

# Mississippi Oral History Program

Simpson County Historical and Genealogical  
Oral History Project

An Oral History

with

Katherlina McClain

Interviewer: Joe White

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*An Oral History with Katherlina McClain, Volume 1217, Part 16*

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## Biography

Katherlina McClain was born to Alvin Rankin and Fannie Buckhalter in July 1913. She had two brothers and five sisters. Katherlina went to Vardaman School, a plantation school, for three years. She spent another year at Old Kemp School in Simpson County. She stopped going to school so that she could help raise her sisters. She married Earnest McClain in January 1950; they did not have any children. Earnest worked for the railroad outside of Mendenhall as a section hand for thirty-seven years until retirement. Katherlina was a domestic worker, caring for homes and children, including Virginia May, another interviewee. McClain's first job was working for Preston Allen, the sheriff of Simpson County. Her and her husband retired in 1975. Katherlina joined the NAACP in the 1960s. She was one of the first African-Americans to work on election returns.

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AN ORAL HISTORY  
with  
KATHERLINA McCLAIN

*This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi Simpson County Project. The interview is with Katherlina McClain and is taking place on September 6, 2003. The interviewer is Joe White.*

**White:** —is Joe White. Today is Saturday, September the sixth, 2003. This interview is conducted under a grant from the Mississippi Humanities Council as a part of the oral history project directed by The University of Southern Mississippi. Today we're interviewing Ms. Katherlina McClain at her home near Martinville in Simpson County. Ms. McClain, I believe you were born Miss Rankin, weren't you?

**McLain:** That's right.

**White:** And that's Rankin with no S on the end, I believe you said. There're a good number of Rankins out this way, too. What was your dad's name?

**McLain:** Alvin Rankin.

**White:** Alvin Rankin. Where was he born? Do you know?

**McLain:** Simpson County.

**White:** Was he born out this way, toward Martinville?

**McLain:** Yes, sir, between Martinville and Magee.

**White:** And what did he do for a living?

**McLain:** Farmed.

**White:** And what was your mother's name?

**McLain:** Fannie Buckhalter.

**White:** Buckhalter, B-U-C-K-H-A-L-T-E-R, is that right?

**McLain:** That's right.

**White:** And where was she born?

**McLain:** Rankin County.

**White:** Was she born in a town or a community there?

**McLain:** Out from Brandon, east of Brandon, out there, and they called it Oaky Woods.

**White:** Oaky Woods. I think I remember hearing that. Did you have any brothers and sisters?

**McLain:** I had two brothers, and I had five sisters.

**White:** Five sisters. Oh, boy. That was a house full of girls, there, wasn't it? (laughter) What were your brothers' names?

**McLain:** Doc(?) Buckhalter, and James Buckhalter.

**White:** Either of them living over around this way, now?

**McLain:** I'm the onliest one in the family living.

**White:** The only one still alive, huh?

**McLain:** That's right.

**White:** And what were your sisters' names?

**McLain:** My oldest sister was named Helena(?), and the youngest—and that sister, she died before she was named. Then my next sister was named Mamie Lou(?). And the next was named Ina Belle(?). And the other one named Marguerite(?).

**White:** What was the name of the sister who died before she was nine?

**McLain:** She wasn't named. She didn't have no name.

**White:** Oh, nine days, you mean.

**McLain:** She didn't have no name.

**White:** OK. And when were you born? What's your birth date?

**McLain:** July the thirteenth, 1913.

**White:** July the thirteenth?

**McLain:** Nineteen thirteen.

**White:** Nineteen thirteen. And I'm jumping ahead here a little bit, but I believe you got married, not soon after you were born, but what was your husband's name?

**McLain:** Earnest McClain.

**White:** Earnest McClain, M-C-C-L-A-I-N?

**McLain:** That's right.

**White:** We'll get back to him later and everything. I just kind of wanted to establish while we're talking about family genealogy. You didn't have any children, I understand.

**McLain:** No, sir.

**White:** But you're now living with your niece.

**McLain:** That's right.

**White:** And what's her name?

**McLain:** Antoinette(?) Buckhalter.

**White:** OK. That Buckhalter name is still going around, isn't it? (laughter) There are a lot of Buckhalters out this way. What was it like, growing up in that house with five girls and two boys?

**McLain:** Well, I was oldest one. My oldest sister, she was gone, and it left it all on me to see to them.

**White:** You pretty much babysat then, didn't you?

**McLain:** I babysat and go in the field and take the children to the field in those days and make a (inaudible) out. We had to keep the ants off of the children and keep them with bread and water.

**White:** Did you carry the food for lunch to the field?

**McLain:** Oh, yes, sir, we carried. Had to get up and fix that food to carry to the field, and we stayed in the field all day. When they would knock off for twelve o'clock, well, they would open up the food, and we eat and then set around, and then one o'clock they'd go on back to the field.

**White:** What were they using to plow with back then, mules, tractors?

**McLain:** Mules and ox.

**White:** Oxen, they were still using oxen out this way then, huh?

**McLain:** Yes, sir.

**White:** We've talked to a couple of people who remember taking the ox wagon to Jackson. They don't remember doing it. They remember their daddy and their granddaddy making a trip to Jackson once a year to buy seed and feed and stuff like that with the ox teams.

**McLain:** Oh, yes, sir.

**White:** Do you remember your daddy ever making a trip in a wagon like that?

**McLain:** Yes, sir. They would go to Jackson in the wagon. They never did put the oxens on the road from there to Jackson because they were too slow; I reckon (inaudible).

**White:** Probably so.

**McLain:** They'd use their mules, though, and have those covered, old wagons where the sun didn't hit them, and at night they could live in that wagon and sleep.

**White:** They camped out on the way to Jackson, then.

**McLain:** Camped out on the way to Jackson.

**White:** Mr. Ernest Camper—we talked to—lives between Braxton and Pinola. I don't know whether you—

**McLain:** I know him.

**White:** Do you know him?

**McLain:** Yes.

**White:** He talked about how his daddy and his granddaddy both, from their farm, would go to Jackson. He was one of the people I was thinking of in particular. He said it took them three days to get up there.

**McLain:** That's right. And be so glad when they were coming in because you'd know they was going to bring (inaudible) you bought your soda crackers loose. They'd bring a big bag of soda crackers. That was (inaudible). (laughter)

**White:** You can still remember what they tasted like, I think.



**McLain:** Yes, sir.

**White:** Just looking at your expression now. (laughter) What else was good to eat when you were growing up? Was your mama a good cook?

**McLain:** Yeah, she was a cook for the public. (laughter) In (inaudible) we'd be so glad to get them sardines. And they wasn't but a nickel a box.

**White:** You like sardines, huh?

**McLain:** We did, then. (laughter)

**White:** I still do. (laughter)

**McLain:** But think about how high they is now. You could buy a sack full with what you have to pay for one box now.

**White:** There wasn't much money going around then, either, though, was there?

**McLain:** No.

**White:** Did your dad ever work anywhere other than the farm? He just, he did farming mostly, huh?

**McLain:** I didn't know nothing they'd ever do, nothing but farm.

**White:** Did he sharecrop, or did he own the farm?

**McLain:** He owned his farm, and he had some sharecroppers.

**White:** Had some sharecroppers working with him, for him, huh?

**McLain:** Yeah, he (inaudible).

**White:** I bet you learned how to cook, probably, pretty early, didn't you, with that house full of girls?

**McLain:** Yeah. Mama would get her stuff ready and put it on in the morning time, on the stove and put just enough water in to cook and tell me—and she sifted that meal and seasoned it and tell me about what time to put that bread on. So that's the way I learned to cook.

**White:** You got to have cornbread, huh?

**McLain:** (Inaudible) that old, stiff (inaudible).

**White:** Well, who was in charge of getting the firewood for the stove?

**McLain:** Well, see, they would get that up across the summer when they (inaudible) in the field, and they'd have it to burn. And then when—

**White:** It was always pretty handy then, huh?

**McLain:** It was always handy, and just like way you do with the gathering of the crops, they'd start to cutting wood because there wasn't no public work hardly for them to do.

**White:** Did y'all have a pump, or did you—what kind of well did you have?

**McLain:** We had a dug well.

**White:** Dug well. That's what most people had. I remember that on both my grandmas' places. How did you water the mules and stuff? Did you have a trough?

**McLain:** We had a trough and fill that trough up. And whenever it get low, we'd have to watch it and wash it out and run clean water in it.

**White:** That was pretty close to the well, or did you have to walk a long way?

**McLain:** Pretty close (inaudible) we had right close to the well.

**White:** And what about washing clothes then?

**McLain:** Well, you know, they had batting sticks, and they would put the clothes, get the clothes wet, and put them on the batting block and take that paddle and beat that dirt out.

**White:** What kind of soap did you use?

**McLain:** Lye soap.

**White:** Lye soap. Did y'all make it, or did you buy it?

**McLain:** Oh, my mama made it. Make it out of ashes, oak ashes.

**White:** I've always heard that. I don't know exactly how they do it.

**McLain:** And you put chips in the bottom and then after your ash is in there, and then when you get enough ashes in there, then you pore your water and let that drip. And that's where (inaudible).

**White:** It just soaks through there, then, huh?

**McLain:** It soaks through there; water soak through there, and it be brown, and you know it's good lye soap. And then put it in the pot and put you some old grease in there and some rosin and make you some good soap.

**White:** Grease and rosin, that's out of the pine trees?

**McLain:** Yes, sir.

**White:** Well, I always wondered what they stuck that together with, what held it together.

**McLain:** That rosin make you have a lot of good lathers.

**White:** Oh, really?

**McLain:** That's what that was for.

**White:** You telling me something I sure didn't know. I've always heard of that, but—

**McLain:** Well, that's what they put the rosin with it. It'll make lathers.

**White:** Well, I never did ask my grandmother about that, and I always regretted it. I remember we used to go way down in a hollow. We'd have a big wash pot with a fire under it to get the water hot. Did y'all have a fire under your water pot?

**McLain:** Oh, yes, sir. In those days, you'd wash your clothes and boil it, and then take them out. Your first water then, they call that the boiling suds. That's when you got the rest of the dirt out. Then you had to put them over there in them other tubs and rinse them.

**White:** Y'all just hang them up and let them dry, then, huh?

**McLain:** Oh, yes, sir. They would prop them up high, and that wind be blowing, and they would soon dry, and they have all them wrinkles whipped out of them.

**White:** What did the clothes smell like after they'd been washed in that lye soap?

**McLain:** Oh, they smelled so good. That rosin gives it a scent, too, you know.

**White:** That's what I remember my grandmother saying. She said, "Nothing ever smelled better than fresh clothes."

**McLain:** That's right.

**White:** Batting stick, that's what you called it?

**McLain:** Well, you have that batting stick, you can put your clothes up there and bat the dirt out, from them dirty, old hogs and things.

**White:** What else did you learn how to do around the house?

**McLain:** Some of everything.

**White:** My grandma used two types of brooms, and one of them was a outdoor broom that she'd make out of sage straw.

**McLain:** Yes.

**White:** Did y'all ever sweep your yard?

**McLain:** Oh, yes, and up under the house, too. We'd get up—see, children nowadays, that's why they're so mischievous. They don't have nothing to do but eat and play. And (inaudible).

**White:** There was plenty to do back then, wasn't it?

**McLain:** We'd get up under there. "All right. Y'all got to clean up under the house today." Get up under there on your stomach with them (inaudible); had them dogwoods fresh blooming, and you'd sweep back there. And then you'd scoot up a little further.

**White:** Yeah. They used some kind of brush broom. I don't know whether it was dogwood or what it was. But y'all used dogwood, huh?

**McLain:** Dogwood bushes. See, they tall and slim, get them (inaudible) fresh blooms in the spring of the year to last you till (inaudible).

**White:** Grandma used a, I believe it was a sagebrush broom. She'd tie them in the house.

**McLain:** Oh, yeah. I know. That's straw brooms.

**White:** Straw brooms, right.

**McLain:** Sage brush. Well, we had them to sweep the house with. Wasn't nothing like no stick brooms and things like (inaudible).

**White:** We've talked to a couple of people who said about once a year they'd wash their house down with lye soap.

**McLain:** Oh, yes, sir. You had to wash that house out. And (laughter) I don't know whether you know it or not; people used to have chinchies.

**White:** Oh, yeah. (laughter)

**McLain:** I don't know where (phone rings) where they've gone to.

**White:** We'll stop here and let you answer the phone. (brief interruption) Did y'all ever go to town when you were young?

**McLain:** Yeah, about once a year.

**White:** Not very often, huh?

**McLain:** But they'd get something for children's day, every second Sunday in June.

**White:** Second Sunday in June. Was that always chitterling day?

**McLain:** Children's day.

**White:** Children's day. I'm sorry. I was fixing to say, "June." All of a sudden I realized, June, it's not cold enough to kill a hog.

**McLain:** And see, we would go and help, let us help pick out something for us to wear for (inaudible) my mama sewed all the time. And that cloth would be five cents a yard.

**White:** A lot of money back then, wasn't it?

**McLain:** Yeah, that's right. And (laughter) get a nice pair of shoes for fifty cents. That was the price of them. So we'd go to town and pick that out.

**White:** Did your mom have a sewing machine?

**McLain:** Yes, sir. She had one of these old peddle kinds.

**White:** Do you remember what kind it was?

**McLain:** Singer.

**White:** It was a Singer. That was a real popular model around the South.

**McLain:** And I'm going to tell you (inaudible) it is Singer.

**White:** I remember those foot pumps. Did you learn how to sew on one of those, too, where you peddle it?

**McLain:** Oh, yes, sir. If you wasn't careful, it'd run away with you. (laughter)

**White:** When did you start learning how to sew?

**McLain:** Well, I started sewing when I was real young; I reckon right around seven years. My mama would show us how to make dolls. We'd cut out dolls, cut them out. And she showed us how. And then if you had a button off of your dress or something, you didn't take no pin and pin it up. You had to sew that button back on. I learned to sew buttons on then.

**White:** Do it right, huh?

**McLain:** Yes, sir.

**White:** When did you start to school, and where did you start to school?

**McLain:** The first school I went to, I was seven years, and I went to a plantation school. You know they had plantation schooling. And the name was—that was in Rankin County. And the name of the school was Vardaman.

**White:** Vardaman?

**McLain:** Vardaman School.

**White:** What kind of building was it?

**McLain:** Oh, it was a one-room, little, old thing. You could sit on one side and spit on the other side. (laughter)

**White:** Pretty small, then, wasn't it?

**McLain:** It was real small.

**White:** How many grades were in that school?

**McLain:** It just was school; everybody went there. And one teacher.

**White:** You remember the teacher's name?

**McLain:** Arlitha Coggins(?).

**White:** Cogger?

**McLain:** Coggins.

**White:** Collier(?), OK. And how long did you go to school there?

**McLain:** Oh, I went there about three years.

**White:** Up through about the third grade, then?

**McLain:** Yes, sir.

**White:** I believe you had told us earlier you went to school another year in Simpson County?

**McLain:** Yes, sir.

**White:** Where was that?

**McLain:** Some of them called it the Old Kemp School.

**White:** Kemp?

**McLain:** Kemp, yeah, back out here on the other—not on Martinville(?) Road, back over.

**White:** Toward White Oak?

**McLain:** Yes, sir.

**White:** And by then you were home, raising children, too, weren't you, raising your sisters? (laughter)

**McLain:** Yeah. (laughter) And staying with, seeing other folks' children, too. Somebody else, you know, after those grewed up at home, where—folks was bad to, "How about going and getting the eldest to come and keep my children?"

**White:** Is that the reason you didn't go on in school, or was there just not any school?

**McLain:** It wasn't no school.

**White:** A lot of them went to the fourth and fifth grades, and that was it. They couldn't go any further.

**McLain:** That was it because, you see, you'd be grown because it wasn't no school (inaudible). School wouldn't start until in October for black peoples, and then school would be out the last February or first of March. Had to go out there and get the ground ready for them to, (inaudible). Corn stalks, you could cut them, but them there cotton stalks, you had to have a big, old stick and just go up and down the rows, breaking them up.

**White:** How much work in the field did you do while you were growing up?

**McLain:** All (inaudible).

**White:** All the time. What all did you, hoe and—

**McLain:** Hoe and drop in—these velvet beans and (inaudible) beans and peas, stuff like that. You'd get two rows, get in the middle of two rows and just go along, just dropping [seeds].

**White:** On both sides, huh?

**McLain:** Yes, sir, just—

**White:** All the kids were out there doing that, huh?

**McLain:** All of them couldn't do it because you had to be a fast walker because there'd be somebody behind you plowing, and you had to stay out they way.

**White:** They'd be covering the seeds up after you went by. They'd plow over it, huh?

**McLain:** That's right. They'd put the sweep in the middle, you know, throw the dirt out on each side.

**White:** On the rows. Did y'all have sweet potatoes?

**McLain:** Sweet potatoes, yes, sir.

**White:** Irish potatoes?

**McLain:** Irish potatoes and we raised our own meat. Didn't know what it was to buy some—

**White:** I got confused about my hog-killing time a few minutes ago when you said, "children's day," I thought you said, "chitterlings day." (laughter) Then I remembered it was June, and you wouldn't be getting any chitterlings in June, I guarantee you. Did y'all wait till it was cold to butcher hogs?

**McLain:** Daddy'd butcher them any time he got ready.

**White:** They did?

**McLain:** They would put them in brine.



**White:** Heavy saltwater, huh?

**McLain:** Heavy saltwater and just like you going to cook, have you some fresh meat tomorrow, you'd put it in soak tonight and let it soak that salt out of there, and wash it good and put it on and cook it. It'd be just like fresh meat.

**White:** You ever make any redeye gravy with coffee in it?

**McLain:** Oh, yes, sir.

**White:** Do you like it?

**McLain:** It was good then. (laughter)

**White:** I don't imagine your doctor recommends it these days, does he?

**McLain:** No. (laughter)

**White:** What kind of greens did y'all raise and like to eat?

**McLain:** Mustard, turnips, and collards.

**White:** A little bit of everything.

**McLain:** Cabbage. Anything, you name it; we raised it in the garden.

**White:** And how did you get out of the house? What led you to get out and go to work somewhere else, or to get married or whatever you did? How old were you when you got married?

**McLain:** Oh, I really don't know.

**White:** When did you meet Mr. McClain? Mr. Earnest McClain (laughter) came into your life there at some point.

**McLain:** Oh! I met him in the last of [19]39, and I just met him, you know, (inaudible) because he came from Collins up here to work.

**White:** Oh, he wasn't from Simpson County, originally, huh?

**McLain:** No, sir, he wasn't.

**White:** And y'all got married in 1950, I think, didn't you?

**McLain:** Yes, sir, 1950 we got married.

**White:** What was the date you got married? You remember?

**McLain:** The eighth of January.

**White:** Eighth of January. Where'd you get married?

**McLain:** The home of one of my cousins, John Rankin's house.

**White:** John Rankin.

**McLain:** Yes, sir.

**White:** Who was the minister?

**McLain:** Cousin John was the minister.

**White:** Oh, he was the minister?

**McLain:** Yes, sir.

**White:** Oh, OK. What church did y'all go to when you were coming up?

**McLain:** We didn't go to no church. We went to his house and got married.

**White:** No, no, no. I mean when you were coming up, what church did you go to?

**McLain:** Oh, oh, oh.

**White:** I kind of jump around. You just have to excuse me here. My mind works in funny ways sometimes. (laughter)

**McLain:** When we was at Rankin County, we went to Jerusalem Church.

**White:** That close to Brandon?

**McLain:** Yes, sir. And then after I started staying in Simpson County, well, one out here at Merry(?) Grove for the first church.

**White:** Merryville?

**McLain:** Merry Grove.

**White:** Merry Grove. I'm sorry. Yeah. Sometimes I'm just hard of hearing. That's all there is to it. (laughter)

**McLain:** Well, something wrong with us all. (laughter)

**White:** Well, there's not much wrong with some folks, though, you know? They're pretty blessed.

**McLain:** Well, I tell you one thing. A person, you think he all right; he may be in worse shape than you're in.

**White:** That's the truth. That really is, really is. But what did your husband do for a living?

**McLain:** Railroad.

**White:** Railroad?

**McLain:** Um-hm.

**White:** Railroad. Did he work out of Mendenhall?

**McLain:** He did. Well, you see, first time he worked down here in Collins, and he was a young boy, and during the war, they have the (inaudible). And so a man come down there hunting somebody to work from that section; he needed somebody. And they gave it to him. And he come here (inaudible), and he worked out there thirty-seven years.

**White:** Thirty-seven years. Started off as a section hand, probably, didn't he?

**McLain:** He was a section hand when he retired.

**White:** What did they do? I know that job changed over the years. But when he first started to work for them, they did some pretty heavy work, didn't they?

**McLain:** Oh, they didn't have machine working. They had to do it all, pulling out those ties, and hammering them down, and cutting the right of way, and oh, I don't know what all.

**White:** Pretty seriously hard work when they were—

**McLain:** Yes, sir.

**White:** —putting in these lines, railroad lines around here.

**McLain:** That's right. Yes, sir.

**White:** Were you working when y'all first got married?

**McLain:** Yes, sir, I was working for Ms. Virginia May.

**White:** I believe I know her. That's the lady that used to be a nurse?

**McLain:** Yes, sir.

**White:** In Mendenhall? What type work did you do with her?

**McLain:** Oh, I see to the house and the children.

**White:** You did that for a number of years, didn't you?

**McLain:** I sure did.

**White:** I believe you used to work with some of my neighbors there. You mentioned Joe and Ruth Myers.

**McLain:** Yes, sir, I worked for them and Mr. Dan McIntosh and them, worked for them. I kept a job, now, because they always somebody say, "If you ever leave there, you don't nothing to nobody. You come to me." (laughter)

**White:** Your reputation went ahead of you then, didn't it?

**McLain:** Yes.

**White:** Well, you probably raised a lot of children around Mendenhall then, didn't you?

**McLain:** I did. Rosalind was one of them.

**White:** Rosalind Lee(?) she is now.

**McLain:** Yes, sir.

**White:** She was Rosalind Rhodes(?); I think. Yeah, we had mentioned her earlier. Let's see. Her dad's name was Naz, I believe it was.

**McLain:** Naz Rhodes.

**White:** Naz Rhodes. And her mother's name was Myrtle, I think.

**McLain:** It Myrtle Rose.

**White:** Did she run a beauty shop?

**McLain:** Yeah. She had the only beauty shop in Mendenhall one time.

**White:** Is that right.

**McLain:** The onliest person. It was when her first child, you know, when her first child died.

**White:** Right. I remember hearing that.

**McLain:** And when she had that little girl, (inaudible), she was up pretty good size, toddling around, and she got sick and died, and Ms. Myrtle thought that was something she had did wrong. It was a long time getting, kind of getting over it, and then Rosalind(?) come along.

**White:** I believe you had mentioned on this biographical sheet that you filled out that your first job, your first paid job was a dollar a week.

**McLain:** That's right, a dollar a week, um-hm.

**White:** You remember about what year that was?

**McLain:** No.

**White:** That dollar went a little farther than it did in these days, though, didn't it?

**McLain:** Oh, went further than five dollars now. (laughter)

**White:** It'd still be hard to live on five dollars a week, though, wouldn't it?

**McLain:** It sure would.

**White:** You mentioned a word a while ago. Oh, I did want to ask you what other families you worked for while we were talking about—

**McLain:** Oh, I can't remember. (laughter)

**White:** A number of them, huh? You had mentioned a fellow that used to be sheriff here.

**McLain:** Oh, that was the first somebody I worked for in Mendenhall, Mr. Preston Allen.

**White:** Preston Allen, I remember that name. I never did know him, though. He was sheriff of Simpson County, huh?

**McLain:** That's right.

**White:** And I think you worked for a man who was a judge one time, too, didn't you?

**McLain:** Judge Walker.

**White:** Judge Walker, Jack Walker.

**McLain:** Yeah. That's right. I raised up they children. (laughter) Betty Ruth was to see me right now, she say, "Oh, looky here. Here who raised me." (inaudible).

**White:** Well, you raised a lot of white children and black children and didn't have any of your own, then, huh?

**McLain:** That's right. That's right.

**White:** Well, you got blessed or cursed with plenty of children then, anyway.

**McLain:** I sure was. Some of them is real nice right now. Be like Coach Rains' (?) little children.

**White:** That's Jack Walker's daughter and her husband, I believe. Isn't it? Coach Rains.

**McLain:** And so you know they had two little, old boys. And they called Ms. Banks, "Ma Banks." And so they called me, "Ma Kat." So one day they was here. He was in this door, and (inaudible). They come running in to me. "Here Ma Kat." (inaudible) (laughter) He wanted to know who they was talking to. (laughter) So them little boys called me Ma Kat for a long time.

**White:** You had you a bunch of surrogate families all those years, then, huh?

**McLain:** Yes, sir.

**White:** You never did have any trouble finding a job, huh?

**McLain:** No, sir, never had no trouble. And Ms. Vada(?), I worked in that family, Vada and Ms. Ada.

**White:** Vada Grubbs and Ada Griffin, is that right?

**McLain:** That's right.

**White:** They were sisters, weren't they?

**McLain:** They were sisters.

**White:** Where'd you work for them? When they lived together?

**McLain:** Oh, you know when Ms. Vada's husband had to go to Sanatorium for—

**White:** I remember hearing about that. He had tuberculosis.

**McLain:** When he came home, the doctor had said he had to have three meals a day, and so Ms. Vada said everybody she mentioned, "I don't want them. I don't want them." So then she (inaudible) come down to me, and he told her, "All right. She (inaudible)." And I fixed meals for him.

**White:** What did you like to cook? (end of digital file named tape one, side one; interview continues on digital file named tape one, side two.)

**White:** —[favorite] kind of peas.

**White:** Just any of it. Just whatever I was supposed to cook.

**White:** My brother, who's been dead for a number of years now, I never will forget, loved pink-eyed, purple-hull peas. I mean, he would just about kill for them.

**McLain:** Mm, my Lord have mercy.

**White:** That's the reason I asked if you had a special kind of pea you liked to cook or to raise.

**McLain:** I love peas. Now, a lot of people love butterbeans, but I love peas better than I do butterbeans. Peas is one of my favorite. Be like Billy Boy, Ms. Virginia's baby boy.

**White:** Billy Boy May.

**McLain:** He liked the peas, too, and so she'd tell me, "Kat, you just think everybody love peas because you and Bill love them!" (laughter)

**White:** This thing's just about to run out and turn over now, this tape. I presume we're just going to let it keep running, though. When did you and your husband build your house out this way, or did you buy a house that was already here?

**McLain:** We built it from (inaudible). We bought this (inaudible) Mr. Ben Slade(?). He was selling them lots out for \$200. You know down there where the house at; it was water oaks just like that. You stepped right off the road, couldn't nobody see you. All that was a water oak grove in there.

**White:** (Inaudible) that real close, huh?

**McLain:** And so Mr. Ben, got to telling, “Lots of people got (inaudible).” And so we cleaned up that lot. I was working out there at Mr. Max Lee(?). Did you ever know him?

**White:** Yeah, that’s my great-uncle, I believe, if we talking about the same Max Lee. He used to run a gin. (laughter)

**McLain:** (Inaudible)

**White:** That’s right, yeah. (laughter)

**McLain:** He was a character, wasn’t he?

**White:** Oh, yes, very much so. (laughter)

**McLain:** But you know what, baby? She liked me, and she never did do me like she did the other folks.

**White:** I believe he was my grandmother’s brother.

**McLain:** Sure enough?

**White:** My grandmother was a Lee before she married and became a Brown.

**McLain:** Well, I reckon (inaudible) is gone.

**White:** I think so. I think the whole bunch of them. What other families were living out this way when you—

**McLain:** Out this way or that way?

**White:** Well, where you had your house.

**McLain:** Oh. What other families? Lisa Holmes(?) and her husband, Bishop Russell(?) and his wife, and Red Durr(?) and his wife, John Miller, his family, and John Rankin, talking about, they lived—Ms. Nancy Haywood(?) and R.T. Walker, Gertha Manning(?). Oh, it was a gang of us down here.

**White:** You had some pretty good neighbors there.

**McLain:** Yes, sir.

**White:** Sure did. Have times changed around this way any? When did you retire?

**McLain:** We retired in [19]75.



**White:** Your husband retired then, too, from the railroad?

**McLain:** That's who retired me. I—(laughter)

**White:** He made you retire then.

**McLain:** No. You see, the thing about it, whenever they retire the husband, they retire the wives, too.

**White:** Oh, is that right?

**McLain:** Yes, sir. I'll tell you who went up, Mr. Delmer Dice(?) and Ms. Ada Lee. We all four went together and retired at the same time.

**White:** That was really ironic that I think he later died, got run over by a train, didn't he?

**McLain:** He got run over by a train.

**White:** After working all those years for the railroad. Did your husband enjoy retirement, or did he miss that work?

**McLain:** He enjoyed it because we had a big patch out there in the back, and he kept something growing all the time. He loved to do that kind of work, and so he kept himself busy.

**White:** Did you help him in the garden?

**McLain:** No. See, he didn't wanted anybody to help him. (laughter) They may do something wrong. (laughter)

**White:** He liked to do it himself, then, huh?

**McLain:** Liked to do it himself.

**White:** Did you put up any vegetables, anything like that?

**McLain:** Yes, sir. I put up much vegetables.

**White:** Did you can or freeze or both?

**McLain:** I did them both.

**White:** Well, when you were coming up—let's get back to your early childhood. Did you learn how to can when your mama was canning any?

**McLain:** Oh, yes, sir, I learned that.

**White:** Wasn't much freezing going on then, was there?

**McLain:** Wasn't no freezing at all. (laughter) I tell you one thing. You sure had to have them jars clean before you had put anything in them. Be sure they clean. Wash them good with soap and water, and then scald them out good because if you didn't, the stuff would bust the jar.

**White:** What all do you remember putting up when you were young?

**McLain:** Oh, peas and blackberries and peaches.

**White:** Did you ever pick huckleberries?

**McLain:** Yes, sir.

**White:** Do you like huckleberry pie as well as I do?

**McLain:** Oh, the huckleberry pie was (laughter) good.

**White:** We used to go out every spring. And that was my favorite memory of childhood is picking huckleberries and making some good, old dumplings and huckleberry pie.

**McLain:** But you know, now, don't want to put them dumplings in the pie.

**White:** Is that right?

**McLain:** (Inaudible) now, that's good. (Inaudible) pie.

**White:** A lazy pie?

**McLain:** Yeah. I took one out there to the Walkers, and Mr. Jack would go back in there and get the pan and hear him scraping that little bit. (laughter) Scraping the pan. (laughter)

**White:** Make sure he got every bit of it, huh? (laughter)

**McLain:** Yes.

**White:** You must have made some pretty good pies, then, you know?

**McLain:** Well, you see, you make it up, the way I do mine, I make it all up dry, sugar, flour, and the margarine, all dry. And then let that be boiling and (inaudible) and then set it in the oven, and then when it come out, it have a nice crust on it.

**White:** It tastes mighty good, too. I can almost taste it right now, listening to you. (laughter) Did y'all ever make your own butter at home when you were coming up?

**McLain:** Ooh, yes, sir.

**White:** What did you have, a wooden churn?

**McLain:** We had a wooden churn and stone churn. So glad we got a stone churn, and you know, there had to be somebody that'd fan the flies and one churning.

**White:** Well, the stone churn, is that the one that had the little turner paddle in it? Or it had the up-and-down paddle, too, like the wooden one, huh?

**McLain:** That's right. That's what the little glass one would be.

**White:** That's right. That's the glass one that had the little paddle wheels in it and everything. How'd you keep the butter after you made it?

**McLain:** Well, you work it and get all that water out it and all that milk, and it would keep good, itself.

**White:** Did y'all have a icebox when you were coming up?

**McLain:** People didn't have no ice at that time, coming up.

**White:** Ice man didn't come that far out in the country, huh?

**McLain:** Well, wasn't none, in town, neither. And we used to keep stuff cool, put it in a bucket and let it down in the well, keep it cool like that.

**White:** That's what I was thinking about a few minutes ago. That's the reason I asked you that. My grandma and them used to put it in, they had a little stream, running down behind the house, and they'd tie it, hang it from a branch on a tree there and let that cool water run on it.

**McLain:** That's right.

**White:** That's the way they kept their butter and everything.

**McLain:** And you know, when they did start having ice, you'd drink some ice water; you have to wrap (inaudible). It would hurt all up in (inaudible).

**White:** Give you a headache, huh?

**McLain:** But now, you put ice in your mouth, and it don't do that. (laughter)

**White:** Weren't used to it being real cold then. When's the first time you tasted ice cream? You remember that?

**McLain:** (Inaudible). Well, you know, we used to—

**White:** When you said “headache,” it reminded me of ice cream. (laughter)

**McLain:** Oh, we used to call ourselves making ice cream. Used to snow a lot in the wintertime, and it wasn't no ice cream, but they—

**White:** It was kind of like slush, wasn't it? My mama used to make it when it snowed. Keep stirring the snow in it?

**McLain:** We put that snow in a bucket bigger than the one we had the—(inaudible) around out there. (Inaudible)

**White:** Oh, y'all would actually stir it. Put the ice in a bucket; put the snow in a bucket (inaudible).

**McLain:** And see, if you have your bucket with the ice in it larger than the one with your (inaudible), well, see you slush it around like that (inaudible).

**White:** Make it kind of freeze, huh?

**McLain:** Yeah.

**White:** Never did freeze hard, though, did it?

**McLain:** (Inaudible)

**White:** And thinking about ice cream reminded me of eggs. Did y'all raise chickens when you were coming up, too?

**McLain:** Oh, yes, sir. And people, in the spring of the year, we couldn't sell eggs for five cents a dozen.

**White:** Is that right?

**McLain:** (Inaudible) and you carry them to the store, and they wouldn't buy them because everybody else had plenty of eggs.

**White:** Everybody else raised them, too, then?

**McLain:** That's right. And then people were good to give you a dozen (inaudible) eggs (inaudible).

**White:** Neighbors were pretty good, then, huh?

**McLain:** They sure was.

**White:** When y'all were coming up, how'd your dad sell his vegetables and things like that, or did he?

**McLain:** Didn't sell none.

**White:** Didn't sell anything. He just basically raised the food for y'all to eat, then, huh?

**McLain:** That's right. Yes.

**White:** Did you ever grow any cotton or anything like that?

**McLain:** Something I didn't like.

**White:** (laughter) I thought I could tell by your expression. You not much of a cotton picker, huh?

**McLain:** No, sir. The most I ever picked in my life was ninety-five pounds from morning to—you'd take; go to the field now, and let the sun rise on you, (inaudible) the heat.

**White:** Supposed to be in the field before the sun comes up, huh?

**McLain:** That's right. And stay in there till it go down. So anyway, I picked ninety-five pounds that day, and that was the most I ever picked in my life.

**White:** We talked to one man in an earlier interview who, I think he said the most he ever picked was around a hundred pounds, and he got married, and his wife picked 350 pounds the first day and put him into shame. (laughter) And he said he had to get out there and start hustling. One time he beat her, and he said that's the only time (laughter) he beat her. But you weren't that big a cotton picker, huh?

**McLain:** I wasn't that big a cotton picker, but I'll tell you one thing. I hoed the lead row in chopping cotton.

**White:** Is that right?

**McLain:** Oh, I could take that hoe and get along.

**White:** You didn't mind doing that as bad, did you?

**McLain:** I didn't mind doing that, and they'd always want me to be talking and telling something, so it'd make the rest of them keep (inaudible) to hear it.

**White:** But you pretty much lived out in the country a lot of your life.

**McLain:** Oh, yes, sir.

**White:** And pretty much kept a garden and things like that, or either your husband did after you retired, huh?

**McLain:** Yes.

**White:** When did he die?

**McLain:** He died in [19]97.

**White:** Ninety-seven. Well, he got some retirement in there, didn't he?

**McLain:** Yes, sir.

**White:** Did he enjoy working with the railroad all those years?

**McLain:** He said he did.

**White:** He must have. He stayed with it a long time, didn't he? The unions came along, I believe, and pay got a little better there after a while on the railroad, didn't it?

**McLain:** Sir?

**White:** Pay got a little better after the unions came along, I believe, on the railroad.

**McLain:** Yes, sir.

**White:** Well, I appreciate you talking to us. I've enjoyed this. We're going to stop here for just a minute now.

**McLain:** Yeah. I'll hold it.

**White:** Just wanted to make sure that tape was going in the right direction there. We've talked about a lot of things, a lot about food, and a lot about cooking, a lot about families, but we haven't talked about people in general. You made a comment earlier, right when we first started the interview, about people can be mean, or something like that. And we didn't explore it or anything, but I may be too presumptuous here, but I know you've been active in civil rights during your life and that you were a pretty early member of the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] from what I've heard. Can you tell us a little bit

about your activities along those lines? What's happened in Simpson County over the years in race relations?

**McLain:** Oh, lots have changed, but I always, my method was to always tell the people, "You be nice to people and have faith in God and pray. I don't care how they treat you; you be nice to them. After a while they'll be ashamed, and they'll quit."

**White:** That'll work with some people. It won't work with all of them (inaudible).

**McLain:** Oh! Now, yes, it will, too.

**White:** You think it will, if you can last long enough, huh?

**McLain:** That's right.

**White:** Well, you've got a pretty healthy philosophy there, then.

**McLain:** Well, that's the way I always talk about it. If you get—everybody I ever worked for wasn't nice as they should have been, as I was to them because when I'd go to work for somebody, I treated them just like I wanted to be treated, and I think what hurt them, it hurt me, and I always try to be nice. Some of them could be so nasty to you until it was—I just kept on praying. And some of those same peoples have come back to me and asked me when I was working, they come back, "I'd like to get you to do something." And I used to, after I quit working, I used to do custom baking at the house. I said, "No, (inaudible)."

**White:** You never did say anything overtly. You just didn't go back to work for them again. (laughter)

**McLain:** No, sir, I didn't go back. I'd tell them, "No."

**White:** Have things gotten better in Simpson County? You mentioned earlier that there just was no education past the fourth or fifth grade for—

**McLain:** Oh, yes, sir. Things is a whole lot better than it has been because one thing, a lot of people done wrong things, they would just (inaudible) till they passed because you don't know. If you do something to me, I may not do nothing to you, but somebody else going to do worsen by you.

**White:** Come back to haunt you at some point or another.

**McLain:** Sure will. And so everybody should look out, and just like, say, if I'm going to say something to you ugly, I wouldn't like for you to say that to me.

**White:** Well, you've had some pretty good neighbors, some pretty good friends, white and black, all these years around here, hadn't you?

**McLain:** Yes, sir. You first got to show yourself.

**White:** You got to be the human first, huh?

**McLain:** That's right. You got to show that you care in order for them to care.

**White:** When did you join the NAACP?

**McLain:** Oh, I don't know what year it was because I wasn't in there for fighting. I was in there for talking, and I paid my money to help out, to push it on, but now, I wasn't out there for nothing ugly.

**White:** You were there to start the dialog. There wasn't much talking at all going on then between the races about racial problems (inaudible).

**McLain:** That's right.

**White:** Was this back in the [19]60s or the [19]70s that you joined, or was it that (inaudible)?

**McLain:** I reckon it was in the [19]60s.

**White:** Was that about when Reverend Perkins(?) and his group were working in here with (inaudible) Calvert(?) and (inaudible) ministries, I believe it was.

**McLain:** That's right because it didn't start here until after Reverend Perkins come here.

**White:** Right. That was the late [19]60s and around 1970.

**McLain:** Nineteen sixties, late [19]60s.

**White:** And Simpson County was never a scene of a lot of racial problems.

**McLain:** No, it sure wasn't like it was in other places.

**White:** I have a friend in Jackson who sent her daughter—she's a black lady who sent her daughter to live with the grandparents down in Simpson County during the sit-ins in Jackson in the midsixties because she was afraid violence would erupt up that way.

**McLain:** That's right. But the people down here handled it mighty nice because they would have meetings, and some of the white people would come and sit here on it and listen. And so I know one night we was over there, and they explained what the NAACP was for. It was for not to be violent and things like that. It meant for good things. And so it went on there, and they had a good meeting that night.



**White:** The churches have been pretty active in Simpson County, too, I think, and that's meant a lot for better race relations. Is there anything you'd like to talk about? People or times or events or politics? Did you ever get involved in politics?

**McLain:** Oh, no. I was one of the first blacks that ever worked on the election returns.

**White:** On the polls.

**McLain:** And the place that I worked, the first election I went, do you know it was eleven—worked that morning; be there for seven. And when we come out of there, it was eleven o'clock the next day. (laughter)

**White:** That's a long workday.

**McLain:** We was having paper ballots then. Had two of those big, old boxes full of ballots.

**White:** Had to hand-count them all, didn't you?

**McLain:** Had to hand-count them all, and (laughter) I was stringing them. You had to string them. I said (inaudible) around about two o'clock (inaudible) string, and I let the thing fall, and it hit the floor and done woke me up. (laughter) (Inaudible) and I had to go string them back. (laughter) And that's when Mr. Gaddis Mail(?) got to be a supervisor that year because I know E.C., he come in there. He said, "Katherlina, don't you want something?" I said, "I'd love to have some cool water." He said, "Well, wait. Don't worry." He went and come back there with a big thing of cold water and some ham sandwiches, different little stuff. He said, "I'm going to treat y'all good tonight." I said, "Yeah." And so but that was a time when—and they had been working all four of them books. They was back before they tallied those ballots, and somebody put them in the books. I had to find the names and then let them register and then give them the paper.

**White:** You did all of it then, didn't you?

**McLain:** I said, "They put me through the first one." The first (inaudible) then they'd say, Wally McGee (inaudible) said, "Have a good (inaudible). Have a good election and let you get Ms. Kat here." (laughter) I knowed his mama and daddy before they got married.

**White:** Is that right? The Magees?

**McLain:** Yes, sir. And Mr. Bill, he was—I don't know whether you ever know Clara Bates(?) or not. Do you?

**White:** No, I don't remember that name.

**McLain:** You ever hear talk (inaudible)?

**White:** Is that down around Merrit(?)? I know Bill Robert Magee(?) was from Merrit. That's the only (inaudible) Mr. Finch, huh?

**McLain:** Old Man Dave Thatch(?), he was a mean (inaudible). Clare(?) was his boy, and he was (inaudible). And do you know he shot Clare?

**White:** His son, huh? Must have been a pretty tough fellow, then.

**McLain:** He was. Everybody was scared of him.

**White:** You mentioned Garrett Mullen's(?), E.C. Mullen, brought you some water, or was talking to you about bringing some water?

**McLain:** Yeah.

**White:** He was later sheriff, and he got killed not far from here, wasn't it, right on down this road here?

**McLain:** Right down this road.

**White:** Dan George Road, right behind you.

**McLain:** (Inaudible) And you see, E.C. and them, when I used to work for Miss May, they were living right across the street. Him and his sister acted like I was working with them. Oh, they'd hug me (inaudible).

**White:** They were some of your children then, huh?

**McLain:** Yes, sir. And so I just was so sad. And all the cars was parked all up and down there, and all around Doshia's(?) around there, (inaudible).

**White:** It wasn't far down here, was it?

**McLain:** No, sir, it wasn't far.

**White:** Pretty close?

**McLain:** It was pretty close. And I didn't know what was going on. (Inaudible)

**White:** But he always wanted to be sheriff, and he got sheriff.

**McLain:** Yeah, he sure did. I said, “Well, he did (inaudible) before he passed.” And I got a chance to see him in his uniform one time.

**White:** Is that right?

**McLain:** I had been in the (inaudible). I was coming out, and he was throwing his arms out like that. (laughter) And then he was (inaudible).

**White:** Well, that’s good. Well, do you still think Simpson County is a pretty good place to live?

**McLain:** Yes. It’s a good place to be if you tend to your business. (laughter)

**White:** You’ve always done a pretty good job of that, you think?

**McLain:** Tend to your business and let other folks alone.

**White:** That’s your advice, huh?

**McLain:** Yes, sir.

**White:** Well, that’s pretty good advice, good advice to live on. I appreciate you talking to us today. I really enjoyed this conversation.

**McLain:** Well, I really enjoyed y’all.

**White:** Thank you, ma’am.

(end of interview)