

Transcript
INTERVIEW WITH MR. WILBON WELLS

by Tommy Johnson

This interview is being done by the Oral History Mini-Workshop in the Public Library of Clinton, Mississippi. It was done and it is being done on May 25, 1977.

T.J.: First, what I would like to start off with, what is your earliest recollection of your family?

W.W.: Talking about my father them?

T.J.: Actually as far back as I can remember, my father was 99 years and five months and 16 days, before he died. They were all born in and around here. I guess about three quarters of a mile where he bought.

T.J.: Excuse me for interrupting you.

W.W.: As I mentioned, three quarters of a mile where we now live. When they bought the first 50 acres they didn't move there then. He bought 60 the next time and 177 the third time, and that was back in the 1880's.

T.J.: Oh, Oh, you bought the land in about ~~1880~~.

W.W.: No, my father.

T.J.: Yea, your father bought the land in about 1880.

W.W.: Yea.

T.J.: Alright Mr. Wells, you saw the movie "Roots." You know, I hope you did. You know where these people went back and traced their ancestry back as far as possible. And I know from my own personal experience I have had many, many people tell me that their ancestors and things, about their ancestors. They were slaves and things like that, and I want to know did your father tell you anything about your grandfather and things like that?

W.W.: Well, my father and mother were slaves. He was born in slavery, but he was not a slave. My mother was a slave and they brought her from Georgia. She, or people who owned her brought her from Georgia and brought her out here where we are now. They owned his farm and his brothers. I think there was four or five of them. They owned about, I don't know, thousands of acres.... He bought that land from some of them.... His mother was a slave but I guess his daddy, he owned it.

T.J.: Oh, his mother must to have been a little older than your daddy?

W.W.: Yes.

T.J.: Alright, yea.

A.H.: Now, how is it that your father was not a slave?

W.W.: He just wasn't, I imagine he did not settle as a slave. He was born in slavery, but he was not one. Somebody bought his mother and carried her to Georgia. And when she.... He got burnt. They were going to take him down to make a fire around the wash barn. And he laid down and went to sleep. And he got fire caught on his clothes and it burned him. He went home.

T.J.: Your father did?

W.W.: Yea, the rest of the family--the rest of the family, they carried them back to Georgia and he stayed.

A.H.: Who owned him.

W.W.: Wells.

A.H.: Can you give the first name please, which Wells?

W.W.: His father was named, they called him Buck Wells. I don't know.

A.H.: Buck Wells?

A.H.: Now Buck Wells was the owner of the plantation.

W.W.: Yea.

A.H.: You know where the plantation was?

W.W.: This is some of it what we own?

A.H.: What you own now?

W.W.: Yea.

A.H.: How did you get that land?

W.W.: He brought it from Will Wells.

A.H.: From Buck Wells?

W.W.: He bought it from Will Wells, that was some of the offsprings of Buck Wells.

A.H.: Did he tell you how much he paid for it?

W.W.: Two and a half per acre.

A.H.: Two and a half per acre?

W.W.: Some of it, I think the land he bought from Will Wells, he paid two and a half an acre. The first fifty acres, he paid two and a half per acre. The other, I think he bought from Will Wells was something like 100 an acre.

T.J.: Alright, Mr. Wells, what about other members of your family, such as your wife and your brothers? You know how many brothers you have? You know how many sisters you have? Tell me a little about your wife and relatives and things like that.

W.W.: My sisters, I had six sisters. I was the only boy.

T.J.: You had six sisters?

W.W.: Umh hum, I had six sisters and all of them was older than I was. My oldest sister now is living. She is just about 95.

T.J.: They sure must have treated you with favoritism being a boy with all of those women in the house (laughter). How did it feel being just one, just being one somebody--one, one, one, the man of the House which to say? (laughter)

W.W.: Well, of they, my father and mother, they didn't have any picks or chooses.

T.J.: They did not have picks and chooses?

W.W.: Well, they always treated each one just alike. And my father tried to get along with everybody.

T.J.: Alright, would you mind if you can name some of your brothers and sisters?

W.W.: Well, I can name you all of them--Hattie Bell Wells, Hattie Bell Wells, A. Hall, Louise E. Morgan.

A.H.: Morgan

W.W.: Morgan

A.H.: Morgan, M-o-r-g-a-n.

W.W.: H. B. Wells, Pearl Robins.

T.J.: Alright, what about your wife?

W.W.: Well, I married a girl from here, she lived here in town, not from where I was. A. B. Wells, A. B. Brewery was her maiden name. And I had two children by her. One, a boy and one a girl. I had a boy and a girl--one lives in Chicago and one in Florida. Now they all left. This other wife, I got three boys by her. I guess my

first children, one of them is about--my daughter is about 56. The boy is about 54. He is younger than the girl. The younger boys--one is about 22, one is 24, one is 20.

T.J.: Your first wife must to have died?

W.W.: She did. The girl finished at Utica--Not Utica at Edwards. And my boy he finished at the Catholic school at Vicksburg. And my second wife has three boys--one of them is named Curtis K. Wells, one is Earl G. Wells and the other one is Edward G. Wells.

T.J.: Do you remember when you got married, the exact year, date, etc?

W.W.: I got married exactly August, 1918. I don't remember the exact date but it was August, 1918.

T.J.: Excuse me for interrupting you, you can go on and continue to explain.

W.W.: I married in 1918. Then I left and went to the Army. They were not drafting and so I volunteered. I went to Kansas City, Kansas to a training school. I got on the train and was going to Columbia, South Carolina. Then I came down with the flu, and put me off at Ft. McPerson, GA. From there, I went on to Columbia, South Carolina. I stayed at Ft. McPerson for about two months. I came down sick down there. Before I got well the war ended. That was in 1919.

T.J.: Speaking of the flu, is this the same flu they said killed so many people during World War I?

W.W.: Yes, they had them stacked up like sardines in a box.

T.J.: Yea, what type of life you had in the army? Did you get a chance to go overseas?

W.W.: We were on the train from Columbia, South Carolina to be transferred to the front. I taken sick and me and two boys from Canton, they took us off at Fort McPerson. We stayed there for two months. They called that some type of flu.

T.J.: Today, they call it the Swine Flu.

W.W.: But it wasn't called that then, it was another type of flu. Asiatic Flu, that's what they called it then. It was about one-hundred nineteen of us in the training school at Quindell, Kansas. And we all went down to the depot to take the train to Columbia. About half of us took sick at the depot. I didn't feel sick when I was at the depot.

T.J.: How many died?

W.W.: Well, when I got to Columbia, about half of them that went there were dead.

T.J.: We want to talk about your educational experience. How far did you go in school and did you enjoy your educational experiences?

W.W.: Yea, I liked it. I finished public school under one of my sisters--half sister.

T.J.: Hattie P. Wells?

W.W.: Yea.

T.J.: Where did you go to public school?

W.W.: I went to school in Hinds County about a mile and a half from home. I went to Jackson State. It was white when I finished. Dr. Barrett was President. Then it was taken over by colored people.

T.J.: How was student life at Jackson State back then? You hear so much about students at Jackson State today--how was it back then?

W.W.: Well, I considered it o.k. To me it was all right, of course, it was not as advanced as it is now. But to me it was all right.

T.J.: Did you all go to dances and parties?

W.W.: No, the most we had was that you could go to the recreational room. Where they got buildings at now, we used to play ball. I was on the football team.

T.J.: You were?

W.W.: Yea, I played right tackle.

T.J.: I really didn't know that they had a football team back then.

W.W.: Oh, yes. We had one of the best in the state. We played all over the country. We played New Orleans, Tuskegee, Tougaloo.

T.J.: What about Alcorn?

W.W.: No, we did not play them.

T.J.: When did you go to Jackson State?

W.W.: 1912-13.

T.J.: 1912-1913?

W.W.: Professor Dansby was my teacher. Professor Hubert White, he was the President. He was one of my teachers. When I first went there, my teacher was white, and a woman use to run a school out here they called Mt. Helm Seminary. She was a teacher at Jackson State at that time under Barrett. She was my first teacher.

T.J.: She was your first teacher?

W.W.: Yes, her last name was Eldrige.

T.J.: What type of courses did you take? Were they just reading and writing?

W.W.: Yea, that's all.

T.J.: Now we are getting off into the real purpose of this interview, which is about black land owners like you. I want to know how did you manage to get your land? Was this heir property? Or did you buy it?

W.W.: Yes, I bought some. Where I am now came on down from my father.

T.J.: When did you buy this other property?

W.W.: I don't remember. I owned property here in the city. I got a couple of lots out here. I might say I inherited this through my wife.

T.J.: You inherited this through your first wife?

W.W.: My first wife, yes. I bought it in a way I would let her have money to be operated on. She willed it to me and my wife when she died. The land out there my daddy willed to me before he died. Then I fell heir to part of it when he died.

T.J.: This may seem like getting off from the subject, but tell me more about your mother, father and your wife? They seem to be very important people in your life.

W.W.: Well, my father he had what they called good mother's wit. He could figure out the exact price of cotton. Like cotton was ten and a half, ten and three quarters or ten and seven-eighths. He could tell you what a bale of cotton was worth before you could get a pencil. And my mother, she could read and write. She did not have much education. I had six sisters, all taught school except one. She married but she was able to teach. Most of them finished at Mt. Helm Seminary.

T.J.: Oh, your parents seem to be the type of people who tried to do the best they could. Were they strict?

W.W.: Well, what ever my father told me, I did. He never did whip us but, whatever he said, that was it. We always obeyed both of them. My mother would do the whipping. He did not ever hit me. He whipped one or two of them. He worked hard, he always did the best he could. Cotton was \$25.00 a bale, and about 5¢ a pound.

T.J.: Did your mother have mother's wit?

W.W.: Yes, she was bright too. Her mother was half Indian. She had good mother's wit too. She did not go high in school, but she could read and write. My daddy, he couldn't read but he had good mother's wit.

T.J.: Now, we want to talk about you and your property. You said that it's heir property. Am I right?

W.W.: I bought property. I bought 24 and five acres of land. I bought five acres here, I think. I sold it too quick. I sold 24 acres of land.

T.J.: It has been said that blacks owned tremendous amounts of land in Hinds County. When you bought your land, was that the time black folks managed to get that land?

W.W.: Yes, it was during them times. When the Exdus started up North, most of them that left, left their property including my wife's family. They did not get rid of the property but a lot of them did.

T.J.: What made you decide to hold on to your land? Was it because you saw value in it?

W.W.: Well, I am just the type of person who don't get rid of something fast. I have been offered \$1500.00 an acre, but I have to live somewhere. I rather own it before somebody else does. They have offered to give me a home. But I say if I don't make nothing, then it's mine. I will still try to work and make a living.

T.J.: What else you did besides farming?

W.W.: No, I haven't done anything else. I had the flu and I haven't been able to do anything since back in my army years. I had the flu, and it settle in my lungs. I have asthma. Any type of exertion on me can put me back so I don't do to much.

T.J.: Did you do any social activities such as dancing?

W.W.: No, I did not do any of that. I used to do a dance called Waltz. We used to Waltz.

T.J.: Did you shoot marbles, spin spinning tops, etc.?

W.W.: Yes, I used to have a sock of marbles. We used to shoot marbles and play a game called hop-scotch. You would draw a line and hop on one foot. There were certain things you have to do and you would have to win the game on one foot. I played that.

T.J.: Has anybody tried to buy your property?

W.W.: Yes.

T.J.: Assuming most of the people who are trying to buy your property are white. (Mr. Well interrupts.)

W.W.: Yes, but not always. A colored fellow wanted to buy some the other day. He wanted to raise a crop. He told me he did not have space to operate on. So he wanted to buy some of mine. The main ones, however, were white.

T.J.: Like Bailey and Bailey.

W.W.: Yes, that right.

T.J.: Now, you probably know of instances where blacks were cheated out of their land. Did anybody make an effort to cheat you out of your land?

W.W.: No, they didn't do that because they know they could not cheat me out of my land. They wanted to buy it. It was a fancy price for what it was bought for. But still I wanted it as a home.

T.J.: When did Bailey and Bailey want to buy your land?

W.W.: That was in about 1975. That was about a year and a half or two years ago.

T.J.: You said earlier that many of the heirs of black folks actually gave their land away.

W.W.: Yes, most of them did when they went up north. A lot of them just left.

T.J.: Do you know any people by name that left their land?

W.W.: My wife's folks, they owned property in town. They didn't sell it but all of them went up North. Ada Lewis was her name. She had a house and lot.

T.J.: What year did Black folks start losing all of this land? Was it any particular year or was it something that had been happening all the time?

W.W.: No, it was the year when black folks began to go up north. I don't remember the exact year, but it was the year people left here to go up north. It was when they had that boom up north. At least they said they were making a whole lot of money. They were getting good jobs. Many were getting better prices than most of the people here now.

T.J.: Where up north did they go?

W.W.: Most of them from here went to Chicago. A lot of them left and went to California, New York--but most of them that left Hinds County went to Chicago.

T.J.: You probably know of efforts being made to take land from black people. Do you know anybody that it actually happened to?

W.W.: Yes, it was a man about two miles from here. He lived about two or three miles from here. I heard something like that had happened to him. His name was Mike Hunter. He had a well on his place called the Hunter Well. The well had mineral water. The people fooled him, said that they wanted to lease the place. Instead of making out a lease they made out a deed. He signed that and they had him to get offspring and everything else off the place. He lost it completely. The old man that did it, his people still own the place. His name is Williams.

T.J.: How many acres that were?

W.W.: It was something like 140 acres?

T.J.: How many acres of land do you own?

W.W.: This land consists of 229 9/10 acres.

T.J.: Do you know of anybody that was physically removed from the land?

W.W.: No, I don't know of anybody that was physically removed off of the land. Mr. Hunter was the only man I know that they fooled. He thought he had signed a lease but he signed a deed.

T.J.: Could this man read and write?

W.W.: No, back there in slavery times, he couldn't. None of the offsprings or him had that much education. I know he couldn't because I know some of his relatives.

T.J.: Do you know of instances, where the bank cheated people out of land because of a loan they owed some white man?

W.W.: No, the bank owns a lot of land out here by me. But I don't know the situation in which they got it. It wasn't colored people that owned it, white people owned it. I used to have houses on the bank's land.

T.J.: What was the name of this bank?

W.W.: Deposit Guaranty.

T.J.: Deposit Guaranty?

W.W.: Yes.

T.J.: I am beginning to see that Deposit Guaranty and the black people of Hinds County have always managed to work together somehow.

W.W.: I deal with First National and Deposit Guaranty. They always treated me good. I had some checks folded on me and they refused to refund the money. That's the only thing I know they did to me.

JACKSON STATE COLLEGE

Jackson, Mississippi

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEWEE AGREEMENT

You have been asked for information to be used in connection with the Oral History Program at Jackson State College; 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 College, Jackson, Mississippi. Other institutions or persons may obtain a copy. These materials may be made available for purposes of research, for instructional use, for publications, or for other related purposes.

I, Jesse W. Wells, have read the above and, in
(Interviewee, please print)

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 College, 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 College, Jackson, Mississippi.

Jesse W. Wells
Interviewee (Signature)

5/25/77

Date

JACKSON STATE UNIVERSITY
JACKSON, MISSISSIPPI

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEWER AGREEMENT

I, Tommy Johnson, in view of the historical and scholarly value of the information contained in the interview with Jessie Wilbourn Wells knowingly and voluntarily permit Jackson State University, Jackson the full use of this information, and hereby grant and assign to Jackson State University, Jackson all rights of every kind whatever pertaining to this information, whether or not such rights are now known, recognized or contemplated.

Tommy Lee Johnson

Interviewer (signature)

1
Interview Number

May 25, 1972
Date

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW

Interviewer ----- Tommy Johnson
Interviewee ----- Mr. Jessie Wibbon Wells
Date of Interview ----- May 27, 1977
Time ----- 9:30 A. M.
Place ----- Clinton Public Library

Summary

This interview covered a wide range of subjects, but it primarily dealt with Mr. Well's experience of being a Black landowner. The interview covered such subjects as Mr. Well's background and his opinions concerning current problems of Black landowners. The circumstances surrounding the interview were very quiet, however, Mr. Wells constantly kept moving his walking stick.