get me a nice little chicken farm and a pig and a goat and a puppy or something. Yes, I would. I would. They still, there now, if people liked you, most especially white people, they liked you. You knew it. If they didn't, you stayed away from them. They stay away from you. You knew it.

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Up there, your own, your own race will do you in. You're looking right at it. It's dangerous. It's dangerous. It's amazing. And all from my dealing with the Hoxie school bus driving, I wouldn't exchange that today for nothing. I'm so glad that I came along, and I was in it. I'm glad I was in it, because I can honestly tell you the truth. Never a day or a night was I nervous or afraid of anything that might would happen.

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Only thing I hate about it, and I shouldn't use that word, because it was the Lord's willing, the little four of us that was in this, when we was, when it started, nobody here today but me to see what the end will be or so far see what the end have been, because it's been great. It's been lonely and lonesome, but it's been great, and it's gonna be greater, because I got generations and generations of my own that will read about it, see about it. I got one of my grandses over there in the Martin Luther King museum now, Pooper.

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He's in – what's his name? What was his name that Pooper's in his arms over in that museum?

Essie Steadman:

Somebody that – a little grandson of mine. Hey, that will be there for the rest of the world, I hope, and there's different ones. Probably his little ancestors will be down there one of these days, and "Oh, here's Pooper up here in the Martin Luther King museum." Now, you see, my parents, naturally, they wouldn't have done that. You know, some of those things wouldn't have happened, because they loved a lot of black folks, and they taken care of them, and –

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But now, I'm telling you the truth. It's just about as dangerous to live as it is to die when you don't know where you're going, heaven or hell, you know. It's dangerous.

Rebecca Williams: Why do you think that it's really important that people today and people in the future have knowledge of their history and the types of things that you went through, the Hoxie experience and –

Essie Steadman: I sure do, and most of all, I wish that when you have a nice opportunity to get something great, to do something great for somebody, do it. Do it, and hey, you can't be God given. You can't be God given, baby. I can tell you for sure. I'm a witness, and I don't know why I have to keep on using this word.

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But I'm still here, and I made it. I never got on a corner. I never borrowed a dollar that I couldn't pay back, and I always had somebody that I could go to. And I'm gonna tell you something else I never did do. If I just didn't need it, I never did ask nobody for nothing, like, "Loan me five dollars." Hey, the end had come for me that I needed five dollars to borrow. I got plenty. I think I got plenty. I know I got plenty.

I got – my choir members sometimes, you know, they – I never leave my house on Sunday morning unless my Sunday dinner is ready. "Essie, what you got today for dinner?" You know, hey, I tell them that I done cooked.

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"When did you do this?" "Hey, I was home yesterday." That's the way we did it in the country a long time ago. Saturday, you know, you got all your vegetables and meat and stuff together, and Sunday, we went to church. Then, "What you got for dessert?" I always made a joke out of this, but it was serious. Corn bread and buttermilk. I'm a milk fanatic. I say it. I pray every day, "Lord, don't take the milk taste away from me that I'll have to stop drinking milk." I have this bigger dinner on Sundays, like I said, as you want to see, but just about before I go to bed for the night, I'll end up with a bowl of milk and bread. I like it. I love it, and I make it for me to have it.

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My kids, "Mama, you don't have to do this," 'cause I'm doing it, but I think if they would, they'd be better off. They stomach would be better off. They mind would be better off, and they'd save some money, 'cause they wouldn't be, you know, putting a lot

of stuff in they stomach that they don't need and not good for him. Mine's not the best one in the world, but I tell you it's better off than a lot of my kids. I can eat most anything I want to eat and keep on going. I walk 12, 15, 20 blocks, sometimes three or four times a week. Okay, I'm ready, too.

Rebecca Williams: Well, we'd like to thank you so much. You gave us a lot of good information, so that's –

Essie Steadman: Really?

Francesca Davis: Yes, ma'am.

Rebecca Williams: Yes, ma'am.

Essie Steadman: You know, I just about told you the truth, too.

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I'm glad. I'm glad. Yeah. Never thought this would ever come about, but if it's any help, I'm glad.

Rebecca Williams: Definitely.

Francesca Davis: It's a remarkable story. We appreciate it.

Essie Steadman: I'm glad. Thank you.

Francesca Davis: Thank you.

Essie Steadman: You're welcome. You're welcome. You're welcome, and –

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