

JACKSON Y. W. C. A.  
and  
MISSISSIPPI DEPARTMENT of ARCHIVES and HISTORY  
and  
JACKSON STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT  
THE FARISH STRETT HISTORIC DISTRICT

RETIRED CARPENTER

O. H. 80.09

ROBERT RHODES III

Interviewed  
by

DORIS SIRGEW

on

July 8, 1980



JACKSON STATE UNIVERSITY

JACKSON, MISSISSIPPI

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW AGREEMENT

You have been asked for information to be used in connection with the Oral History Program at Jackson State University, Jackson, Mississippi. The purpose of this program is to gather and preserve information for historical and scholarly use.

A tape recording of your interview will be made by the interviewer, and a typescript of the tape will be made and submitted to you for editing. The final retyped and edited transcript, together with the tape of the interview will then be placed in the oral history collection at Jackson State University, Jackson, Mississippi. Other institutions or persons may obtain a copy. These materials may be used for purposes of research, for instructional use, for publication, or for other related purposes.

I, \_\_\_\_\_ have read the above and, in view of the historical and scholarly value of this information, and in return for a final typed copy of the transcript, I knowingly and voluntarily permit Jackson State University, Jackson, the full use of this information. I hereby grant and assign all my rights of every kind whatever pertaining to this information, whether or not such rights are now known, recognized, or contemplated, to Jackson State University, Jackson, Mississippi.

Robert C. Rhodes  
Interviewee (Signature)

7.27.1980  
Date



## INTRODUCTION

Mr. Robert Rhodes II was born in Jackson, Mississippi. He is a well known carpenter in the Farish Street area. Mr. Rhodes comes from a family of carpenters. He started in the field of carpentry by helping his father after school.

Mr. Rhodes recalls working throughout the state of Mississippi and the surrounding areas. He talks about some of the prominent contractors in the Jackson area. He reflects on some of the problems that the black contractors and carpenters encountered. He recalls his father going to Sunflower County and helping this white fellow build a plantation and refusing to pay him.



INTERVIEWEE: Robert Rhodes III  
INTERVIEWER: Doris Sirgew  
DATE OF INTERVIEW: July 8, 1980  
O.H. 80.09

Sirgew: Would you tell me a little about your family?

Rhodes: My grandfather was Robert Rhodes, my father was Robert Rhodes, and I am Robert Rhodes III.

Sirgew: Would you tell me about your family?

Rhodes: There is just my wife and kids.

Sirgew: Tell me how you got started in carpentry work?

Rhodes: We were carpenters from my great grandfather on down to me. I don't think any of my children will ever go into that field of work.

Sirgew: Did your work take you away from home?

Rhodes: No, because it was a lot of work to do around here. My father was a contractor and he had a office down on Farish Street near Capitol Street. The lumber company would tell him that they wanted him to draw up such and such plan, and he would do it. He was very good at his work. He designed and built this house here in 1923 or 1924.

He started me out by carrying me on the job after school. We burned coal in those days so I would carry kindling home on my shoulders. I learned a lot from him. He was very strict and meant business.

When I was fourteen, I could floor a house just as good as any man. In those days, blacks had to work for what the contractors would give them. My father had to build houses for \$200.00 where the other man might me getting \$800.00 or \$1,000.00. That is just the way it was in those days.

My father would let men work by the square, do so much work a day or cover so much territory. This was very adaptable to us. When I was fifteen, the real building started, sawing, hammering, and hanging doors. We had a rhythm, one person would be on one side of the house and another person would be on the other side, we would go dat-the-dat-the-dat, etc. We would do this all day long, but we would get the job done.

My father would promise every man so much money and give it to him. Sometimes he didn't come out so good himself, but he would pay his men. He knew how to lay brick, so he didn't have to hire anybody. After doing



- Rhodes: his work he would go back to the office. He had people working for him like a stenographers, etc. His daughter was one of his stenographers. Colored people were doing well, but they couldn't get to far because it was always something to hinder them.
- Sirgew: Where was the first house that you worked on?
- Rhodes: I think it was on Noel Street. The first house that I built was on Wabash Avenue, it was in North West Jackson. I found out that I could get more money by working on people's house, especially white people. I took pride in my work because I wanted them to enjoy the looks of their homes.
- Sirgew: Where else outside Jackson did you work?
- Rhodes: All around like Jackson, Clinton, Albany, Chicago, Illinois, and all through the Delta. My father worked in the Delta also. He built a man's farm and guess what he got for it? Nothing!
- Sirgew: Compare working in the Jim Crow Era with the years following it?
- Rhodes: The first job that I had working by the hour was for a man in Hazlehurst, Mississippi. I learned quite a bit from him. He taught me how to do things properly. He said that if a thing is not worth doing right, it is not worth doing at all. I adopted that system and found that it was true in every field of endeavor.
- I went to Chicago working on houses, but I didn't stay long. I was mainly there because I had a uncle there who wanted me to work on his home. As far as the Jim Crow Era is concerned, you couldn't get what the other man could for your work. It is still that way today.
- Sirgew: What was work like during the depression?
- Rhodes: Anything you could get, you had to get it. There wasn't any such things as social security or hand-outs.
- Sirgew: Did you serve in the war?
- Rhodes: No, because when they sent me a meal ticket to go to Hattiesburg for training, I was in the hospital. I had fallen and hurt myself pretty bad. I wanted to go because I knew of the war benefits and I knew it would be over soon.



Sirgew: Your father built this house?

Rhodes: Yes.

Sirgew: When did you move in this house?

Rhodes: In October, 1925. After I got married, I came back here to see after my mother and father. My father also had a store on Gallatin Street called Rhodes Variety. He had everything in it. My father was a very sporty man, unlike myself. I am very conservative. He threw away more money than the average man made in a lifetime. He had about fifteen or twenty houses and lots.

Sirgew: When did you retire?

Rhodes: I retired about four or five years ago.

Sirgew: How does it make you feel to know that your home is listed on the National Register of historical places?

Rhodes: Good. I have done a lot of work to keep this house standing and in good condition.

Break in Tape

Sirgew: Tell me something about your parents educational background?

Rhodes: My mother went to Rust University. My father completed the 8th grade at Smith Robertson School. He was the one who named Smith Robertson School.

Sirgew: Do you know what inspired him to name it Smith Robertson?

Rhodes: I think it was named after someone who was very handy around the school.

Sirgew: Do you know how the name Smith Robertson came about?

Rhodes: No, I don't.

Sirgew: How many children did your parents have?

Rhodes: Six children and just one boy.

Sirgew: Did the fact that your father was a carpenter inspire you to become a carpenter?

Rhodes: I guess it did. I had a shoeshine stand when I was a boy.

Sirgew: Did your grandfather have any sons other than your father?



Rhodes: Yes.

Sirgew: Were they carpenters?

Rhodes: No. I had a uncle that died several years ago, the one that lived in Chicago. He left here when he was seventeen and became a postman. He remained a postman until he retired.

Sirgew: Did they have a carpenters' union?

Rhodes: No. I don't think they had a white carpenter's union either.

Sirgew: Did they have any kind of group?

Rhodes: No. We had three good contractors here, M. C. Dozier, lived on Rose Street, Percy Evan, lived on Helm Street, and my father. There is another man named Joe Smith who was real good. He also had a office in town. They didn't work, they just got the contracts. When my daddy became head of the company he named it Mississippi Colored Men Realty Company. It didn't last long because blacks didn't have money to buy houses.

Sirgew: Do you know how your father came about having an office downtown?

Rhodes: No, because I was only eight years old then.

Sirgew: Do you know where it was located?

Rhodes: Between Amite Street and Capitol Street on Farish Street. Dr. Redmond had a three-story building on Farish Street. He was a big man in Jackson and across the State. He was a money man. Dr. Christian and several others were in this building. Richard Beadle had a picture studio there also.

Sirgew: Tell me about your religious background?

Rhodes: They carried me to church after I was born to be christen. I wouldn't take anything for my Christian efforts. I believe that it is something after death and that is what makes me like it. I use to teach Bible class at my church.

Sirgew: Tell me about your parents religious background?

Rhodes: My mother's father was presiding Elder of the methodist church. She was born and reared in Meridian, Mississippi. His name was Elder Joseph Campbell. He had a stroke and



Rhodes: died right in the pulpit. My father's father was a christian. He came from Rankin County.

Sirgew: What was your mother's name?

Rhodes: Mrs. Louella Campbell Rhodes.

Sirgew: Were your parents from around Jackson?

Rhodes: My mother was born and reared in Meridian, Mississippi. My father was from Brandon in Rankin County. We call it Pearl now.

Sirgew: How many children do you have?

Rhodes: Two boys and one girl.

Sirgew: Are your sons carpenters?

Rhodes: No.

Sirgew: Did you want to become carpenters?

Rhodes: Yes. My younger son works for Xerox as a machine repairman.

Sirgew: Are your children aware that their grandfather named Smith Robertson?

Rhodes: Yes, I never let them forget.

Sirgew: How does it feel to have a father who named Smith Robertson?

Rhodes: Alright. I am accustomed to it now.

Sirgew: Do you do any other carpentry work other than houses?

Rhodes: Yes, I have done a lot of buildings in town. Before the unionization in Jackson, colored people built most of the biggest work in town. We did work all on Capitol Street. The tallest building wasn't over six-stories high. I didn't care too much about elevators. The Edward's Hotel on the corner of Capitol and Mill Street was the biggest building in Mississippi. It was twelve-stories high.

Sirgew: Are there any structures that you would have liked working on?

Rhodes: I wouldn't have liked building the State Capitol Building because of the top. I was never to fond of climbing rope. That was that way you had to do it in those days. Now you have



Rhodes: elevators to pick you up from the outside.

Sirgew: Do you think that there is anything that you might have liked being other than a carpenter?

Rhodes: I perhaps would have liked being a minister of the gospel. I have always liked to read the Bible. Sometimes I would come home from work, put the Bible on the floor, and just lie on the bed and read and read. One thing I didn't understand is why God made man knowing that he was going to sin. They put him in the fire and he burned forever and ever. That is just the way we were taught.

Sirgew: You were also a property owner, right?

Rhodes: Yes.

Sirgew: Could you compare the job of being a carpenter to the job of being a property owner?

Rhodes: If you don't own a lot of property, it is best to work and own a home. It is easy for a carpenter to build his own home. The lumber yard would trust you with the materials. I use to get my supplies from Evan's Lumber Company. You saved a lot of money if you build for yourself.

During this time you could get a sack of flour for 25¢. It is very different now. You have to have a car to get around because Jackson is so large. You couldn't walk to the supermarkets, but you couldn't go to the little neighborhood stores because they charged twice as much. Blacks and whites are alike when it comes to money, they wanted to get the most that they can for their money. Colored people have learned not to spend every dime that they got, you had to put something down for a sick day. If the insurance company refused to pay, well you were just messed up. So you had to save money.

Colored people can have just as much as a white person, but they didn't care how rich you were, you were still just a Negro. When I first went to Chicago my father told me, remember Chicago is Chicago and Jackson is Jackson. I feel that Chicago is a much more liberal place than Jackson. It was very true that wherever you go, you are just a Negro.

Sirgew: You were very well known as a carpenter in Jackson, right?

Rhodes: Yes.

Sirgew: Did you have a crew that worked for you?



Rhodes: Yes, I had my father's crew. I didn't have too much until he got so he couldn't do it. I could draw a picture of a house and plan for every peice of lumber it needed.

Sirgew: Do you still have any of those old plans?

Rhodes: No, my boy took all of that out and burned it up. He said he was cleaning out.

Sirgew: How was it to work with a crew of men?

Rhodes: Very good, but sometimes they would fight. Sometimes you would have to grab one and take the hammer away from him to keep him from hitting the other one in the head.

They would get paid on Saturday evening around 12:00 or 1:00 o'clock, instead of going home and seeing about their household needs, they would sit around and gamble. Carpentry work is very hard so that is the way they kept going. Carpenters, plasters, and plumbers made more money than the average person. The plumbers made more than anybody.

Sirgew: Were there any other problems?

Rhodes: One woman came on the job and said that her husband had told her he hadn't got paid in two weeks. I paid him because that was my job. He looked at me, wanting me to say that it was true. I looked at him and told him that this is your wife, are you going to let her starve to death for the pleaura of whiskey. I told him that if you do that, I don't want you on the job. Some of the men would spend all their money and not give their wives anything.

Sirgew: What kinds of problem did you encounter as a property owner?

Rhodes: You would have a problem paying the taxes, insurances, and keeping the renters from breaking your windows. Sometimes the renters would get mad and just break anything.

Some people would ask you for \$2.00 for some medicine for their baby, then come back another evening and say the baby was sick, they'll pay you back this evening, but they never did. This was okay because I knew how it was with babies. Other people would ask for a loan and never pay you back. They would break your windows and not think of it.

Sirgew: Do you own any more property?



Rhodes: I have a lot behind this house. I still have to pay taxes on it. I don't pay taxes anymore because I signed up for the tax exemption after I got older.

Sirgew: Have you lived in Jackson all your life?

Rhodes: Practically all my life. There may be two or three years that I didn't live here. My father carried us to the country with him. He was suppose to be building a plantation. While we were there my mother almost died of malarial fever. When we left here I was just a little boy and my sister was eight months old. There was nothing in this little country place. We had to go to school in a church. When someone died, they would haul you away in a wagon and drop you in a watered grave. I remember this very vividly. If I look back, it really hurts me to remember these kinds of things.

We stayed there for a long time. My father was ready to go and he wanted to get his settlement, but the man wanted him to stay. This place had what was called a commensary, a place like a store. We didn't have to go there because daddy had money he had gotten from the insurance when our house burned. He bought everything we needed as far as clothing out of Montgomery Ward Catalog from Memphis, Tennessee. Anyway, this man told daddy that he owed him more money that he had made from building the plantation. My father knew that he didn't owe him any money so we left one night in the wagon. They put stockings on the mule's feet so he couldn't track us.

When we got to Yazoo City, my father didn't even know we were there. He thought that we were in Jackson. The high water came and we were trying to catch the animals in a barrel, we had cut out of a wooden tub.

Sirgew: Where is the plantation you are talking about?

Rhodes: I believe it is in Sunflower County.

Sirgew: Did you ever hear from that man again?

Rhodes: He came to Jackson and sued daddy. My father took him to court. The man said that daddy had a contract with him to build so many houses and that he had left before he completed it. The judge asked him did he pay my father for the work that he did complete. The man told him that he didn't because he said that it was understood that he would live on the place and eat from the commensary as settlement.



Rhodes: The judge also told him that he knew Robert, this man that you are referring to as a nigger. He told that man that he had better get out of here before he fined him and make him pay Robert every penny he owe him. The man left here and went back to the Delta.

Sirgew: Have you all heard from him since then?

Rhodes: No, nobody wants to hear from Tom Phillips.

Sirgew: Do you know what year that was?

Rhodes: Around 1922.

Sirgew: You said that your father had a house on the corner of Short Farish and Fortification Street, right?

Rhodes: It burned, but he never repaired it. When we came back to Jackson, we stayed in a rental house until he built a house at 669 South West Street.

Sirgew: Did they have insurance claims at that time?

Rhodes: My father had insurance. He ordered all of us some new shoes. He had to go pick it up from the railroad stop about five miles away in Carter.

When he started working again, he carried us with him to Yazoo City about 10 miles from the plantation in Bell Prarie where he had this trouble with this white man. He wanted daddy to come back and build some more houses, but he wouldn't do it.

He built this house on South West Street with a bathroom inside of it. This was very unusual for blacks during this time. He also built a store on the side of the house, but he didn't want to run it. He rented it out to this white fellow. He let me work in the store delivering groceries. I have always hustled trying to make a honest dollar.

I use to get together with some guys and go over across the river to get a drink. We never got drunk, but there is always going to be somebody in the group that is going to mess up. One of my friends lost his wife and children.

Sirgew: Where did you move after living on South West Street?

Rhodes: He built over there next to this house. He later sold it to this lady named Hattie Crane. In those days you



Rhodes: could buy a house and pay for it in about 10 or 12 years. You only had to pay about \$12.00 a month.

I was about twelve when we moved in this house in 1925. He build this house with a drop gable it was very popular. He built four or five more house like this for white people.

I went to Vicksburg in 1953. Vicksburg is a very historical place with all the hills and the big river. I use to come home every weekend while I was working there. I came back to Jackson. They didn't want me to leave.

My wife had to have an operation and it costs a \$1,000. Let me tell you how God works. ~~Two~~ women came along and wanted to buy a lot. This man told me to give him \$50.00 and he would help me sell both of the lots. I told him that I wanted \$1,500 for them and in a couple of days he had sold both of them. The money came just in time before my wife got out of the hospital.

Sirgew: Do you have any regrets about staying in Jackson and pursuing the career of a carpenter?

Rhodes: No, because I have always eaten good, had a nice place to stay, and attended church. I haven't regretted anything because I have always had friends.

One time I put an ad in the paper which read, "For carpentary or foundation work, call such and such number." I had so much work, more than I could do.



Rhodes, Robert III  
O.H. 80.09

Index

Amite Street 4  
Beadle, Richard 4  
Bell, Prarie 9  
Black contracotts 4  
Campbell, Elder Joseph 4  
Capitol Street 1, 4, 5  
Carpentry work 1  
Collecting insurance 9  
Crane, Hattie 9  
Delta 2, 9  
Depression 2  
Dozier, M. C. 4  
Drawing plans 7  
Edward's Hotel 5  
Evans, Percy 4  
Evans Lumber Company 6  
Farish Street 1, 4, 9  
Fortification Street 9  
Gallatin Street 5  
Going across the river 7  
Helm Street 4  
Illinois, Chicago 2, 4  
Jim Crow Era 2  
Mill Street 5  
Mississippi, Clinton 2  
Mississippi, Hattiesburg 2  
Mississippi, Hazlehurst 2  
Mississippi, Jackson 2  
Mississippi, Meridian 3  
Mississippi, Vicksburg 10  
Mississippi Colored Men Realty  
Company 4  
Montgomery Ward Catalog 8  
Noel Street 2  
Phillip, Tom 9  
Property owner 7  
Rankin County 5  
Rhodes, Robert 1-3  
Rhodes Variety 3  
Rose Street 4  
Rust University 3  
Selling a lot 10  
Smith, Joe 4  
Smith Robertson School 3, 5  
State Capitol Building 5  
Sunflower County 8  
Tennessee, Memphis 8  
Wabash Avenue 2  
West Street 9  
Yazoo City 8