

Participants:

- Linda Burks
- Loretta Watkins
- Unknown Female

Location: Rhodes College - Memphis, Tennessee

Date: November 16, 2007

Linda Burks: Hi. My name is Linda Burks. My age is 61. Today's date is November the 16th, 2007. The location is Rhodes College and my relationship to Ms. Watkins is we are coworkers.

Loretta Watkins: Hello. My name is Loretta Watkins. My age is 57. Today is November 16th, 2007. Location is Rhodes College. Relationship Mrs. Linda Burk is my best friend.

Burks: Well today I just wanted to tell the story about my parents. They was born in Rossville, Tennessee as Rupert Kendrick and Mary Hickma. I understand that they dated for a while and then they went on to marry. They had four children during that time.

Later years they moved to Walls, Mississippi where four more sibling was born and I being the oldest of them. They did sharecropping there while I took care of the kids and they have beautiful vegetable garden. They raised hogs, chicken and we had cows and we just had plenty of good food that was raised by us. But one of the things that I didn't understand during the years they did their personal crops they chopped cotton for like Burks 2.00 a day from sun up to sun down. They also picked cotton for like Burks 2.00 a hundred. Once they had completed their crops they went on to help their neighbors and they did this at no charge other than to say, "Thank you."

So they were very close to their neighbors. After all the crops had been completed then they would sell up. Oh my god, how much money did I see my mother with and had it spread all over the bed and all the children were just so excited because that was the one time that we could get the Cracker Jacks that we liked and stage planks. Were the goodies that the children got back then during that time. But however during all those time we still remained to be a close knit family. We didn't go very much but we went to church all the time during the week and every Sunday. We did not have a lot of clothes to wear but the one thing we did have – we had clothes that were known as Sunday clothes and we had to wear those only on Sunday.

Once we came back home we had to pull those off. We had Sunday shoes, Sunday dresses and that was all we did mostly and we went out into the garden and we gather the vegetable. We poached peanuts. Those were some of the excitement that the children liked doing around the heaters.

Unknown Female: What did you do to the peanuts?

Burks: We poached the peanuts on the stove, on the wood stove then we'd use like our coals and wood. That's what they used in the stoves to cook and that's how we heated our homes during that time. Late at night the fire would go out and we just had to try to keep warm. So there was about three or four of

us in the bed together. Our beds were – I always remember the tick that we had. They were split down the center with cotton and we had to stir them up like we was making bread or something but it made the most beautiful bed.

But I just never could get used to doing that. But I liked growing up in the country and I liked doing all the things we could afford to do. Our parents, they couldn't do much but what they could do they did that. Most of all they kept us all together and they had that love for each other. I often think that if I could change one thing about being back in the country during that time I would just remember not to burn those bridges. Just in my mind keep that bridge strong because that bridge has caused me to be where I am today.

Unknown Female: So do you feel as if you have burned those bridges?

Burks: Well if I had burned those bridges something may have gone wrong in life. I wouldn't have been able to be where I am now. If I had to go back there I would just think that, "Hey, this is what brought me across and this is what got me here today." Our parents always instilled in us that if we pray together then we'll be able to stay together. I loved that and I enjoyed that country life but I would not want to just go back there to live but I often ride through there and things has really changed.

Unknown Female: How is it different now?

Burks: Well one thing, they have changed the highway. You used to go straight 61 there but now you have to cross over to get on the old highway to go to our hometown, Walls, Mississippi.

I never went too far down in Mississippi. I think I went as far as a little town called like Lake Harmony but it was nice. Loretta, tell me something about your life back when.

Watkins: Well I was born in Summerville, Tennessee and our mother used to tell stories to me. She was born in 1920, Ms. Roberta Watkins and she'd tell stories to me down because I was the youngest of the siblings that they cropped and everything but the crop belonged to my granddaddy. They never sharecrop or never live on a plantation. That when I was small they would go out and chop, pick in the field and they would take me and sit me in a box and I would be on the rows with them out there in the field.

Then she said we had to churn milk, my mother and my older sisters and my grandparents. They churned milk, made butter. They had to kill hogs and just regular farming. She said they used to on Sundays they had a tradition where everybody went to church and then every Sunday they cooked meals for the reverend at my parents' home. They would – everybody would come to the house, all the siblings, all the relatives and everybody would eat in one place every Sunday. She said on the Saturdays they would go to town. Once every Saturday they would go to town and they would always buy crackers and red bologna and then you'd buy a red drink. She said they weren't able to go to the movies back then but as years went by and my other siblings got older they were able to go the movie and it was a nickel to get in a movie.

She would always tell me whenever they would go to the grocery stores or different places it was different that they had – if somebody – if they was in line to get their groceries _____ or whatever they were going to buy at the store in town that if the white people would come up then they had to wait until they were waited on. But where I was born at they had – up to Walton where we live in _____,

Tennessee my mother said they had the barbecue place you could go buy sandwiches but the white was to go to the front and the black had to get served in the back.

Unknown Female: Do you remember any of that yourself?

Watkins: No. My mother told me. I don't remember any of that because I was a baby. It was just a story told down by my mother to me but I don't remember anything.

Unknown Female: Do you remember any specific story she told you or any incidents that happened to her?

Watkins: Well she told me one time that they were on their way to town and that they was pulled over by the sheriff. She said the sheriff just harass like my father a little bit and whatever but then nothing just dramatic happen to them anything but they would get harassed sometime when they went to town.

Burks: Okay, Loretta. Well I was talking about the food that my parents raised. I mean the hogs, the chickens. Have you killed a chicken before?

Watkins: No. I never killed a chicken before but my auntie used to kill them as I growed up and got a little older, I was still a little girl but I would see my Annie catch the chickens and ring their neck and kill the chickens, you know. Then they would take it, cooked in the scalding hot water, pluck the chicken and prepare to cook it.

Burks: Well absolutely correct. I had the opportunity one time to try and ring the chicken neck off and I was pecking the chicken around but I never get the neck off. So somebody had to ring the chicken around and get the neck off the chicken. But it was something to see the chicken would just shout, jump around before it died and absolutely. We did have to put the chicken in hot water and get the feathers plucked off them. But I never had an opportunity to do anything with the hogs except look at them when they would do the hog. I never had anything to do with that. I tried to milk our cow one time and I fell off the stool. So I never had another experience trying to milk the cow. But also I did not say about when I was a little girl in the country I remember that they had – they did not get paid every week. They got paid like every two weeks.

On that extra Saturday that they did not get paid it was known as a drag Saturday. So what they would do is you would go to the grocery store and they would give you some kind of book that had little money tokens on it and it was called a Do Look book and you could go to the store and purchase groceries with that and the next pay period they would deduct that from your salary. So that was just kind of interesting to me.

Watkins: Well Ms. Linda have you ever made the – churned the milk or made the butter where you was from, where you all had from?

Burks: No. I tried milking the cow. That's all I tried doing and that didn't work out. I fell off the stool so I never had anything else to do with that cow. I did babysit. I did mostly babysitting in the country while they did the crops and they were – as they weighed the cotton out on a tall pole lean as a big tall pyramid and I would sit out there and set the baby out there also.

I do recall this terrible time that we were out there and I was watching the baby and I just got a hammer and just was going around in a circle with the hammer in my hand and I managed to let the hammer go

and it hit my little brother in the head. That was a terrible evening for me once my mom found out about that.

Watkins: So did you all ever do anything like go out kill the hogs or anything like that, for it's hog killing time? You know that hog killing time back in the country years ago?

Burks: Absolutely. My dad and my older brothers did the hog. I never did. I think I may have tried to help my mom do some chittlins. The only thing I basically did with that hog was eat it. (Laughs) I did.

Unknown female: What were your schools like?

Burks: Well we – every class was in one big huge building. During the weekday they used it as a school and on Sunday they used it as a church. That's basically about the schools.

Watkins: So let me ask you another one. What about the clothing? What type of clothing did you wear back then? They said a lot of things were made of like flour that they got in the flour sack and that's what – they made your clothes to wear out the sack.

Burks: True. My mom used to buy the 25 pound bags for flour. Once she used the flour she washed the sacks and she would always buy those pretty color sacks with flowers in it. So she made our dresses out of that. We wore like high top shoes and some of the children wore like brown stockings but I don't ever recall wearing any of those but we did walk like country miles to school.

A lot of time we had to carry our lunch in a molasses bucket. Our parents would cook and we'd carry our lunch, fix our lunch in that. We didn't have lunch bags and wax paper and all of that. We'd carry our lunch in a bucket.

Watkins: Did you all ever get a chance to go to town on some Saturdays?

Burks: I just don't ever remember going to town. I do recall my mom going but I don't recall going to town. Did you ever go to town? What did you all do for recreation?

Watkins: Well we used to wear – as I grew up and got a little older you know because I was the baby of the family I would see my sisters and them make those stilts with the cans. It wasn't such thing as skates. They didn't have anything like that.

Burks: Absolutely.

Watkins: They was make the stilts and you would walk down the road on the stilts and you was real, real tall. I was seeing them do that.

We didn't have a candy man – a store that – well we didn't go too much to store, to town. We went for _____. We didn't buy you know like the candy. So there was a candy man that always would come around to the house and they would leave so much candy and though your mother then he'll come back collect the money later. I know I kind of remember that but I was still the young sibling. Then I remember the time when our mother used to straighten our hair out, my oldest two sisters and do our hair. I was always – I was still up to their age. Once a chicken snake got in our house and the chicken snake love eggs. The chicken snake was in the box and it was just eating all the eggs. Our momma was very afraid of snakes. So she would always run and get my auntie but my auntie was never afraid. She could take those snakes and ring their neck and just chop them. She wasn't afraid of anything.

All that happened in the country and for us milking the cows. I never milked a cow but I used to go in the barn. I was still a little young girl. I used to go in the barn and mess around with the hay. We used to get on the mule and it would be all of us on the one mule. We used to go – somebody would fall off. The mule never stepped on us. It was so much fun. I remember my mother and me used to raise – used to take – after they kill the hog they would have the – where they cure the hog and where they keep the bacon and the hams and the skins and all that. We used to go out there and eat some skins. My mother didn't want us to really sneak out there and eat the skins and cut off the ham and all that but that was the good eating and the good cooking. My mother used to make the homemade butter roll they used to make that years ago. We didn't eat like bacon with the hog.

We would always eat Stricklean fed back and they were fried in sorghum molasses and humper dough biscuits and all that was just real good food. But it was a tradition thing where everybody just ate and joined together and helped each other, you know. As I never went to a country school but my siblings did and it was like you say a one big room and it was the school there and it was the church there. They carried – they said they carried their lunch in a bucket. It was just whatever momma cooked, that's what you ate for lunch. It was similar to the living that everything – the same as your family and my family but as we moved to the city it was different. We came to the city. I was like in the 3rd grade and I remember that they busses were about – you had to ride on the back of the bus.

The white on the front and the black on the back.

Unknown Female: Do you remember what that was like the first time? Do you remember when you realized that?

Watkins: Yeah. It was you know you get on the bus and everybody was on the back so you know you had to go to the back. You know once my sister – my sister that's next to me got on the bus and she dropped her – she never liked to buy lunch at school when we first moved to the city. She always want to take her biscuits and ham from home. She got on the bus one morning and she dropped her lunch. My oldest sister and brother ignore like they didn't know her and she called their names, "Standing and wipe and help me get my lunch off the floor," and everybody on the bus turned around and looked at her and act they didn't know her because they was embarrassed. But it was just strange because it was a familiar thing to us because as we got on the bus all our color was on the back of the bus. Then certain places you went in Memphis when we get here it was like color restroom and white restroom.

Then when you went to the zoo it was color restroom and a white restroom.

Burks: And also a certain day –

Watkins: Certain day.

Burks: - with the colors.

Watkins: Certain day we had to go to the zoo, just certain days we could go to the Memphis zoo. Certain days for the blacks, certain days for the whites. Where we lived at one street over that's where the whites begin to live and everybody who lived in the black neighborhood we went – was mostly maids because my mother was a maid. She worked for the Gads'. They owned jewelry stores here. She worked for one of the brothers. He was a traveling salesman. The lived like three streets from where we live but it was the white community back in those days. I remember East Drive that's right straight

down Springdale that's in the back of the college. East Drive that's right in the back of Rhodes College now. You could not go through there. No, they didn't want nobody to go through there for years and years and years.

We used to walk through there to go to the zoo but I see since years back now they got it where you cannot drive through there coming from Springdale across Jackson and you can't walk through there.

Burks: Absolutely.

Watkins: But they have been wanting to stop that walk there for years and years and years at East Drive. I remember the time when we used to catch the tunnel and walk to the zoo all the way in the tunnel to the zoo and come up in the zoo and the zoo was free back those days. It didn't cost any money. But things have changed now you know since 1962. We got to ride on the front of the bus and things is still – it's different than some places but mostly it's about the same. But in my lifetime since I've got older we was traveling to Alabama and we stopped at a convenience store and we saw them burn a cross. Now I've seen that down in Alabama before but we just got out the car, got what we was going to get, get back in the store and here we go and continued to drive on but we didn't have any problems going to our destination.

But I've seen a cross burning before.

Unknown Female: Do you remember the first time you were able to sit on the front of the bus?

Watkins: It was 1962 when the segregation laws and we were able to sit on the front of the bus.

Unknown Female: But do you remember the time when you sat on the front of the bus?

Watkins: Oh yeah. I remember the time I sat on the front seat.

Unknown Female: What was that like?

Watkins: It was like exciting. I sat on the first seat when you get on the bus. They had two seats facing each other. I sat right there when I first got on the bus.

Burks: Well when it first happened was you a little nervous, uncomfortable?

Watkins: No. I was just glad to jump on the bus. I wasn't everything. I was just calm.

Burks: You just felt good about it.

Watkins: Felt good about it and we was able to go more places than we usually go. We used to go just certain places. We could go anywhere we want to.

Burks: Absolutely.

Watkins: But it was still a different experience in some places but we were still able – allowed to do things that we hadn't been allowed to do for years and years and years.

Burks: Oh okay. Well if you could change anything what would you change?

Watkins: If I could go back and change some things my mothers had to do in their lifetime I would change when they went to town. They'd be able to go do things, do more you know. I would like to

change where they had to chop in the fields all day, sun up sun down, have to work so hard. I would like to change all of that for my parents. Both of my parents now are deceased right now. If I could go back to the days I would like to do a whole lot for things to change for them. They wouldn't have to be where it's working hard and always just have to just work and for everything they got and just have to work hard. I'd rather for them to be able to cherish things in which they weren't able to do and they weren't able to get a lot like I am now today, able to go shopping and do things.

They weren't able back there to do things and be able to go places and see things and meet people. Back those days they was just in the fields and back in the woods and they weren't able. I would like to change that if I had a change.

Burks: Okay. Well do you think by our parents working so hard back then, from sun up to sun down do you think that caused some early death because I recall my mom died in '72 but my dad died at an early age in '54?

Watkins: Yeah. I think so because back then I don't think there was a whole lot of hospitals, anything like that and I think it was more like of a mid-term – nit nurse who came who delivered the babies back at that time and I believe a lot of hard work did cause a lot deaths early because they never got a chance to come to hospitals and things.

So you know it caused a lot of deaths in the years back there. My mother's mother passed, just passed. So nobody never know whether it was from child birth to what. But back in them days we didn't have all this medical stuff and all this like we have today. So they really suffered back in those days.

Burks: Yeah, I think so. They didn't have an opportunity to go and they used so many home remedies. Like back then a lot of the home remedies didn't work and some probably did help but I think maybe working hard like they did – I recall my mom say she used to bunch grains and I wonder what that was for a long time and ice was on them. So her hand would just be numb. They did not have gloves. So I'm sure that probably caused a lot of arthritics in our parents back then.

Watkins: Yeah. I'm for sure it did Ms. Linda. Let me ask you this though. What about – do you all have – okay, back in the years did your parents have a vehicle?

Burks: I do not recall a vehicle. I really don't.

Watkins: Well I know back in the years I don't think my granddaddy and my auntie and them they had a vehicle because I remember they said they used to go to town in the wagon and to church in the wagon and everything was in the wagon. Everywhere you went was in the wagon back in those days.

Burks: Absolutely. Horse and wagon.

Watkins: Horse and wagon.

Burks: I don't think I would feel comfortable if I had to do all that, live that type of life today because I'm kind of used to the modern life and kind of used to what I can do both go any place and work any place you want, do anything you most want now.

Watkins: So it would be kind of complicated for me if I had to go back to those days and live the life that they had to live.

Burks: Okay. You don't think you could adjust because sometimes I recall back when we had that – what – that straight windstorm and our lights were out. It was just chaos for so long and that was kind of like getting – you had to get adjust to maybe using candles or a lamp with kerosene or whatever they use in those lamps. Well we had to get used to that. So I always think you – we have come a long ways but you never know when we might have to fall back and do some of the things that we did when we was growing up because back then in the country for a long time before we had electricity we had to use lamps to light our houses and we had like – I think they call them icebox where you would go out and purchase ice and bring it back in a big huge block and you would use an ice pick to chip it off.

Watkins: Yeah, well I remember the ice storm back years ago but I had to kind of, just like you say – we had to burn candles because we had no utilities and we had to kind of reflect back to the old – to the years back when we were sitting in the dark and everything.

Burks: Right, yes.

Watkins: But then they had hotels that had lights. So you didn't have to really stay home if you didn't want to because you could have went to a hotel and they had electricity and they had lights.

Burks: Well maybe some of us and maybe some of us still today cannot afford to just on the spur of the moment jump up and go to a hotel you know. Being that case my mind's running back thinking about the incident down in New Orleans. They had asked the people to leave but you know it's kind of difficult for you to just jump up on the spur of the moment. All of us can't because we don't have transportation and we don't have the money to just jump up and leave. So we just have to sit there and try to wait it out and hope for the better.

Watkins: But by the way you're talking about New Orleans, the incident that happened down there.

Burks: Mmm-hmm.

Watkins: My sister that passed in 2005 a family that her husband knew lived with them until like last year and they moved back to Louisiana, New Orleans. It was very difficult for them to live up here because they lost everything they had but it was very difficult. She had a sister that was a librarian and she was taken sick with multiple sclerosis and never recovered.

Burks: So sometimes things happen and we just have to do the best we can with what we got, you know. If we know ahead of danger that's coming or supposed to happen that if we could afford it and some of us just not physically able – we have to consider that. A lot of us not physically able to jump up and just move on along to some other place.

Watkins: Yeah, you're right Ms. Linda. Another thing I wanted to bring up too that I didn't bring up in the conversations was that my mother had some step sisters and brothers and there was quite a bit of them. They worked on the farm. My mother – in Macon, Tennessee. My mother went – go out there and check on them all the time and it so happens that she went out there one Saturday and she said those boys had been beat and their t-shirts were stuck to their back and they had whips on their body where they have been beat out there in that field. She said she called the sheriff and she said she got those kids and she brought them all, all those siblings back up here with her to Memphis. They stayed there until they was able to venture out on their own and most of them went to St. Louis, Missouri. That was back in the years. They were just beat and beat.

She said their shirts were just stuck to their backs where they had been whipped and beat

Burks: Yes.

Watkins: But that was back in the days. Crucial things happen in the days. But now we in the new beginning of life now so things have changed a bit but in some places you go now it's still there.

Burks: Yes, Loretta. Things are still happening. We've come a long ways true and we thank the Lord for that but we still have a long ways to go. We have things that's continued to happen. The little West Memphis incident and the –

Unknown Female: Explain. What was that incident?

Burks: That incident in West Memphis was about the DeAunte Farrow shooting, the 12 year old being shot by a police officer. Well that's still going on. Then we have the Jena Six somewhere down South there.

So we've come a long ways but we still got a long ways to go and we just going to have to keep on praying and hoping for the better and pray for our children.

Watkins: Well I'm going to back to the incident in West Memphis. DeAunte's mother's on her way to Washington, DC. She's in Washington now –

Burks: She's there now.

Watkins: - because they had the march today. The Jena Six, what they trying to do in Washington now they trying to get the hate crime on the hanging noose and different other things that happen. Then another incident that happened back – it was 2005 when a 14 year old got abused at the camp, they going to bring that up today when they go for – to try to – the march. His attorney's there also, too. It was a boot camp, 2005. Remember?

Burks: Oh yes.

Watkins: The 14 year old got abused and was beaten and gagged and they videoed it and all this colorful _____.

But like Ms. Linda say we have came a long way but we got a long way to go right now because things are still happening now and we have to continue to pray each and every night and each and every minute and each and every day that things will go on and will get better for us.

Unknown Female: What do you think race relations are like in Memphis right now, sort of the day to day?

Watkins: Well like I say it's not that bad. It's just certain people that you meet because to me it's not that bad in Memphis at all. It's just certain people that you meet. That's how I can explain it. What about you Ms. Linda?

Burks: Well I'm going to tell you. I think our biggest problem here in Memphis now is crime, black crime on black crime. That's what it is. We're killing up each other. It's not so much what the white man is doing but we need to stop killing each other.

That's what we are doing every day, every night, every hour. You hear a crime it's us killing each other and it needs to stop. That's a major issue here in Memphis is crime. Crime is really up. You're almost afraid to – I am – walk out of your door now. I walked out of my door a couple Saturdays ago. I had my porch light off and I was going to get my son about 10:00 and I flipped the porch light on and opened the door. The tags on my car was lying on my porch. They had taken them off the car so I'm sure they was around the house someplace waiting to get them because if they were not going to get them I don't think they would have taken them off. I had locked the door and I was too afraid to stand there and try to unlock the door. So I just jumped in the car and took off. So it's really dangerous. It's dangerous out here.

Unknown Female: What do you think people can do to make it better?

Burks: I think it starts with the heart, loving each other. More love and parents teaching our children at home. Don't expect them to go out in the street and get something that they are not getting at home. I think it just needs to be more love. That's one way of – I think it starts at home. We need to teach our children and train our children, keep our children in church and in Christian organizations where they can learn how to love each other instead of killing each other. Lay the whipping down and pick up the Bible and study it. Learn what – how we supposed to treat each other. We didn't give life and we shouldn't take it. That's all we're doing today is just taking the life. You know if you going down the street in your car they'll stop right in front of you and hold a conversation and your best thing to do is sit there until they finish, not say a word if you can't get around them because if you do you may get caught because they're just – at random just load you up with bullets for no reason at all.

You could sit on your porch and that's what they'll do.

Watkins: The main issue, the main topic is that I wish we could all be able to join together because we are so separated you know.

Burks: Yes.

Watkins: We are very separated. If we could just join together and just try to be one big family because I love everybody regardless of race or color. It doesn't make any difference.

Burks: Amen.

Watkins: That's how we supposed to be but it doesn't happen like that. It doesn't happen like that. We just have to learn how to deal with it until things get better because some places we go, some places we do we still is lower, on the lower level.

We not up to the standards. So we got a long way to go. But we constantly climbing but we pull each other down. As go up the ladder we falling back down the ladder. We've got to be able to climb the ladder and make it to the top.

Burks: We go four steps up and we come back down three of them.

Watkins: But that's how –

Burks: So that's a slow process for us.

Watkins: That's how –

Burks: But hopefully we can get it together Loretta. I've enjoyed talking with you, hearing your stories. Hopefully at some time we can continue to talk about these old times.

Watkins: Ms. Linda, I enjoyed talking to you. I enjoy listening to your stories and maybe at another time we can continue.