

Participants:

- Russ Wigginton
- Jimmy McClain
- Unknown Male

Location: Rhodes College – Memphis, Tennessee

Date: November 16, 2007

Russ Wigginton: My name is Russ Wigginton. I'm 41 years old. Today's date is November 16th, 2007. We're at Rhodes College in Memphis, Tennessee. My relationship with Jimmy McClain is friend and colleague.

Jimmy McClain: Okay. My name is Jimmy McClain and I'm 60 years old. Date, November – what – 16th, 2007. Relationship with Russell, friend and a colleague.

Wigginton: Great. Well Jimmy the question I have for you is when you started working at Rhodes – how long ago did you start working at Rhodes College?

McClain: It was in the '60's. '67.

Wigginton: 1967?

McClain: 1967.

Wigginton: When you first came to Rhodes College was that your introduction to Memphis or were you already living in the city?

McClain: No, I was already living in Memphis.

Wigginton: Okay. When you first started working at Rhodes did you think you would be here 30 years later or 40 years later?

McClain: I did not. I really did not.

Wigginton: Forty years.

McClain: Thirty, 34.

Wigginton: Thirty-four years?

McClain: Thirty-four years.

Wigginton: Okay. Over those years, I mean I had a chance to know you early on at least early on for me. I first met you in the mid-80's. So about 20 years ago. Part of meeting you has been getting to know you over those years. How do you feel about seeing former students like me around this place and getting to know us personally and as students?

McClain: That's probably one of the biggest things that kept me here is seeing people graduate, come back and a lot of the alum and then the relationship with the one that have graduated and the one that are still here continue the relationship.

Wigginton: Yeah. So you built a lot of relationships over the years with people that you work with?

McClain: A lot of people, yeah. A lot of people.

Wigginton: So do you think those relationships, the fact that it's at a college do you think it has anything to do that your workplace is a college? Do you think that has mattered in your relationships or – like watching young people grow and come back? You mentioned that so it must be important to you.

McClain: Yeah, it is because one thing that I like is when peoples come back they'll holler, "Jimmy, Jimmy! I wonder why you still here. I'm so glad to see you. This is my son. This is my daughter." So it's been nice. I like that.

Wigginton: Yeah. So it's more than they knew you when you were here but there's a relationship there?

McClain: There's a relationship there, uh-huh.

Wigginton: Yeah. Something we never talked about before in all the years we've known each other is where you're from. You mentioned Fayette County. How'd you get to Memphis?

McClain: I was looking for a job and weren't too many jobs in Fayette County. I came to Memphis and I found a job. I worked there – my first job was I worked in construction. Then I left construction and I went to a cabinet place. I just kind of moved around different places but one of my jobs I really like dealing with people is I worked at Shoney's. I left Shoney's and went I think to the Board of Education. Left the Board of Education of which I worked in the Board of Education but also I started here. The guy that I know worked at the Board of Education he worked at here and he helped me get on here. It's kind of funny because he told the supervisor that asked him, "Do you know anybody else, a good worker?" He said, "Yes, sir. I know this one-arm guy. He a real good worker and I think you will like him."

So I came out, fill the application out, he interviewed me and before I get home he had called me and I been here ever since.

Wigginton: Wow. Well you know it's funny you had mentioned being a good worker because – and then being a people person because I think that's part of the reason why so many people come back and they looking for you because that's how people know you. People at Rhodes College community that's what they think about when – your name. So it's interesting that you've had that reputation for a long time, a people person and a good worker.

McClain: Yeah.

Wigginton: Yeah.

McClain: Another thing, too it's – when some of them graduate they'll tell their friends, their cousin about me and I'll be walking across campus they holler, "Jimmy, Jimmy!" I'm looking. "I don't know you. I don't know you." "Yeah, but my cousin know you. My brother know you." So we start from

there building a relationship and as they continue here, graduate, like I said they come back, they still looking for me. So still here.

Wigginton: Yeah. So you came to Memphis looking for work and you found work and so you decided to make Memphis your home.

McClain: Home.

Wigginton: You think of Memphis as your home?

McClain: I think of Memphis as my home. Yeah, I does. Not Fayette County but I think of Memphis as my home.

Wigginton: Do you go back to Fayette County very much?

McClain: Not since my parents died. I go occasionally but not often because really there ain't too much to go back to out there. I go visit my relatives but not too much.

Wigginton: You have your family and everything's here. Can you say a little bit about your family here?

McClain: Well I got a sister here – well I got two sisters here. One live in Lakeland and the other live in Orange Mound. My other two sisters I got in Louisville, Kentucky and they come visit occasionally which it's been awhile since I've been there but we still see one another. We have family gathering and get together. So I think they like Memphis, too. They had me think about moving back but they had to move back here.

Wigginton: Yeah. So what do you think about Memphis since you've been living here a long time? What do you think about the city?

McClain: I think Memphis is great. I like Memphis. It's got its ups and down and it's got its problems like every other city but overall you take care of your business and do what you're supposed to do and leave other peoples alone then you'll fare well in Memphis. I think Memphis is a nice place. I like Memphis.

Wigginton: Yeah. You know one of the things that you and I have teased each other about for a long time and it has been in a joking manner but everybody, really they know you as somebody who I think of as entrepreneurial. You always have something that you're doing work wise. Right? People know you're talented and you can do a lot of different things. Has that always been the case or have you just sort of learned how to do a lot of things along the way or were you always like that?

McClain: I just kind of learn it as I went along because I didn't know it. A lot of things I do now I just learn it. I look at it and I pick it up and go with it. My dad always taught me never say "I can't". So I always strive to do whatever I says I doing. If I can't do it I let a person know I can't do it. So I do a lot of different things for a lot of people that I couldn't have done but end up doing. So there's another way a lot of people like my work.

Wigginton: Yeah, yeah. Well that's important to you, I'm sure, that people respect you for that.

McClain: Yeah, very important.

Wigginton: Yeah. So when you're not at Rhodes College – I think people often times think of you as so connected to Rhodes College but they don't think a lot about what you do when you're not here. What do you enjoy doing when you're the – the few hours a week when you're not at work?

McClain: I do yard work on the side.

Wigginton: Do yard work? Okay.

McClain: Yeah.

Wigginton: How long you been doing yard work?

McClain: Well I've been doing yard work for, oh, about 20 years.

Wigginton: So do you have a lot of regular customers that you service or is it like word of mouth or how have you gotten your customers over that 20 year stretch?

McClain: It's kind of like word of mouth. I do work for peoples and peoples tell other peoples and they recommend me like that. So a lady just called me a few minutes ago. She wanted some firewood and she tell me where she live at. I said, "Wait a minute. Wait a minute. Wait a minute." She had to tell me again. I said, "Oh you the one off of Menden Hall." So it like it been like two, three years since I sold her some wood but she kept my number and she gave me a call. So it's by word of mouth.

Wigginton: Yeah. So what other things do you do? You say you've been doing yard work on the side for about 20 years. What other things do you do when you're not at work at Rhodes? What do you for –

McClain: Recreation?

Wigginton: - recreation, yeah.

McClain: I like fishing. I fish occasionally.

Wigginton: Oh yeah? Where do you fish?

McClain: Yeah. It's a place over on Humphrey Boulevard over by Baptist Hospital. There's some lakes out there. So I go out there and fish. Then sometime I go to the Grizzlies game, the University of Memphis game. So if not I'm sitting at home watching the game.

Wigginton: So you like sports?

McClain: I like sports. Yeah, I like sports.

Wigginton: Yeah. So this is a question. I used to fish a lot when I was a kid and actually in college and don't do it as much anymore. So we fisherman, we always want to know do you like to fish by yourself or fish with one person or fish with a group of people?

McClain: Maybe two peoples.

Wigginton: Two people?

McClain: Yeah, two peoples.

Wigginton: So maybe you and a friend?

McClain: Me and a friend. It's going to be quiet.

Wigginton: Oh.

McClain: Don't like disturbing, distraction. I don't like that. So I fish with somebody, a fisherman that knows how to fish and don't bother me and I don't bother him.

Wigginton: Yeah, but it's just – you don't have to talk but you enjoy each other's company?

McClain: Oh yeah, we enjoy each other's company. Yeah.

Wigginton: Yeah. Do you have some regular fishing buddies?

McClain: Yeah. I got one and he's in tree work. So he don't get a chance to fish as often as he would like to but we get together occasionally.

Wigginton: Yeah. So do you – what would you say from living in – you lived in Fayette County, you lived in Memphis. So would you describe yourself as pretty much a Southern guy?

McClain: I would. I would say pretty much Southern.

Wigginton: Yeah. Have you travelled a lot outside of the South?

McClain: Not a whole lot. Not a whole lot.

Wigginton: Yeah.

McClain: I got a wife. She don't want to fly and she don't want to ride a boat. I get tired of driving so if I can find somebody to drive I go but as for me driving, no she don't.

Wigginton: Is she from Memphis?

McClain: She from Collierville.

Wigginton: From Collierville?

McClain: Mmm-hmm.

Wigginton: So how long you been married?

McClain: Forty year.

Wigginton: Forty years.

McClain: Forty years. We call one another ma and pa now.

Wigginton: So does your wife – does she spend much time over at Rhodes? I don't think I've ever met her?

McClain: No. No, she doesn't. I try to get her to come over, walk on the track. We swim or play – do something. She don't.

Wigginton: Yeah. So –

McClain: But the kids do though.

Wigginton: The kids do?

McClain: Yeah, the kids. They comes over and also I bring the grandkids over.

Wigginton: Oh okay. Yeah. So how many kids you got?

McClain: I got three kids. Two boys and one girl.

Wigginton: Yeah. They all live in Memphis?

McClain: They all live in Memphis.

Wigginton: Yeah. How many grandchildren do you have?

McClain: Oh man, I got eight grandkids.

Wigginton: What do they call you?

McClain: Granddaddy.

Wigginton: I thought – when I say what did they call you I thought you was going to say, “Only when they want something.”

McClain: Well they do that, too. They do that, too. But they usually call me granddaddy. “Granddaddy, I need this. Granddaddy I need that.”

Wigginton: So how often do you see them?

McClain: I see them on a regular, on a regular basis.

Wigginton: Yeah?

McClain: Yeah, on a regular basis.

Wigginton: You all get together on the weekends, they come over for dinner and stuff like that or you go to their houses?

McClain: Well basically they’re coming over there. Their mom or dad will drop them off and say, “Would you all keep the kids for us so we get a chance to get out in the yard and do different things,” and I take them sometimes when we do lay jobs like hauling wood or raking leaves. They pick up branches and things by them. So I give them a little something to do. So we enjoy one another.

Wigginton: So you passing on that entrepreneurial spirit that you have?

McClain: Yeah. That’s what I’m trying to do.

Wigginton: So who – since you’ve been working at Rhodes so long – I’m just curious because there are a lot of people who work here who’ve been here for a long time. What do you attribute that to? Why do you think so many people have stayed?

McClain: I would have to say it’s the friendliness of other peoples because everybody work in different building. They always got somebody that they love to talk to. I think that’s it. Once you – that’s it. Once you come to Rhodes you just don’t want to leave. It just like that. You just can come here and work awhile and leave. Once you get here you hooked. It’s by like I said the different people you meet.

I know it's one thing that really impressed me. Like you, Richard Huvell and Paul is there, Beasha, people like that. Other people meet people like that, too and it's the friendliness. It's a nice attitude you got. So I think that's what it is.

Wigginton: Yeah. You probably not going to change careers at this point, are you?

McClain: Not nowhere soon.

Wigginton: So tell me a little bit more about if – I'd like to hear a little bit more. I'm very interested in you – what you've seen happen in Memphis and maybe even at Rhodes but more in the time you've been living in Memphis what would you say are the major changes in the city or – and you can focus it on this campus is you want but you've been in this area, this part of the country for a long time and you've probably seen some things that are different than what they used to be or not?

McClain: Yeah, well I done seen a lot of changes especially after Martin Luther King died. I seen a lot of changes. It was a lot –

Wigginton: You were living in Memphis then?

McClain: I was living in Memphis then. It was a lot of thing that was quite different then and now I notice that it's something that you can deal with now and one time you couldn't. So now – there's a change. I've seen a great change in Memphis.

As for Rhodes I've seen a great change in Rhodes because getting back to Rhodes when I was at Rhodes, when I first started here it was a lot of things that went on. It was a lot of – it wasn't nothing bad but it was good things like keg parties, white ball games. Yeah, white ball games and – I don't know what you call the little thing you kick with your leg there.

Wigginton: Hacky sack.

McClain: Hacky sack. There was a lot of that going on. So you don't see that now. It look like now it's strictly business. It's business now. It used to be like a lot of activities going on but there's not too much not.

Wigginton: Yeah. Well you know that's interesting you say that because I think you're right. When you look at the costs of higher education now and the pressures that people have on them they are in a hurry all the time and it's always about business. So you've noticed that even on this campus that the students – it's harder for them to enjoy themselves and experience their youth in the same way they used to. Yeah.

McClain: Yep.

Wigginton: So in all the time you've been here and thinking about how many people were sort of in your division when you started working here? Has the place gotten bigger or do you notice that a lot more people are here or –

McClain: There's lots more peoples here now.

Wigginton: Yeah.

McClain: It got bigger, too. It's lots bigger. But yet and still it's still kind of like crowded. What is it? The mutual feeling is still there.

Wigginton: Oh yeah.

McClain: I don't care how many peoples come it's still always basically the same. There is some different but, you know the good always outweigh the bad.

Wigginton: Yeah. So you mentioned remembering when King died and how that change allowed for some change to happen in the city and stuff.

You were working at Rhodes when he died?

McClain: No, I was working at Shoney's.

Wigginton: You were working at Shoney's then.

McClain: I was working at Shoney's.

Wigginton: What was it like to you when that happened, when you heard that news? How did that affect – did that affect you?

McClain: It kind of did. It put bitter in me and for a long I had a lot of bitterness toward peoples but as I got older I learned that that wasn't the attitude to have because people bitter towards you. You don't have to be bitter toward them. Again, when I came to Rhodes that really helped me out because I had never been around integration people like that. So I looked at that and that kind of helped tone me down a whole lot. Like I said, meeting different people here that really helped me a whole lot.

Wigginton: Well yeah, because when you first came to Rhodes there weren't a whole lot of black people around here, were there?

McClain: No there wasn't. Wasn't a whole of blacks. Nope. There was a few but there wasn't a whole lot.

Wigginton: Yeah.

Were there black students at that point?

McClain: There was black students. Uh-huh. Herman Morris was here and who else I know was here?

Wigginton: Was Julian Bolton and those guys here?

McClain: Yeah, yeah. All them guys, met all them guys. Yeah, they was here.

Wigginton: Yeah.

McClain: It was kind of different then because then the blacks had their own – what is – fraternity and white had their own but they used to party. There was some there but it's still mixing but they partied but mostly they had their own thing and they had their own thing.

Wigginton: Yeah. How would you describe it now compared to that? A lot more black students for sure.



McClain: Yeah, sure. I agree. A lot more blacks and it's – it seem to be – it's more freedom and it's more like they accepted more.

Wigginton: Were there any black teachers here when you first came?

McClain: No. No, weren't no black – no.

Wigginton: Do you remember when there was a black teacher that came?

McClain: I can't remember the year and I don't know the guy's name but I remember one.

Wigginton: Was it Dennis Dickerson?

McClain: Hey, I think so. It was Dennis Dickerson. Yeah, they were.

Wigginton: Yeah, that was like in – he came in like 1985, something like that.

McClain: Okay.

Wigginton: He didn't stay very long.

McClain: No, he didn't stay long. No he didn't.

Wigginton: But it was a big deal here, wasn't it?

McClain: It was a big deal. Yeah.

Wigginton: I was a student here. I know it was a big deal. I was happy to see him.

McClain: Yeah. I was proud to see him, too.

Wigginton: Yeah. So how has – how would you say Memphis has changed since the time you've been living in the city? From the standpoint of – has it got bigger? How do you think people get along? That sort of thing.

McClain: Memphis have got bigger. It done grow a whole lot because some parts of the city like in Cordova, Germantown I can recall when I was living in the country across there we used to come to the city and we used to catch the back roads. Now though all the back roads is closed and it's homes now. The city, I would say jobs are more frequent and you see more blacks involved in business now. Then you didn't see that but now you see it. There's more opportunity for peoples to be whatever if it what you – if you want to do it.

It's a big difference.

Wigginton: Sure. Yeah. So one of the ways that I started getting an appreciation for guys like yourself who have been at Rhodes and contributing to this community over the years is talking to our mutual friend, Joe Neville.

McClain: Oh Joe.

Wigginton: Mr. Joe being here even before you. What kind of relationship did you and Mr. Neville have here and was that important to you being here and that sort of thing?

McClain: We had a good relationship. I used to aggravate him a whole lot though but I don't know why I did it but he always come back at me. But he was – when I came here I had a finance problem and I went to him and asked him for a loan and he had an account at the credit union.

He said, "Come on, boy. Get in this car. Let's go down to the credit union." He went out there, co-signed for me some money. I paid him back and we just – we had been friends ever since. Like I said, Joe was – he was like encouraging to me because a lot of time I would get upset by the man, I'd go talk to him and he would take my arm. "Hey don't worry about that. Let that blow off. It going to be all right. It going to be all right." So Joe never – he helped me a whole lot because like I said there was a lot of times I got upset about different things and I could go to Joe and he would really tell me the truth and it set me straight.

Wigginton: Yeah.

McClain: When I do something he would get on me and say, "Man, you know you wrong. You know you shouldn't have did that, you shouldn't have said that." "That's okay. Joe, you right." So Joe had been a great encouragement to me.

Wigginton: Yeah. He worked here over 40 years.

McClain: Yeah.

Wigginton: Yeah. He had a long career. Yeah. So when you asked – you told him about your financial problems at the time.

How long had you known him?

McClain: Maybe a year.

Wigginton: Yeah. So you all were – you all had a relationship but you hadn't known him for a real long time.

McClain: I hadn't known him – no.

Wigginton: He volunteered to help you out? Yeah, that's pretty – he liked you a lot, didn't he?

McClain: Yeah, he did. That's one thing, like I said, that really impressed me about him because if I had went to anybody else I probably got a no but when I went to him and explained him my situation he didn't change a word. He said, "Okay, when I get off we'll come and get in the car," and he came and did it and I paid him back. Like I say, we had been friends. Always, every time I see him I always shake his hand. He is a nice guy. I really appreciate that. He always said, "Don't worry about it. Don't worry about it. Don't worry about it."

Wigginton: Yeah. So do you think of – do you have that kind of relationship with sort of younger guys who have come after you as far as being like a mentor or a place where they can – somebody they can talk to about things the same way that Joe was for you?

McClain: Yeah, I got – Romney Vessell. He's here and he always come to me and talk to me about different things. Me and him got a good relationship as well as Willie Simms over in Palmer. We'll talk about things. So I and him got a real good relationship, too.

Wigginton: Yeah, yeah. So that's part of the reason as you were saying earlier that your relationships with people help keep you here, help you stay here.

McClain: Mmm-hmm.

Wigginton: Yeah. So one day you going to retire I presume.

McClain: One day.

Wigginton: What are you going to do when you retire? I just can't see you being at home retired watching TV all day. What are you going to do when you retire?

McClain: I'll probably go in landscaping full time.

Wigginton: Is that right?

McClain: Yeah.

Wigginton: So you might retire from here but you going to be doing stuff?

McClain: I'm going to be doing something.

Wigginton: Yeah.

McClain: What I want to do is kind of like do what I want to do. Do a little fishing and maybe unless you all do some drive and basically that's it. I don't want to lay around the house. No, no, no. That's not in my plan. Not lay around the house.

Wigginton: Yeah (Laughs).

McClain: You have to keep moving because if you keep moving you feel better and I done talk to a lot of peoples who retired and they just went home and laid up and they don't get along too well – I mean they don't get around too well now. So as long as you can keep busy keep busy.

Wigginton: Now is that something that you learned from your upbringing or from your home or something or just something you sort – just the way you are?

McClain: No. I learned that by talking to a lot of people that already have retired.

Wigginton: Okay.

McClain: I remember talking to one guy. He retired of light, gas and water and he told me, he said he retired too early because what he had to do he had to go back out and go back to work again.

He thought he could make it but he didn't. So he had to go back and get him another full time job. So he told me, "Whatever you do make sure that you – this something that you ready to do. You ready. So don't go out when you're not ready."

Wigginton: Yeah.

McClain: So that's what I want to do. I want to make sure I'm ready. So far I'm still in pretty good shape. So the work, it's not awful bad around here. Sometime it get kind of stressful but I mean the next day you come back it's lots different.

Wigginton: Yeah. So if I can ask you some more about your – you mentioned you had three kids. What do they do in Memphis? Are they in any particular areas of work or where do they live and that sorts of things.

McClain: Well I got one that live out here off of Summer. Well I got two live off of Summer and I got one – my daughter, she lives off of National and she work at this eyeglass place out at there, out there off of 70 Highway like around Brownsville.

My oldest son, he work at Chili's out in Collierville. He's a cook. My youngest son, he work with his uncle in AT and they do landscaping. So he work with them. So he's in landscape.

Wigginton: So do any of them work with you sometimes in some of your landscaping stuff that you do as well?

McClain: Yeah. Yeah, sometimes if I get a big job and I need some help I call them and they come. They there for me and I'm there for them. So we work as a team. I learned that you work as a team. So when I need them they'll call me and say, "You need anything?" If they want to borrow some money I say, "Yeah, I got a job you can help me with."

I do it like that.

Wigginton: Yeah, you can pay me back for watching them grandkids.

McClain: Yeah. So if I got a big job they will come and help me.

Wigginton: Yeah. So we – something you mentioned earlier in our conversation was the fact that you've gotten to know when alums come back here and they're looking for you and they want to introduce you to their families, their children, their spouse, whatever the case may be. What does that tell you?

McClain: It tells me I'm kind of important.

Wigginton: Yeah.

McClain: It make me – it really, really do. It really makes me feel good. They hadn't left and came back and maybe like I said ignored me. They let me know right away, "Hey Jimmy, hey Jimmy." A lot of time I maybe forgot who they are and they let me know who they are. So that make me feel good.

Wigginton: Sure. Yeah.

Well I think you're right. I think they think about their experience here and remembering you and having a good relationship with you and they want to share that with their families. So I think that's an important – that is important to them obviously. So are there any other things that we – getting to know you better and getting to talk about some things. Are there some things that you'd like to share, some other things that you'd like to share?

McClain: No more than I've had a good time around Rhodes because when you came here I used to sell your furniture and rugs and all the students they used to put stuff back and send it to the students and made a fair price. A lot of students they would get on me about it, you know. "You sold this guy for this. Why are you selling me this, you know, cheaper and you selling this guy here more?" I have really enjoyed that. That's one thing I can look back and laugh.

They'll tell their family, their wife or their kids, "This guy sold me my first chair," or, "This guy sold me my first piece of carpet, my first mirror," or something like this.

Wigginton: They say what I tell them, "Man, this guy beat me out of" (Laughs). No, you used to look out for us though, there's no doubt about it.

McClain: Yeah.

Wigginton: We knew you were looking out – we were giving you a hard time but we knew you were looking out for us and we were going to have the good stuff.

McClain: Yeah, definitely.

Wigginton: Because you know when I – my sophomore year we lived – I lived with three other guys and there wasn't a whole lot of black students here at the time. There was four black guys living in a big suite in one of the dorms and it was one of the nicest rooms on campus and we were pretty proud of that room and we were thinking about how we had to make that a pretty cool space. We went straight to – "We got to talk to Jimmy. We need to get his A1 stuff."

So we did.

McClain: You all got it. I hooked you all up. I hooked you up.

Wigginton: Yeah, you took care of us. All four of us graduated and we've all – we all stay in touch. We're in different professions but we all have done fine. It's nice to have the roots that we have here. But you don't do that anymore?

McClain: I don't do it anymore. No.

Wigginton: See, those students today they just don't know what they're missing out on.

McClain: Don't know what they're missing.

Wigginton: (Laughs)

McClain: No. That's a no-no now. Mr. Fulston told me that he didn't think it was fair because the student come – they pay a lot of money to come here and then he said when they get here then you start selling furniture and stuff like that they might have second thoughts. So he said, "If you can, cut it out."

Wigginton: (Laughs)

McClain: So I cut it out. I said okay.

Unknown Male: It's hard to compete with the Internet now.

Wigginton: That's right, yeah.

McClain: Yeah. Yeah.

Wigginton: It's a whole different level marketing now.

McClain: Oh man, definite. Definite. Definite. Definite.

Unknown Male: We've got a little bit of time left.

Wigginton: Oh okay, good.

Unknown Male: I want to go back to Fayetteville –

McClain: Fayette County?

Unknown Male: Yeah, Fayette County. Can you tell us a little bit more about you coming up like your parents like what were their names and what they did?

McClain: My parents, my father was named Jack McClain. My mother was named Willie Mae McClain and they was farmers. I would say it was kind of hard for them because my dad had to drop out of school to take care of us. A lot of time we missed a lot days out of school because we lived on a farm. We had to get the crop out. It was kind of tough back then because they had this mall stand I'll never forget it. They served barbecue, ice cream and stuff like that. They had the white go to the front; the black had to go to the back. That was kind of hard and there were several places like that coming up. When you come up out there it was always, "Hey boy this," or, "Hey boy that."

They never used the nigger word to but it was always, "Hey boy this," or, "Hey boy that." You was always put on the backburner. You know what I mean? You was always put on the backburner. So that's something I had to deal with out there. So that's why I said when I came to the city I seen in some cases it was lots different but then as I say after Martin Luther King died it was a whole big difference. But coming up in Fayette County you might say it was just a little town. You roll your window town and spit you'd have went through it.

Unknown Male: What kind of farm was it? What did they grow?

McClain: My dad he used to plant cotton, corn and sorghum. We used to call them cane which is sorghum. We had to get that. Then after we get that then we had to go to the guy that he was renting from to help them get their crop in.

They had to – the way he got his money that after he got his crop in or they pay him for it but they had it where you could go and get things like go to store and you had a list, whatever you want. They write it down, give it to you. At the end of the year you pay up. If you didn't have the money it done go over to the next year. So it just on and on like that. It adds up.

Wigginton: I got a feeling the stuff from the store wasn't cheap.

McClain: No, it wasn't cheap. No, no, no, no. It wasn't cheap at all. So it was kind of hard coming up on a farm.

Wigginton: Like sharecropping?

McClain: Like sharecrop. Yeah.

Wigginton: Yeah.

McClain: I get three bill, you get two or one.

Wigginton: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. That's part of what brought you to Memphis, too, was –

McClain: Getting away from that. Yeah, it did.

Wigginton: Getting away from that, wanting a different kind of opportunity.

McClain: Yeah.

Wigginton: Yeah.

McClain: Because there – it wasn't – the only thing you could do that in it was drive tractors and farm.

So I know a lot of guys, a lot of young guys they did good. They paid them but they wasn't getting paid what they should have been getting paid. They stayed there til – a lot of them stayed there til they got older and got married or moved away. But that wasn't the life that I dreamed of. So I got away from the life and I guess got a hold to a real life.

Unknown Male: Do you remember some of your first impressions coming into the city after being in the country farming?

McClain: Say that again now?

Unknown Male: Do you remember what you first thought about Memphis when you came into Memphis the first couple of years you were here and sort of like adjusting to looking for work in the city verse how you was living before?

McClain: Yeah. Well when I first come to the city I looked around the city and to me it was just big. And like I said I seen so many opportunity. I see peoples doing different things like I say cutting grass, washing windows. So there was always something here that you could do.

I always was I guess a good sell. I could sell myself. I can go somewhere and tell a person that I need to work and I break it down to them and they would say, "Okay then, we'll give you a chance." So when I got to the city the opportunities it was good. Real good. Lots better than it was in Fayette County.

Wigginton: Mmm-hmm.

Unknown Male: To your – all the things that you've accomplished in your life how do you want your children or like your former students who became your friends here on campus at Rhodes how do you want to be remembered?

McClain: I want to be remembered as Jimmy, as a nice guy, friendly guy and always willing to give a helping hand. That's how I want to be remembered.

Wigginton: I think you got that covered.

McClain: I hope so.

That's going to happen. There's no doubt about it.

Unknown Male: Okay.

Wigginton: Great. Very good.

McClain: Okay.

Wigginton: Thank you for your time.