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"Negro house of old type," Alabama, ca. 1922

"hobo" to Charlotte, North Carolina. When he finally returned some twenty years later, neither his eight siblings nor his father recognized him. The conditions that Cavers was trying to escape were common among rural African Americans in the Jim Crow era: poverty, maltreatment, brutal and often unpaid labor, a lack of educational opportunities, and the constant threat of white violence. . . As Cavers suggests, even well-intentioned New Deal programs such as the Works Progress Administration (WPA) did relatively little to alter the bitter truths of many black sharecroppers' lives.

## Narrative of

# WALTER M. CAVERS

Alabama & North Carolina, 1930s-1950s

◆ Age 83 ◆

Interview conducted 1993, Charlotte, NC

Behind the Veil Project: Documenting African American Life in the Jim Crow South, Center for Documentary Studies, Duke University

Born in 1910, twenty miles outside of Selma, Alabama, Walter Cavers felt compelled to leave his family in the late 1930s and

**W**e lived out in Autauga County [Alabama]. [My parents] were farmers. We had three rooms. There were nine of us. Our house was partly built with slabs. I don't know whether you know what a slab is. That's the outside of a log wood. [We were] just dusty farmers, and we lived on a plantation where, when the crops matured, we'd take the grain or cotton up to the boss's house. So many times I can remember that he'd sell the cotton and give us the cotton seeds. Back then everything was cheap. One of my ambitions, the biggest one, was to go to college. See, we didn't have no public schools back then. I attended school three months in a year. Then that's all we got until the next year. The white [children] would be going to school up to May or June. But we only had our school open in November and it closed in March or the last of February.

[One day] we were picking velvet beans. It was the kind of bean that would eat you up, scratch and sting you. I told my boss that I wanted to go to school. He asked me where I wanted to go. I told him Tuskegee. He turned around and hit me in the mouth and told me George Washington Carver should have been killed a long time ago.

I used to work for the gentleman [whose] place we stayed at. He asked me to turn a big log, and I couldn't turn it, and I walked off and came home. I told [my mother] what happened. She said, "Well, you better move somewhere else and not let them find you here tonight." Sure enough they came. Just because I said I couldn't turn the log. Part of it did dawn on me before I left, that I wasn't a man, and I wasn't respected [by] the other race. I soon found that out. The whites, we lived on their place. We'd go possum hunting together, all that sort of thing. They never would bother you if they had a gripe against you until that night. Your best friend in the white race would come for you at night. They'd laugh and smile and everything until that night. You couldn't trust them. Then night come and they come for you and give you a good thrashing. Who were you going to complain to about it? Nobody. You just got a good whipping.

[In Alabama] I used to work on the WPA. I couldn't get nothing to eat. There wasn't no jobs. When [you] worked for the WPA, you saw no money. They gave you a slip, a little piece of blue paper and you could take it up there where you buy your coal; they specify how much coal to give you. Then you got your meal. They put it in there and you put it in a croaker sack and throw it over your shoulder and come

on home. We cleaned out ditches. You didn't get no money. You only got food. I was scheduled to work two days a week. That's all I could work. Say if you go in on Monday, you'd work Monday and Tuesday. Tuesday [at] three o'clock the truck would bring you back by the canteen. No, before we went to the canteen, they came around to all the employees and give them a green slip. That was to buy coal, food, and they would give you a supplement which was dried beans, hog jaws, hog head, butter, meal, and I think it was five pounds of flour, five pounds of loose sugar. It depended on how many you had in the family.

I worked for 10 cents an hour in Alabama. If I was picking cotton — I never was a good picker — I would get 50 cents for that day's work. On a Sunday when they got ready to go, [my sisters] would wrap their hair in plaits out of cotton stocking. My shoes, brogans, I'd take lard and soot and make up the shoe polish. A car was out of the question. I had worked all year and didn't get anything, didn't have anything, and I couldn't see where I was getting no more. So a gentleman came down. I saw

him coming down across the field on his horse. He said to me, "Walter, let the mules cool off a little bit." I said, "Okay." I let them cool off and I got to thinking while I was out there and I just kept walking. Just kept walking. They looked for me and I was gone. What prompted me to leave there, it was spring and we were breaking land. I didn't even get a pair of shoes for the winter. I didn't get nothing. [The landlord] gave us an acre. My brothers and sisters, we worked hard on it and [made] a bale and a half of cotton. He took the cotton and gave us the seed. It wasn't nothing my father could do about it. So that was in the back of my mind. I said, "Well, I'm going to leave here. Don't know where I'm going, but I'm going to leave here." I had nothing to look forward to. He had taken everything I'd made. So I'm going to go through another year and come up with the same thing, not even shoes. Uh uh, [I] couldn't do that. So I just wandered off.

I didn't go back there no more. That was back in the thirties. I just had to get out from down there and I walked until I got to Calera. Then from Calera I went on to Saginaw, and I'd go around to the back door of some white residence and ask for some food. They'd always hand me something. I kept on trying to make it. Finally, I managed to reach Anniston, Alabama. That's where I got the train to come here. I remember, shortly after I was here [in Charlotte], sleeping outdoors for three or four nights in February. I took pneumonia and fell uptown on [the] street. Some people came by, and I told them I was sick, and they took me to a widow lady's house on Palmer's Street. That's where I stayed until I felt better and recuperated. They told the lady to take care of me, some of the church members from one of the large churches here. So she did. From there I managed to get a better place to stay.

I remember in my traveling: I was very tired. I'd been walking all day and it was hot. I decided to go out and lay down beside the road. I went off, I reckon about 15 feet. It was dark, and [I] laid down and went to sleep. I was awakened by a wagon. That was about one or two o'clock. It was a two-horse wagon. Whoever was driving it had a lantern, a light down in the bottom, So I said, "Guess you're somebody going to town." So I went to sleep. I woke up a little after daylight. I didn't think of it no more. So then I noticed where I went to sleep. There wasn't no way in the world that a wagon or mule could come up through that cemetery because brush was all in the old slavery-time road. There were no tracks of no kind,



no nothing. I said, "Let me get out of here. I laid down in the wrong place." I don't know what that was. I don't believe in ghosts, but people say there are ghosts. I've never been able to figure that out.

So I went on to Saginaw, later made my way to Anniston and the train. [It was a] steam engine, and they had what you called the mail car. I got between there and stood there until we got in Atlanta. When I got in Atlanta, the sheriff discovered me. I mean the conductor or somebody discovered I was on there. I ran through the yard, and finally they turned around and left. I was talking with a colored person who worked there in the yard, and he said Number 67 and 66 were going to pull out at 6:15. He said, "Now they've got to stop up here to get water." See, you pull that thing down and water the train. He said, "If you get in it, I'll show you where to stand." So I went with him up there. After awhile, two locomotives came up with a string of cars. He pulled that thing down and put the water in there, and after he put it up, everybody went back in the train, [and] I climbed up between the mail car and the engine. That's where I stood all night long. So when I got in Charlotte somebody said to the conductor, "We got company back there." He came around there looking for me, and I went out on the right side and jumped off and went up Trade Street and then turned and went to Swatts Junkyard. Went over in there where they couldn't find me, and I stayed over there until the train left. Then I said, "Let me go and see if I can find something to eat and a place to stay." I never did that day, never did. So I slept at Martin's Shop up here on Statesville Avenue that night. The next night I didn't find anything. I was walking with no money and nowhere to live, and I was just sick. Those two Christian gentlemen, [Bailey Young and Dr. Moore, found me]. It was all I could do to make it to [Miss] Butler's. They put me to bed, and I had pneumonia. [Miss Butler] put tar, what they get out of pine, and covered my chest with that tar. I don't know what was in that stuff, but anyway, it made me well. I didn't have no doctor.

The gentlemen told her they would pay her. I had nothing to pay her with. She was an elderly lady, and she liked the home remedies. She used one of her home remedies. The next morning, I believe it was on a Friday, the Sunday school department [of] First Baptist Church, that I am now a member of, sent me thirteen dollars. The pastor there saw to it that I got food. I didn't know nobody, and I've been here ever since. Up and down. I just didn't know all of this could happen to a person in their lifetime.

I have had an uphill battle. I've been in jail. I've been accused of things I wasn't guilty of. But I got by. I got by. I had to go to jail for something I did not do. I spent a year in jail. A gentleman ran into me, a white gentleman, and they condemned me of driving too big a car. They didn't like that I had a new Lincoln. They couldn't give me a [proper] lawyer because you couldn't get a lawyer in [York, South Carolina]. The lawyer I did get was a neighbor of the deceased. They played chess together. So I went to jail for that. I had a lot of aid. I had people from all over the country helping, trying to declare me [the victim] of a false charge. But it didn't do any good.

I saw a car coming. I was going south. When I got to the intersection where the light was green, I was sure the car meeting me would stop. He didn't. He tried to cross in front of me, and I hit his right fender. He was 84 years old, and he passed away. They say he had a heart attack. I don't know about that. But it wasn't any damage [to the car]. You couldn't hardly tell it was hit. I heard my attorney say, "Blow that picture up and make it as bad as you can." [And] I'm paying him! The [old man] was the one made the turn. He wasn't supposed to make a left-hand turn with ongoing traffic against the light, but he did it. Now it would have been something if I had hit him in the side or back, but it was on his left fender and I had spend a year [in jail] for that.

A gentleman 10 miles from where the accident occurred said he heard my car speeding at 75 miles an hour. I had a lot of support because nobody didn't believe it. I still keep the brief. Everybody wanted to read it. But it was just a shame. I got no justice. If I had not admitted that I was a member of the NAACP, it probably wouldn't have been so hard. But you know how most people feel about the NAACP. If it had been here, tried in [North Carolina], I don't believe I would have got anything. The gentleman was 84 years old and blind, but he was white. So it cost me my freedom for some time. I had to stay away from my home for more than five years.

I was in jail only 12 months. The judge gave me probation, and they wanted me to come to South Carolina to live. You see, if you are on probation, unless you can get the probation officer in [another] state or county to supervise you [you cannot leave the state], and I wasn't lucky enough to do that. Finally, a gentleman in New York, a minister, gave me a job [and] then I got out. But I thought it was wrong [for them] to railroad me. It wouldn't happen this time of day, but it did happen back then. That was back in 1958, in York, South Carolina.

After [we moved back to Charlotte], we had a lot of threats, but they never identified themselves. We'd been here about a week. We had stayed in New York for most of the time. I remember one night shortly after we came back somebody called here and called me an SOB and said, "You're not going to live here and you'd better get out of town." So I hung up the telephone because I didn't think much of it. I thought it was just somebody playing a prank. In a few minutes the hospital called and said my wife was receiving the same threats. So then they brought her home and kind of looked out, patrolled this area. Nothing ever did happen about it. They thought I had hit that gentleman. It was just some white gentleman would call. If I had known who [was threatening us], I would have had them arrested, but I didn't know who did it. Every afternoon we'd see cars parked. The lady on the corner called me and asked why this gentleman was up there, coming in to park every evening. So I called the police. The police came out and didn't find anybody. Possibly whoever it was had a [police] scanner. For years after I got back here, I had it pretty rough. I still held on. I got a church soon after, and I didn't have to apply for no job. I stayed there until the end of my probation.

I had a gentleman call me up, the richest person we have here in Charlotte. I knew him very well. I came home for dinner and while I was at dinner the phone rang. I answered it. He told me who he was. "Was that your car you were driving this morning?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Sell it. I don't want to see it on the street no more." That was before I had the accident. That was way back in the fifties. Then he called me again [after the accident] and said, "I could help you but I'm not. I told you so sell that damn car." So I said, "Well, whatever a person wants to drive, if they've got the money, [they] can drive it." Alonzo Mackey, a friend of mine, had to go to Pennsylvania and get a car. It was the biggest Chrysler



they were making back then. They wouldn't sell him one here. I got [my Lincoln] through a person in another state. When I built this house, wouldn't a bank in town loan me one dime. I had to build it from scratch.

I got in trouble because I reached for something too big and it wasn't time for me to get it. I've had [church] members say that you can't, you don't drive a car [unless it] was

just a secondhand car. When I first got one of those cars, I was living in Fairview Homes [public housing]. The supervisor over there told me she wanted my car. I told her, "No." I wasn't going to trade my new car to her. She wanted to swap. Because I didn't do it, I got outdoors. They told me to move. They told me [I had] a certain length of time. I said, "What are you doing?" I said, "I have a wife and a baby, and I can't move." So it hasn't been an easy road. A few bumps.

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