



Narrative of **WILLIE HARRELL**

Mississippi & Tennessee, 1930s-1950s

◆ Age 68 ◆

Interview conducted 1995, Memphis, TN

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



Leaving Mississippi for Memphis, Tennessee seems to have been the central fact in Willie Harrell's life. Harrell was born in 1927 and grew up sharecropping on a plantation owned by two brothers — two "old white honkies" whose cowboy hats defined them as much in his mind as their brutality to the men and women who worked for them. As a young man, Harrell decided to leave. He could not pay off his debts as his grandparents had done a short time before, but he managed to save enough money for a train ticket and began to watch for an opportunity to steal away.

Harrell offers suggestive glimpses of a mid-twentieth-century plantation life that was only a hairbreadth removed from nineteenth-century slavery. Adhering to racial "etiquette," white denied blacks the courtesy titles of "Mr." and "Mrs." and forced them to enter white homes through the back door. They employed corporal punishment freely and kept their tenants' children out of school to work in the fields. And, just as slaveholders handed out rations, Harrell's landlords controlled "furnishing," the practice of providing clothing and other supplies to farmers on credit in anticipation of the harvest. Although they sometimes took tenants to town to buy supplies, Harrell's landlords more often drove a busload of groceries and other items from house to house, encouraging their workers to buy from them on credit and go ever further into debt.

Harrell's recollections of sharecropping are followed by an escape narrative reminiscent of runaway slaves' struggles to gain their freedom a century earlier. But then, as Harrell explained, it was "just like old slavery time" for him as a young man. "That's the way it was when I come up in the country."

Everything you had to do was outside of the door. It wasn't inside the house, like a bathroom. We had to take a bath in a bathtub in front of the fireplace. They didn't have it like it is [now], when I was coming up. Uh uh. It was in the country. Didn't nothing have it but the white people. Colored didn't have nothing like that.

You couldn't go in a front door down there. You had to go in the back. During that time, if you was allowed to go into white folks' house, you had to go around to the back. They used to feed you outside of the door. Outdoors. You wasn't allowed to go in there.

Didn't nobody have a car but white folks. Them big white people [who] own[ed] them plantations. Naw, we colored didn't know what a car was. Didn't know nothing but mules and tractors. That's all we knowed about. All we ever did [was] farmed. Cotton and corn and everything you could name, we raised it. That's all [we] ever knowed was to do it. Cotton and corn. Beans. Peas. Peanuts and potatoes and everything. They give us so much [farmland] a year, and if we cleared anything, like on the sale of cotton, they would give it. If we didn't, we had to go over another year if we was going to stay on that plantation, but if we were going to move on another plantation, well, that boss man come to pay for what we owe and move us on their plantation. That's the way they did. If you didn't want to stay with them, if you owed them some, this honkie would come over here and buy you from this man, and you go and live with him and work the crop there a year. Sometimes I get to thinking about that, and then when *Roots* come on [television], that time when they have it on, I cut it off. I couldn't stand to look at it, because I went through some of it. I just flipped it off because it put me in a memory of what I used to go through when I was coming up. I couldn't stand to see it.

They used to come to our house down them dirt roads in the country once a month. That's when we'd get our groceries. They hauled it on a school bus. Wasn't no stores like it is now. They brings it to your house, see, and they allow you so much a month. You get it off that bus. That's just like a grocery store. You couldn't go to no grocery store. They didn't have that many in town. Your food come out on a bus like that. You couldn't get but one pair of shoes a year off of the bus. You wore boots along there, [and] them overalls. My granddaddy wore a pair of boots until he couldn't get a string in them, but he tore them and just kept putting strings in them, you know, to walk on. Couldn't get no shoes or nothing like that till the end of the year.



You could [also] go to town, and shop there at them stores, and then, like you staying on a plantation, the white people loads coloreds up on the back of their pickup and take them to town and let them buy what they wanted, and they pay for it. Overalls and jumpers and shoes, like that, they would pay for it. They wouldn't give you the money to go and shop. They'd take you to shop. They would furnish you that for the year.

They always called me "Son" or "Harrell." That's all they ever knowed of my name. That's all they ever called me. [They] called [the older people] "Whitman" or something like that or "Uncle." Them old white folks call[ed] the older people "Uncle" or "Auntie." Wasn't nothing [older blacks] could do [about it]. They had to [just] feel good over it, because there's nothing they could do about it, but take it. That's right. That's all.

We couldn't go to no school. You take me. I didn't go to school but once or twice out of the year. That's right. I was in the first grade. I can't read and write now, because I didn't have the chance to go to school like children got now. Back there then, there wasn't no school like it is now. You had to walk seven or eight miles to the school. When it rained and you couldn't do nothing in the field or you couldn't do no other kind of work, that's when you had a chance to go to school, but as soon as the sun comes out and dry off, you in the field. [I] never did have no chance to go to school in them days. You always doing something, cutting wood, or [cutting] cross ties, or [working in a] sawmill or doing something, [even] in the winter. I bet you I didn't go two days out of a month or a year or something to school.

Like Fourth of July we might go to a picnic; [the white plantation owners would] allow them to have, a big picnic out in the woods. That's once a year. That's all we would go. That's the only where to go. When they laid by the crops in July, you got something else still to do. You still working. You don't never have no [time] off. When they lay the crop by in July, you still cutting wood or doing something, the whole year.

Shit, you couldn't even look at a white woman hard back then when I come up. You would get hung. Yeah. Sure would. Back then was just all slavery times. Fasten you up and whip you just like you a dog or mule, animal or something. Yeah, they would tie you up or hem you up in a barn or something. [It would] be brothers on the plantation, two or three brothers, old white honkies, you know, wear them old hats. You see them old hats they got on, look like old Texas hats. Old honkies, I call them. Might beat you to death. [You] couldn't try to fight back then in them days. They would kill you. There wouldn't be nothing did about it. Yeah. Back then you couldn't fight back.



African American farmer, Mississippi, 1936

Blacks couldn't look at no white. But whites could look at blacks all they wanted. Ain't going to be nothing did about it. Yes sir, that happened right down there where I used to live on the plantation in the country.

If they'd catch you trying to leave, they'd take you back there and whip you, fasten you up in the barn and whip you. It's just like old slavery time. They hemmed me up in the barn like [where] they feed mules, and they whipped me. It was two brothers. Two old white honkies. There wasn't nothing I could do. They had a whip. Shit yeah, they whipped me. Sure. Wasn't nothing you could do, but take it. You try to resist [and] they would kill you.

[It was] just like I'm in prison or something. [They were] watching you. [You] couldn't go nowhere, had to stay there and get them cows and mules up and feed them. Five hundred and some cows and mules every day of the week. You didn't have a chance to go nowhere. You couldn't go and visit nobody, your friends or nothing. You had to stay right there. I got tired. I made up my mind to get on away from there and I got away. That's what I did. [I] couldn't handle it no more. [If] I'd a stayed on there, [I'd have] probably been dead by now.

When I got here [to Memphis], I had to go out there to Gaston Hospital. They liked to killed me down there. I had to slip off at night. When I left Mississippi, I left at night when they was in the bed asleep, around two and three o'clock at night. I got by their house. On a plantation, you can tell when they go to sleep, because the lights go out. When they put them lights out, you know they gone to bed then.

They had a gate. If you cross[ed] there in a car, [the noise] could wake [them] up, like you crossing an old bridge. But see, I didn't have no car. I just stepped across there. They had the fences up, and the stuff on there would electrocute you, but see, I was smart enough [that] I got across there and hit that dirt road and got in the woods. I bet you I walked about five or six miles in the woods. Onliest way I could see [was] these little lightning bugs at night [that] light up. That's the onliest way I could see at night, and [my] clothes was tore off where I was going through the woods and trees and couldn't see, [and] it was tearing my clothes off until I got from there where I could catch this train. Man, I was as raggedy as a pan of kraut when I got here in them. [I] didn't have nothing but what I had [on], and they was tore all off. Old pair of shoes. Bare, with no socks or nothing on.

I left there around about two or three o'clock that night and caught the train and come to Memphis. Shit, I laid across the railroad track. Train work me up, hitting the rail. That train was about six or seven miles [away], and they hit that rail and was blowing. It woke me up. I woked up and got up to see, and I just stepped back and took that handkerchief and did three flags like that, and they blowed and flashed that light twice. When they pulled on up beside me, that man, the conductor, whatever you call him, he let the gate down and I walked on there and come on to Memphis. I had a ticket. I had worked until I made enough money.

I was by myself, because my granddaddy and grandma had done left from there. They left from there and come to Drew, and I was in the hills. See, when they settled up at the end of the year, they paid off, but I just stayed on. I was going to stay on till another year, but they got so bad I had to leave there. I had to run away from there.

I was scared until I got here, and it took me about — shit, it was a year or two before I got back like I should [be], normal. I didn't know nothing about Memphis then, and my auntie was taking me around trying to find a job when I come here. She was up here way before I left from Mississippi. She was working down[town], and I come here, and she was taking me before she [would] go to work [to] try to find a job. That's when I found a job working at Crosstown Storage. That was moving people, furnish[ing]s and stuff.

When I got a little older, I felt [I had become] a man from my boyhood. When I got to where I could manage and take care of myself. That's [after] I got here, but it took me about a couple of years before I could get myself together to see, realize, [that] I was a man instead of a boy. When I was down there [in Mississippi], it was just like the penitentiary or something. [I] couldn't go nowhere. Certain time to go somewhere. Certain time to come in. [I] didn't have the freedom as I got now.

I ain't been back there but since I left from there and I'm 68 years old. I went down there [last year] because my sister was sick. I was scared then. I spent the night. I didn't sleep the whole night I was down there because I was scared. It was still in me. See? [I was in the] same place I was when they did all that they did to me, you know. But they all dead now. All them people's dead. Shoot, I didn't even know the town, it'd been so long since I had been down there.



I left by myself. I left some of my people down there. But self and God for us all; I was looking out for myself. They had to take care of their self. There's plenty of them [who] left and [live] right here in Memphis since I left from around there. Only thing, my sister [is] still down there, and you couldn't get a bulldozer to push her away from there. She likes that. She worked for them [same] people, I don't know how long. Now she works in the hospital down there, and she got her own house now. She married and have a man. They got their own home, automobiles and everything. But shit, when I was coming up, there was no such thing. Colored had no automobile and [were] buying no homes down there. Nothing but white. If she wanted to stay down there and take it, that was her business, but I couldn't take no more of it. [I] got tired of it. I got to git, and I got, too.

I say the Lord has really been good to me, has blessed [me]. I'm telling you the truth. I've really been blessed by him. I was lucky they didn't kill me when I come from Mississippi. They tried to, but I got away from down there. [If] I'd have stayed on down there, they would have killed me.

I been misused and everything. I think of that. Sometime it gets next to me. You know how it'll come up, but the Lord blessed me. I'm blessed to be 68 years old for the time when I come up. I come up the hard way, mister. People got it made now. You see me sitting on this porch, but I have worked in my day, I'm telling you. I have worked in my day and that's when I said God blessed me to retire. I'm going to sit here and serve him and enjoy.