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Growing Up on a Sharecropping Farm in Bonlee

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I wasn't born in Bonlee. Our parents were sharecroppers, tenant farmers if you will, and we moved from place to place. And as we lived at these different places, we always called the place in which we lived the last name of the landlord. We were living at the Henley place when I was born, up near Silk Hope. I must have been a couple of years old when we moved closer to Bonlee. I was about four years old, probably 1940, when we moved over to the Field place on Tick Creek. We didn't have a bridge across Tick Creek. We just forded it. We didn't need a bridge across Tick Creek because we didn't have an automobile or a truck. Our transportation, our basic transportation, was either a two-horse or a one-horse wagon. Which we used mules; same difference. My father would not have a horse, 'cause "horses didn't have any sense."

From the time I was, say, four years old until I was twelve, we lived here at the Field place. When I was twelve years old, we moved up to the Jessup place. When I was fifteen years old, we moved a little farther north, up to the Brooks place. Then later my father was able to buy a parcel of land and a house down near Bear Creek, but I was already gone from home when that happened.

What was sharecropping? (Or, what is sharecropping? A lot of people sharecrop.) Well, we lived on someone else's land. They provided the house. My father provided his own mules -- as I said, no horses -- his own equipment, which would be a crude plow, a wagon, et cetera. He bought his own supplies and furnished everything.

Joe Burke, retired public school teacher and administrator, recalled his early life during a meeting of the Chatham County Historical Association on 16 November 2000. For copies of unedited tape or transcript, write CCHA, P. O. Box 913, Pittsboro, NC 27312.

When the time came to settle up, as he used to say, over the fall of the year, then you would have to give the landlord the part that you had agreed to give the landlord. It would either be two-thirds or three-fourths. The tenant farmer or the sharecropper would either get one-fourth or one-third, depending upon the agreement when they went with the landlord. I can remember my

If you put that in the form of taxation, that's pretty high taxes. But, that is the way it was, and this is the type of life under which we lived. We worked hard, we had a lot of fun, and we were happy.

father getting one-third, but I can remember my father getting one-fourth. That simply meant this, that when you shucked your corn, and you got ready to divide it -- daddy always let me stay out of school on that day, and I loved that -- we would take galvanized metal bushel tubs, and if we got one-fourth, we would fill four, we would put three over here for the landlord in this pile, and put the one we would keep in the crib, which would be ours. Tobacco. If you sold \$1200 worth of tobacco today, and they got three-fourths, you got your one-fourth of that and they got their three-fourths.

We raised cotton, later tobacco, corn, grain, everything that normally people grow. One thing I remember about the Field place and the fields was the fact that one field had some of the longest rows that I've ever worked, that I've ever seen. My father always planted cotton there. Now, the two toughest jobs in a cotton field, to me, would be when you had to chop that cotton, because you had to scrape the ground -- you take a hoe. The cotton is planted in rows. Well, you've got to get the grass out of it and then pull the dirt back up to it. So you have to go down on both sides -- you chop the middle, too -- and you pull out all the grass, kind of scrape it out, and then you gotta to reach over

and you gotta pull dirt back up to the lower part of the plant.

[The other tough job was] when you went to pick it, because you were dragging a bag with you, and it got heavier as you picked the cotton. I was a little boy, but remember, sugar came in five-pound and ten-pound cloth sacks. The first sack that I used was a five-pound sugar sack and it would hang on me, and I started picking cotton dragging one of those. As I got older the sack got larger, naturally, 'cause I could handle it.

We planted and cultivated everything that we raised with mules. I started plowing a mule when I was seven years old. My father used a double-foot plow. He would not use a cultivator, which had either three or four feet. A little double-foot plow only had two, which meant when you plowed around a row of corn or cotton or tobacco, you had to go back and split the middle, because it wasn't wide enough to overlap. He and my older brothers would run around the stuff, and I would take two rows every time I'd go around, bursting the middle. We called it busting the middle back in those days. I had to burst the middle, and I could keep up with them. The first mule I had was old Buck. He was a gentle mule. I worked him probably three or four years. I went out to get him one morning to go to the field and he'd passed away.

It was hard work, but it had to be done. My sisters worked out there also. They did a lot of the chopping, did a whole lot of the chopping, actually did more of the chopping than the boys, because they did not plow and do the harder work.

Bonlee was our hometown.

I remember my first day at school. My first-grade teacher was Mrs. Mann. First day of school I found out that she was strong as a man. The little Dunlap boy and I went out for recess, and the first thing one of us did was hit the other one. I don't know which one, but we got in a fight, and she came and broke it up. I was glad to see her, because he was whipping the daylights out of me. He really was. I was on the ground and he was all over me. And I had jumped on him because he was smaller than I was, to start with. I'm not big, but he was whipping the daylights out of me, and she took us in and spanked both of us. I stayed at Bonlee School grades one through eight, and started in the ninth grade. That's when I had Miss Ina [Andrews].

Bonlee was the center of the universe for us. We only lived a mile from here, so we lived inside the city limits -- almost. It was our home town. It was a big town. You come into Bonlee on Saturday morning and things were

already bustling. Grocery stores, hardware, post office -- the post office was downtown then -- and all the farmers would come in. You could buy almost anything you wanted, or needed, in Bonlee at that time. If you happened to need something you couldn't find in Bonlee, then my father or one of my older brothers or older sisters would go to Siler City and you could pick it up there, because Siler City was the largest town in Chatham at that time.

[Bonlee] was a place where you would come, and you would stay. You didn't just come and shop a little. You would stay all day. Farmers would come in in wagons and those who had motorized transportation would come in in those. Fellowship, see people that you didn't see during the week. It was just a time to have fun, and enjoy yourself. We had a constable, and we had a jail right down here on the right. We boys used to come and look in on Monday mornings, because we knew it was going to be full. We wanted to know who was there -- "Who is that?" -- who was in the jail, so we could go home and tell who we saw. We had a constable. We didn't stay here on Saturday afternoon without protection!

Miss Ollie Hancock and her sons lived in the house -- where this building is now was a part of their yard, but there were trees here. At least once a year, or twice a year -- see, that's when your old movies were coming into being, the old B Westerns -- the Rusty Williams show would move in and she would let him use her yard for about a week or two, and all her children could go free. He'd throw this big tent up, like a revival, like an evangelist. You could go at night and he would show a movie; three cents it would cost you to get in, I guess. If I lucked up I'd get to go to one. That was a big event in Bonlee back in those days.

Also, we loved country music. I still love country music. About once a year there was a country music group that used a tent that would come and do the same thing. Smoky Graves and his group; there were only three of them. Smoky was the boss and he was the lead singer; he played the guitar. Then he had a guy who played the banjo and [one] who played the fiddle. I remember this guy because they called him "Knee Action." They called him "Knee Action" because all the time he was fiddling he was doing this [mimics ducking motion], going up and down, like this. I remember going to the Smoky Graves shows, also.

When I was twelve years old I was baptized. I never will forget it. We were having revival, and at the end of one of the nights, the second night, say -- I'm not sure of that -- the altar call was given. Well, if you didn't go up, they would sing "Just As I Am" for three hours. They would *never* stop singing "Just As I Am." So, a couple of my little buddies and I were sitting there and

Actually, we had two churches here. Hope Methodist was up on the hill -- it's inactive now -- and that was really my mother's church, the one she wanted to go to. So we'd go to it sometimes and then we'd go to the Baptist Church, which was my daddy's denomination.

one of them said, "Let's go up, and maybe they'll stop singing." Well, we did, and they did. The final result was, of course, I was baptized.

But I want to tell you a story about the church. I'm not going to give you these guys' names because one of them is still living. I had two close friends, roughly my age, and it was in warm weather. We must have been ten years old. One Saturday afternoon about two o'clock we came walking down the highway coming to Bonlee. Well, lo and behold, we looked over there and they were having a wedding inside the church. I don't know which one of us said this, but one of us asked the question, "Have you ever been to a wedding?" "No-o-o." Then one of us said, "Well, let's go." We had on bib overalls. That's all of the attire we had on, okay? No shoes. We walked up, walked inside the church, and one of the ushers saw us. He ushered us in, but only to the back seat. He didn't take us down; he took us in, to the right - I remember this as if it were yesterday - and seated us. That was my first wedding to attend. Soon as it was over, we didn't wait for the ushers - you know how they empty the church - we didn't wait for that; we just left. By the time we got home, each one of us, word had gotten home that we had been to the wedding of the day. I told you my father was six three, and weighed two thirty. That particular day I thought he was six six and weighed even more. And the other two got the same thing, and we should have.

But the most important thing that I remember was the home in which we lived.

I told you that my parents were sharecroppers. We were poor, but we didn't know we were poor. Every night my parents were there. I remember my father would gather us around him and do two things, usually. He'd tell ghost stories. I know he made a lot of them up. I might be sitting *this* far from him when he told the first one, but by the time he got to the second or third one, I was in his lap. You know, you could just feel something grabbing you. And, he would read the Bible.

I didn't realize until I got old enough to read and began to read the Bible that many times he was just mouthing it, speaking it. My father was uneducated -- had no formal education. My father had taught himself to read and write a little, although that was about it. But you see, that didn't matter. The most important thing to me was the act of bringing us together and reading the Bible. We were loved, and we were taken care of.

[As] you know, in sharecropping you wait until the fall, until the harvest comes in, to get any money that you're going to get, and then you usually owe more than you get and so you're in the hole before you start the next year. My father would work in the saw mill occasionally, to bring in a little money, and he would tell all of us before he left in the morning, "If you give your mother any problems today, I don't care what time I get back tonight, I'll take care of it." My father, when he gave you his word, you didn't need his signature.

And we were disciplined. My father was the disciplinarian in our family. If you got out of line, he put you back in line.

So we'd misbehave during the day, and my mother would say, "Well, I'm going to have to tell your daddy." And then along about three or four o'clock in the afternoon, when we knew he might be coming in, we'd start working it off. "Please, mama, don't tell." Well, many times she wouldn't tell, but, you know, frequently there would be something so bad that she would have to tell. [Like,] if you knocked out a window somewhere, sash and all, as W.F. did one day.

We were playing ball. We had a homemade bat and we'd taken a rubber center and taken tobacco twine and made a ball out of it, and bought some of this black adhesive tape and put around it. [One day] Dub was batting. And the kitchen was right here. My mother and father were cooking supper. Dub was [swinging] whaaa - he was a righthanded batter - my father walked out and said, "Son, you're going to turn that bat loose and it's going to come through this window. Move." Well, Dub was the oldest; Calvin's pitching to him, and I'm out in the field rounding up the ball - naturally, I'm the youngest and have to do all the work. We didn't move. About three pitches later, when Dub swings, the bat goes out of his hands. It didn't go through the window this way [indicating end first]; it went through the window this way [lengthwise]. Took everything right in onto the floor, right at my father's feet. I don't have to tell you what transpired after that. The only thing I remember is that my mother did her normal thing

when my father was punishing us. She would be – this is true – she would be standing in the background, hollering, “Lord, have mercy.” If I was the one getting punished, I was hollering it, too, inside. “Lord, have mercy.”

But we had a *home*. We raised sugar cane and we’d take it to the molasses mill and get our molasses. We raised our own popcorn. So in the winter we’d have a fire, and at night we’d get around the stove or that fire-

We heated with wood, we cooked with wood, we fired tobacco barns with wood, and we fired the chicken houses with wood. I thought we cut wood every day of my life. I really did. We were always cutting wood.

place and we would pop popcorn and use that homemade molasses. And you talk about crackerjack. My mother knew how to make crackerjack. You buy these things. Those aren’t crackerjack. I mean, we *really* had crackerjacks. We had my aunt’s old organ, and we would stand around and sing. Now, none of us could sing much, but we had fun. We made a joyful noise unto the Lord. We made a *lot* of noise.

The number one doctor that we had was a homemade remedy. My father in the fall of the year would go buy (you know, Chatham County *has* been known for its white lightning, you know that) my father would go buy a pint, or sometimes a quart, of white lightning, and he’d get ca’lpa [catalpa?] gum. He knew how to mix it; he was a doctor. He would take this ca’lpa gum -- he’d been doing this for years -- and put it in there, and I guess it would ferment. He’d do this in the summer, so that by the fall, by the time cold weather comes around, you got your medicine. If you had an upset stomach, they gave you that – on sugar. My mother would put a few drops on sugar. If you had an upset stomach, you got it. If you were constipated, you got it. (I never could figure that out.) If you had a toothache, you got it. That was the medicine. Now, if that didn’t take care of it, and you got real sick, my daddy would go -- we didn’t have a telephone -- my daddy would go to Goldston and Dr. Byerly would come. And that was it. That was the medicine.

And what about clothing. I told you we raised chickens. Your feed mill, where you’d get your chickens and where you would get your chicken feed, was here in Bonlee. Your chicken feed came in print sacks. My mother made our underwear, and you could see those checkerboards through the . . . Play checkers! We would take the wagon, and Daddy would say, “You go

to Bonlee and pick up chicken feed.” And my mother would say, “Okay, Joe, you need a shirt. Now, you pick out a print that you want,” or “You need underclothes; you pick out a print that you want.” And we wore those things to school. You say, “But, Joe, weren’t you ashamed?” No, we weren’t ashamed, because if I was in the classroom with Curtis, he had on one, too. You weren’t really *that* ashamed. Those were basically the clothes that we had. If I went in with a new print sack shirt – king of the roost! Got on a new shirt on today, fellas, don’t mess with me too much. Because usually when you went out for the first recess, you’d get – see, teachers didn’t go out. We didn’t have P.E., okay? We just had fifteen or twenty minutes when the teachers would get us out of their hair. They didn’t come out with us; they *sent* us. Now, they’d usually have to come out because within five minutes after we got out there, someone would be fighting. You would know that! And you would wind up with one of your sleeves off, or your shirt gone. But we were *boys*! And we had a lot of fun.

During the summer we children used to pick blackberries to get a little money. We would pick them and bring them to Bonlee and sell them. When you left

If you picked a peck bucketful, by that time you’d probably have three hundred redbugs (chiggers) on you. That didn’t make any difference.

home with them, they were up above the top of the bucket, but you know what happened, as you walked with them, they settled down. Had one guy that would buy from us, and I’d say, ‘Well, Mr. Charlie, there are four quarts here.’ “No.” He’d take it for three, because they’d settled down. Neighbors would buy them, Miss Ina used to buy a lot of them.

Rabbits. Well, I’m not going to go into the history of Chatham County and rabbits, but I will say this. We set rabbit boxes, and we would catch rabbits, and Mr. Alec Pugh would buy them. I think they started off paying fifteen cents, and later they would pay a quarter. We set those boxes along Tick Creek, and when it got cold over in the fall of the year, it stayed cold. The creek would freeze over. We would actually walk to the rabbit boxes boxes on that ice. It was that thick.

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