

Mississippi Oral History Program

Simpson County Historical and Genealogical
Oral History Project

An Oral History

with

John M. Perkins

Interviewer: Joe White

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An Oral History with John M. Perkins, Volume 1217, Part 24

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Biography

Reverend John M. Perkins was born to Jasper and Maggie Wallace Perkins in New Hebron, Lawrence County in June 1930. His family were sharecroppers. Perkins' grandmother had nineteen children; his grandfather was a bootlegger. Perkins had two sisters and three brothers. His mother died when he was seven months old. As Mississippi was a dry state until 1964, members of Perkins' family ran a profitable bootlegging racket throughout the state, selling home brew and moonshine. He dropped out of school at around the age of twelve. Perkins left Mississippi for California at the age of seventeen. Perkins married Vera Mae Buckley two weeks before being deployed overseas. Together they had eight children. Perkins and his family later returned to Simpson County where he began traveling from school to school and telling Bible stories for nine years. He established the Voice of Calvary in Jackson and in Mendenhall (which became known as Mendenhall Ministries). His association of ministries includes seven hundred organizations around the United States and is known as the Perkins Foundation. Perkins was arrested in December 1969 after protesting the arrest of Garland Young and the brutality of the police force after Young's arrest. This event triggered what is considered as the first cohesive example of the Civil Rights Movement in Simpson County. After much boycotting and protesting, Perkins was arrested again in 1971 and was sent to jail in Brandon, MS, where he was subjected to extreme displays of police brutality. Perkins devoted the rest of his life to his ministries and to racial reconciliation.

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AN ORAL HISTORY
with
JOHN M. PERKINS

This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi Simpson County Project. The interview is with John M. Perkins and is taking place on April 23, 2003. The interviewer is Joe White.

White: This interview is conducted under a grant from the Mississippi Humanities Council as a part of the oral history project at The University of Southern Mississippi. Today we're interviewing the Reverend John M. Perkins in his home in Jackson, Mississippi. Reverend Perkins, could you state your full name, please, sir?

Perkins: My name is John M. Perkins, and the M don't stand for anything.

White: And you were born when?

Perkins: I was born in June, the sixteenth, 1930.

White: In New Hebron? Is that right?

Perkins: In New Hebron, Lawrence County.

White: OK. And your parents were?

Perkins: Jasper, we called him Jap, Perkins and Maggie, she was a Wallace before marriage, so Maggie [Wallace] Perkins.

White: And they were both from New Hebron in Lawrence County?

Perkins: She was from Columbia, near Columbia out there, and my daddy was born down in Covington County, but when I was born, I was born in Lawrence County near New Hebron.

White: Do you remember where their parents were from? Do you remember your grandparents?

Perkins: Yes. What happened, I was raised by my grandmother. That was my father's mother, and they grew up around Bassfield. It was Bassfield is where I knew my great-grandmother, and she was fifteen years old when slavery was over. And so I knew her real well. And so we was brought down to Williamsburg, and so we—she was brought down there as a slave.

White: Her name? Do you remember her name?

Perkins: Her name was Rosie, and I don't remember whether it was Rosie Barnes(?). I think it was Rosie Barnes, but of course they got their name, we got our name from the Perkins that was there in and around Bassfield, the white Perkins. So we go all the way back to our name change.

White: All right. You said Bonds. Was that Bonds, B-O-N-D-S, or Barnes?

Perkins: Barnes.

White: B-A-R-N-E-S?

Perkins: Right.

White: OK. I just wanted to make sure on the tape, so we have the right family there.

Perkins: Yeah. So we got our names in Bassfield, in Jeff Davis County. That's near that line down there. And so yeah, we go all the way back, I go all the way back to—my memories goes all the way back to slavery through her.

White: You lived on the west side of New Hebron?

Perkins: No. I lived on the south side of New Hebron, southeast side of New Hebron. All of our dealings was on the south and on the east side of New Hebron.

White: When you were growing up, do you have any early recollections of Simpson County? Were there any family dealings or anything else over in Simpson County, or was that just foreign country to you?

Perkins: It was a little bit foreign although we went to—our church was on the Simpson County/Lawrence County line, Oak Ridge Church, and it was right on the line. And so part of the people was from Simpson County, and the other people was from Lawrence County, like Vera Mae would be from Simpson County, but she was right on the line.

White: Is that toward Shivers, or (inaudible) town?

Perkins: No. That was, it would go south, and you would be like going to Rockport, that way, and that line runs right along that area there.

White: Close to where the old store was at Rockport?

Perkins: No. It's further toward New Hebron. It's at Oak Ridge Missionary Baptist Church, sits right on the line of Lawrence County and Simpson County. So we did know people. We did pick cotton for people in Simpson County, but yeah, Isaac Newsome(?) and all those people, they lived in Simpson County. In fact there was a few people that owned land. Old guy that owned the gin there in town also had land in

Simpson County, and we used to go up and pick cotton for him and hoe cotton for him. So that was the only—we was right on the line, but we lived basically in Lawrence County.

White: What did your parents do for a living?

Perkins: My daddy, all of us were sharecroppers, and we was sharecroppers. As I understood it later, my grandmother wanted to buy a house just before the Depression and when my grandfather was still living. And she was the mother of nineteen children, my grandmother. And she used to carry the children out to pick both cotton and beans and whatever there was to be picked. But she said she could never talk her husband into ever buying the property because he was a bootlegger, and he trained all of his kids to be, all of his boys to be bootleggers and that he figured out early on that he was better off on a strong, white person's place with that big of family, and he got more protection. And he found out early that if you did something to another black person, that your boss man would come and get you out of jail, even if you kill another black person, if your boss man was a strong person, you would get out of jail, and there would be not much done about that. And so I think my grandfather and his boys figured out early on that they could practice their trade much better by living on a white gentleman's place, that kept them sort of out of trouble because that was our main under-economic base while we never made that much money in cotton. Cotton was basically, and the land was basically, yeah, a place for our food, but it was basically a place to live because the real money, the real concern of my uncles and my aunts and my grandmother to a certain degree, was to be bootleggers.

White: Did they live around you when you were growing up, all of the family fairly close together?

Perkins: Yeah. With my grandmother being the mother of nineteen children, they stayed very close. It wasn't until after World War II, or during World War II, that we scattered. We all lived pretty well geographically either sometime on the same plantation, depending on the size of it, and sometime all within the geographical of New Hebron. It wasn't until during World War II that my aunt came to Jackson, and with her coming to Jackson and getting a house, and back in those days, getting roomers. In fact when I grew up is when the light line was being installed, electricity was being installed. And my aunts, then they would keep these pipeline workers. These pipeline workers would come in with these companies and stay there for—

White: Power lines?

Perkins: Power lines. I said pipelines, but power lines, electric lines. And they would keep these roomers and fix them a lunch and fix them dinner in the evening.

White: You mentioned that your grandmother had nineteen children. How many brothers and sisters did you have?

Perkins: Oh, I had two sisters and three brothers with myself.

White: Could you name them?

Perkins: Yeah. My oldest brother was named Clyde. My next sister was named Mary, and my next brother was named Clifton. He's alive. And then my other sister was named Emma Jean, and then me, John Perkins. We was the five. We had one brother to die as a baby, and so we never really counted him.

White: And all of them grew up around New Hebron?

Perkins: Yeah. Well, what happened was my mother died when I was just seven months old, and you know when I was doing the research and write my first book, *Let Justice Roll Down*—

White: Yes, I read that.

Perkins: We discovered that she died of a disease, and it was a common disease prior to my mother's death, and the thought was that they had eradicated it. But she died of a disease that had to do with nutrition (inaudible).

White: Pellagra?

Perkins: Pellagra, pellagra. And so I always say, when I testify before the Senate Nutrition Committee, I said that my mother died of starvation. I've said that—

White: I think in a sense that's true.

Perkins: Well, that's the deduction. They say that was the disease, and part of the food commodities was sort of designed to sort of eradicate that, and when I spoke before Senator McGovern's nutrition committee, that's what we was doing then, studying the relationship between nutrition deficiency and learning. And that's what the Head Start Program was. It was a nutrition program because the idea was that children integrated into a school where you had people who had nutritional meals, and those children who come from that poor background who didn't have it would not be able to learn as well. And so the idea of the Head Start Program was to develop those, make those kids' nutrition efficient. And then later on, Senator McGovern who was looking at early childhood development, then, what they discovered then was that the mother, if she did not get the right [foods] during the time of her carrying of the baby, then the baby was actually born nutrition deficient. And so that brought about what is called the WIC [Women, Infants, Children] Program, Women, Infant, and then Children. And so I was one of the early people who testified and who pushed that program. And as I look back at it now, and even my testimony before the Senate was actually motivated by my mother's death. And some of my own—I would say this on the weekend when I was speaking that I think people, sometime they misjudge my commitment to the poor. My commitment to the poor is something like a former

alcoholic or a former gambler who got converted from that. And that's part of their conversion experience. And so part of my—so people take basically working with the poor and working for civil rights and working for that is more or less an intellectual, and it's right, truth (inaudible), but to me it's a little bit different in that it's a little bit of who I am not—

White: It's an extension of how you grew up.

Perkins: Right. And as I look back at it, I don't know if I was as conscious of it as I was (inaudible) action of it. Hopefully it became a part of who I am and a virtue that come forth, and hopefully how I live, how I live my life, but I don't think—some people probably look at my life and say, "You live pretty fancy." But if I live any way fancy, it's really because of the quality of friends that God has given me, and they—

White: Well, I was sitting here wondering how your grandmother housed and fed nineteen children. How was your life growing up? What kind of housing—

Perkins: We was poor. We lived in these plantation houses, and of course you could see the cracks, and in the wintertime when it would get cold, it would be this ice on the inside. These icicles would be on the inside of the house. It would always be five or six of us in the same bed. We slept at both the head and the foot, and I thought that's the way that everybody lived. There was kids—

White: To retain body heat.

Perkins: Yeah, right. There was kids who slept, usually it was two or three at the head or two or three at what we called the foot. Now, there was a privilege that I had probably a little bit because my grandmother took me when I was seven months old, and then I slept with her. And then my aunt had a baby; my youngest aunt had a baby, and her and her husband probably didn't stay together but six month, and then it was almost like my grandmother then got that baby, and that was Rosalie. And so Rosalie and I, we was cousins, but we both slept with our grandmother. And so we probably in a sense had more room than anybody in our house. And of course consequently, Rosalie and I grew up very—we grew up much closer than my sisters and brothers because my grandmother then gave away three of the children because we just too many. And she kept the other two; that's my oldest brother Clyde and myself. And then my oldest sister sort of just got lost. I mean, she, as I look back at it now, she had no basic supervision.

White: No place to call home.

Perkins: No place to call home, see, because she was just under my oldest brother. My brother could plow, and I don't ever remember him going to school. She probably went to school a little bit, but by this time now, she was twelve or so years old. And the boys began to—and she just became a girl of the streets, sort of just faded out. And eventually she was killed by her boyfriend. So that was my early—

White: That would certainly have a—we were talking about nutrition. What do you remember about food when you were growing up, during your early years?

Perkins: Yeah. Syrup and biscuits for breakfast and even when we ran out of biscuits—and biscuits was pretty constant, but sometime we would run out of biscuit for a week, run out of flour for a week. And then we would have bread for breakfast, but actually biscuits and syrup and fatback, a piece of meat. We would eat a piece of meat with the skin on it, a fatback. And we didn't have—grits came later. Grits came to us with the commodities in about, along there with the Roosevelt thing in about [19]36, [19]37. I can remember when we began to get ground grits, and ground grits became a deal.

White: So commodities did make a difference?

Perkins: Oh, the commodities made a—cheese, raisins, prunes, those dry foods that came from commodities was very important. Now, we had, when I was born, my daddy and mama—my daddy couldn't read or write, and I think maybe my mother could a little bit. But they got married pretty early. So they were extremely poor, but we was poor, but there was a collectiveness of it, and then that we were bootleggers, which meant that there was money in our house. And one of the things that affected me was, they over loved money for the sake of money, and that's a trait in my family. It's a trait. I got at least one child, who that gene was passed onto, and the gene was passed onto me. But as I looked at it, I looked at them having money, but the money itself never gained any assets or any what I would call equity. The money would just flow through, and it never amounted to nothing because it didn't, in the early days, it did not help the quality of our life because they were both gamblers, and they was bootleggers. And so the money they made from bootlegging would sort of end up in the gambling game, and we benefitted as a family very little for it. And I looked at that, and as I say I looked at my folk would be—we would wake up at night sometime, and my grandmother and uncle, they'd be actually counting money. They'd be counting money on a table, and it would be a lot of money. And sometime they was getting ready to buy the whiskey from the guy who got whiskey, or they was fixing to go down around Columbia or Picayune; those were the areas in which they got whiskey, and a little bit out of Simpson County.

White: Was it bonded whiskey, or was it moonshine?

Perkins: It was moonshine, moonshine. We bought it in kegs and in five-gallon containers and in gallon deals. We was a major distributor of bootleg whiskey in upper Lawrence County.

White: And you put that in smaller bottles, in fifths and pints?

Perkins: Right. We put it in smaller bottles. We would get pennies for bottles. Whenever there was a bottle, we'd come along and see a bottle uptown, whether it was

a Coke bottle or whether it was an off-brand bottle, whatever kind of bottle, but whiskey-bottle type was the most favorite because it had a cap on it. But we also used corn cobs to stop up. A corn cob makes a great, just like on a wine bottle. It makes a great—because once it gets soaked, that hit it, it's not going anywhere, and so bootlegger was—but back to my thought was, I was highly motivated when I went to (inaudible). And I said if I ever got money, I was going to do something creative with the money because we had money. And like my uncle, he died right here in this room. He was very, would be looked upon as a pretty wealthy guy, and I had a difficult time transferring his money into, his cash into money because at the bank, in order to avoid the internal revenue and all of that, you can't put more than \$10,000. It would be \$9,999.00. (Inaudible) that is. (laughter) In the bank, at a time and—

White: Otherwise it'll be reported.

Perkins: It'll be reported if you put it in. And so I had a difficult time. I mean, this was a major task when he went to the hospital in California, and I went out there (inaudible). I went out to get him and to bring, when he was in the hospital, to go in his house. I had to get his money and bring it home. I had to put it in two suitcases. (laughter) And I—

White: (Inaudible) did he (inaudible).

Perkins: And wait a minute. And I had to fly, and of all things I missed my flight in Dallas, and I had to go to a hotel with these two suitcases of money. And this was a terrible thing for me to have to do that. This was before all of the scanning in the deal. And then I had to sleep in that hotel room that night with all of this money.

White: Afraid somebody would either rob you or open the suitcases.

Perkins: You feel that somebody know you might have—and he was forced in California, he bought property because he understood that, and I'm still selling some of his property, but that money was more important than anything around him, than what it bought.

White: I'm going to have a couple of more questions on this. I'm fascinated by it. And then I'd like to, in just a few minutes, shift over into what started influencing you to develop your life and education the way you have. But a couple of more questions on the bootlegging front. Were the customers predominantly black, or were they black and white?

Perkins: No, no. No, they were predominantly white. Our customers old, (inaudible), and white. The customers was black on the weekend, and yeah, and during certain times of the year, wintertime, because people, public work and blowing up stumps and hauling stumps and doing logging, but actually the farming, then, wouldn't be (inaudible) farm. There was no money.

White: So you went where the money was, basically.

Perkins: Yeah.

White: As a family business there, as it were.

Perkins: Yeah.

White: The money in Lawrence County and in Simpson County about that time was pretty seasonal, wasn't it? Didn't a lot of it have to do with agriculture?

Perkins: Yeah, it was agriculture, yeah, and of course agriculture. Now, when gin time was, when they would gin the cotton, that's when our white business would multiply. And of course the people in New Hebron, the merchants, they pretty much had a little money all the time. And our business went from the banker, all the people, not every single person, but basically all of the people in town—

White: Well, it was illegal at that time to sell bonded liquor even in Mississippi. Mississippi was a dry state up until 1964; I believe it was.

Perkins: Right.

White: So moonshine was the easiest method, I would imagine. Did the customers come to the family, or did they deliver?

Perkins: They'd come; they'd come by the house. They would drive. They'd come by the house. Well, what we sold to black folks on the weekends was more like home brew. We made the home brew. White people didn't buy much home brew. They bought the moonshine whiskey, but black people would buy the home brew because home brew was much cheaper than moonshine.

White: What was the difference between home brew and moonshine? You're telling me something I didn't know there.

Perkins: Well, moonshine was much stronger, much more alcohol. It's boiled into alcohol. And home brew was much more of a (inaudible).

White: A faster brew, huh?

Perkins: Yeah, yeah. It was a substance. You would get full. You would drink more of it. The minimum amount of home brew you would sell would be a quart, but actually the home brew you would have sold in half a gallon or gallon, most of our home brew. Of course we learned how to bottle it based on your customers and what you going to sell the most of. Well, home brew would be quarts and half a gallon and gallon while whiskey would be, a half a pint was your biggest sale to the white folks

who came from town. The blacksmiths and all those people who came to our house would get a pint of whiskey.

White: Where did you hide the alcohol in the house? Or did you hide it?

Perkins: We kept it just sort of somewhat concealed slightly in the house. We kept the main whiskey buried, and we kept it under the house. And our house was pretty low to the ground, and we would go under the house, and never, never, never I've had—and our house would be searched. I mean, the sheriff would come into our house often. We would always know the sheriff was going to come two or three times a year.

White: Did somebody tip you off?

Perkins: Yeah. Somebody would tip off the sheriff. No. We would know. We would hear the car coming, and we would bury—our whiskey was pretty well secure. We learned how to do the big stuff, the gallon. The cash, they would never find that. It was back in the woods. (laughter) OK? It was back in the woods. They didn't find it.

White: If they got the liquor, they wouldn't get the cash.

Perkins: And not only that, but we learned that if it was too far away from your house—and we usually, we would actually bury our whiskey. Our cash, we would put those on other people land, but then our whiskey, we'd bury it in the pathway. We wouldn't bury it out, put it out in no bushes. And that's where the sheriff would come and look, but we would put it right in the middle of the pathway with a post-hole digger, dig a hole right in the pathway where the path was at.

White: Pack it down.

Perkins: And pack it down. And the sheriff would be looking, would be with sticks, looking somewhere else, (laughter) but not the path.

White: I'm going to stop this tape. (End of digital file labeled tape one, side one. Beginning of digital file labeled tape one, side two.) You've talked about some of the influences on your early life. At what point did you decide to get out of the bootlegging business and start living?

Perkins: Well, now, remember that I dropped out of school originally when I was somewhere between third and fifth grade. I wandered between the third grade to the fifth grade, somewhere there. I went two or three years in that, and I guess when I became motivated for education was when I was about eleven or twelve years old, and this was in Simpson County. We was living near Simpson County. We still in Lawrence County, and I went into Shivers, was in Shivers. I was up there visiting a friend, and we wanted a job to buy something that I could carry back to New Hebron,

carry back home, and let the kids know I'd been away. And we was going through the field that morning, and this Mr. Lee up there had some land and was cutting hay.

White: Near Shivers?

Perkins: Near Shivers. And we asked him for a job, and he wanted us to work. And I expected to make about a dollar, a dollar and a half for that day's work because that was the going wages back in those days. And we worked that whole day, hauling hay, and this man brought us back into the kitchen, back in the kitchen, and he gave us fifteen cent. That was the beginning of my education. That's when I really began to understand what was going on around me and how the social—I really wanted to take that fifteen cent, and I really wanted to throw it on the ground and walk out of there and be through with it, really curse him, really. That's what I—I wouldn't have cursed him, but I would have cursed him when I got in the back, got on the field, but I couldn't. I realized if I had done that, my family would have been in trouble. I'd have been considered a "smart nigger." And I couldn't do it. That's when I really began to understand what was happening, and I began to ask the real questions that led to my education. How was he able to take advantage of me? How was he able to exploit me? Well, as I looked around, he owned the mules. He owned the wagons. He owned the hay, and he owned the field. And I could relate to that because we never owned that. You understand? And he took advantage of me. And that's when I began to say, just as clear as today, that "I know what I got to get if I'm going to make it in this society. I've got to get me the mules, the wagon, the hay, and the field." And the second thing I had to get me, I realized, that why I was buying, why I wanted to work; I had to get my values under my own control. I had to know what I valued, and that's when I—I think that became the anchor of my education. Well, my brother came back from the service, and he was home, you remember, about six months, eight months, and he was killed in Magee by Uncle Bud(?), a white marshal. And then that's when our whole family, then, left Mississippi. We left Lawrence County and migrated to California.

White: How old were you then?

Perkins: I was seventeen when I left. I came to Jackson and stayed a little while, so I was really sixteen when all this is happening.

White: Came to stay with your aunt in Jackson a while?

Perkins: Yeah. And then I, from there—her daughter was in California, and so I migrated to California. I never intended to come back here to live. But it was in California then, I got a job and then finally went into the service. And then in the service, I'd already met Vera Mae, and then I got married to her. And then she came to California. When I got out of the service, she came to California. We started our family in California.

Mrs. Perkins: He got married to me fourteen days before he went overseas.

Perkins: Right, right. You're not supposed to talk in this. (laughter)

White: It's hard to remember not to talk, isn't it? (laughter) It won't hurt a thing.

Perkins: And so I came out of the service. We got married. We started our family. And then it was through the influence of my oldest son Spencer; that's when my education—now, you keep in mind, now. My drive was there. I am the most motivated person. There's one thing: I am the most motivated person I ever met. And unfortunate, I'm over ambitious, and I don't say that with any virtue, at all. I'm over ambition and pretty focused.

White: Let me get some facts out of the way here. You had met your wife back in Simpson County. And her name before she married was?

Perkins: Vera Mae Buckley.

White: Buckley. And her parents?

Perkins: Her parents, (laughter) her parents was Rosie Williams, and her daddy's name (laughter) was Garland Young(?). Now, (laughter) how she become a Buckley is what we can't get to. (laughter) Yeah. So she was Vera Mae Buckley before I got married, when I got married to her.

White: OK. And you ended up having how many children?

Perkins: Eight children.

White: Eight children.

Perkins: Eight children.

White: And their names are?

Perkins: My name was Spencer. Joanie, we called her Joanie, Joan. Philip, Derek(?), Deborah(?), and Priscilla, and Wayne, and my youngest baby, Vera Elizabeth.

White: And you lost Spencer last year

Perkins: Lost Spencer five years ago.

White: Has it been that long?

Perkins: It's been that long; 1998 we lost Spencer.

White: I did not realize it had been that long. I didn't mean to interrupt your train of thought.

Perkins: OK, yeah, my train of thought. Then after, it was in California, really, that when I got out of service, and all the good things that could happen, you might say to a hardworking guy, happened to me. I got a good job, and Vera Mae and I began to climb the ladder.

White: What were you doing?

Perkins: I worked for a foods company; worked for a food company, and I was a part of their developing the whole, what you call it? The barter system in the store. That's a whole complicated thing. I was in the part of macronizing the grocery business where you scanners and all that kind of stuff, bar codes. That's what I would say, bar codes. And we built a warehouse based on the bar code system, and so I was a part of that. Then I went in as a maintenance person and ended up in this development with a rewarding job. And then my oldest son began to go to a little Good News Club; ended up in a Sunday school. And it was there he fell in love. He heard about Jesus, and he sort of fell in love with Jesus. And then I went to this Sunday school, and there I heard about Jesus. I gave my life to Jesus Christ. I grew up without a mother. I grew up without a father. I grew up without the institution of love. The family is the basic institution of love. The church reinforces that institution of love.

White: You don't remember going to church much when you were—

Perkins: Yeah, I went to church, but I went to church as a boy. There was some other motives for going. I did not go because—we was not a churchy family. I'm not the typical black, religious, Sunday-school-going, even actually influenced by the religious people. We sold whiskey to people who were religious, so we did not see religion as having—we saw religion as another part of a society. We did not understand any of the virtues of Christianity. And then when I heard that God loved me, I realized the fact that I had not been tendered the love by a family. And that really brought me into faith, deep faith in Jesus Christ, and it shaped my life. Now, you talking about education. I had this desire to learn, and I learned these natural things. I always come back to the fact that when I went to school, I told about—I mean, I hadn't told it on this tape, but I was given a book. I was bought my first book. I like to read, and I like to read, and I got—my uncle, before he went into the service, that was the one great thing that we had growing up. In the midst of all the community around us, one thing we had that other people didn't have, is I got a newspaper every day, and I read the comic strip. I read "Sky King" and all of those, and I read baseball. And I read the news, and I read the business page. I'm a newspaper junkie. And I've been a newspaper junkie; I've been an information junkie all my life. So when I came to Christ, I took that same energy. Didn't give up the newspaper. I took that same energy into the Bible and became what people give me honorary doctor's degrees for is sort of a thinking theologian, a person who thinks about these issues. And so I got married to Vera Mae, and then my family, and then—

White: How did you get back to Simpson County?

Perkins: OK. That's (inaudible). I felt call of God to come back to my home town of New Hebron, but when I came back to New Hebron, Vera Mae and them lived—I lived at their place. They had farmland over there, so I lived with them, and they was in Simpson County. And then I started going around to the schools, the black schools, when I came back here, telling Bible stories. So I came back to Simpson County.

White: Which part of Simpson County was that? Was that (inaudible) close to Rockport?

Perkins: At the lower part, yeah. Down at the lower part of Simpson County, right at the border. That's where they lived, on the border of Simpson County. And then our kids went to New Hymn(?) School. And then that's how I got into the schoolwork because when I went to enroll my kids in school, I started talking to the principal, and he invited me to come back to the school and tell these Bible stories. And then I began to go to the schools, and what you might not know, for nine years, what I did, and white folks probably don't even know that in Simpson County, I went out to fifteen schools, Vera and I, and told Bible stories in school to these kids. And everybody that's thirty-five, forty years old and over got to come to know me.

White: Well, New Hymn was one of the most influential schools. Do you ever go back to their reunion?

Perkins: Yes, I do. I go to them. They have it in Mendenhall. Right.

White: They've had it in Chicago a couple of times, I think, too.

Perkins: Yeah. And so then we came back, and then we needed a house. And we found a house in Mendenhall because I would ask the people at New Hymn, "Where was there any houses to live in?" Anybody who built a house back in that day, lived in it, and so there was no decent house. Us, coming back from California, wanted a somewhat of a decent house to live in, and we couldn't find one. And a Mr. Peacock up near Mendenhall had built some little houses, and they was pretty nice, inside bathroom, and we rented one of those, and that's how I came to Mendenhall.

White: Where was that located in Mendenhall?

Perkins: OK. It was located right in front of the Nazarene Church. It's on that street that comes by the Harper(?) High School, the main street (inaudible).

White: Close to the elementary school.

Perkins: Right. The main street that go there, it was right on the corner off of that street and just before you hit the railroad track.

White: On the same side as the Harper School was on?

Perkins: No. On the same side of the old Harper School was on, but the new Harper School was on the right side. It was on the other side.

White: It was the old Harper School—

Perkins: Old Harper School.

White: —that I was remembering.

Perkins: Right. Well, it was on the same side. And that school was at the second—that's just where they got the railroad. There's another street just before you get to the railroad. It was on that corner that those two houses was built. They was built right together, and we rented one of those houses on the corner.

White: Elder Reed(?) lived fairly close to that.

Perkins: Elder Reed lived at the next block down, if you call them blocks.

White: They're still blocks, I think. There's not many blocks in there, though. What were you doing besides speaking to schools there? Were you preaching at a church?

Perkins: No. When I first came back—I came back, and the first summer, I got back here June the ninth. And pretty soon, we did a couple of what we called vacation Bible school.

White: What year was that?

Perkins: That was 1960, 1960. I did a couple of vacation Bible schools. Then I spoke at a county-wide or tricounty-wide association. And of course everybody liked me, and I told these Bible stories on flannel graphs. So I visualized the Bible stories, and that was something very new and very progressive. And so the people liked me, and they started inviting me to their churches. And so I became more like an evangelist.

White: Were you invited to any white churches?

Perkins: Oh, no. Oh, no. No white churches. Never spoke at a white church in Simpson County. I'll get to that. But from the time of my conversion in California, this was the thing, I spoke at white churches, and I—

White: Outside of Mississippi.

Perkins: Outside Mississippi, and I have, all of my Christian life, I spoke at white churches, white colleges, white high schools and all of that. Now, this had a lot to do then, in Simpson County. And so when I came to Simpson County and started speaking in schools, and then was just normally communicating to white people, the white people liked me.

White: There were no conflicts.

Perkins: No conflicts. I mean, the first two years of our summer program, the white people in town supported it. It's an amazing thing. There is a—

White: Was this known as Mendenhall Ministries then, or you had not started?

Perkins: No, it wasn't Mendenhall [Ministries]. It was Voice of Calvary.

White: At that time.

Perkins: We first started calling it Voice of Calvary, and when (inaudible) Mendenhall, we then, they changed the ministry there because we established Voice of Calvary here and in Jackson, and they called that Mendenhall, which was the way that—

White: How are they affiliated (inaudible)?

Perkins: We're affiliated by partnership, by partnership and fellowship.

White: I didn't mean to sidetrack you there. I wanted to establish that.

Perkins: Yeah. Well, and we have a ministry in California, and I have established. And we have an association of ministries where there's 700 organizations in, that I started all around the United States. So they're all associated in that association. They're members of an association of ministries, but it's not denominations because it crosses denominational barriers, but it would function like a denomination would function instead of the association.

White: All right. Perkins Foundation, which is right next door here to your house—

Perkins: The Perkins Foundation was established after me creating all these ministries, began to create these ministries. We then needed a vehicle to create ministries and support ministries.

White: And that's what the foundation—

Perkins: The foundation. And the only reason it's here is, see, I created this one. I went back to California. That was to start ministry all around the country. Then when I came back to live with my son Spencer and to retire—that's why people think

(inaudible). (laughter) When I turned sixty-five I was going to retire, and I was going to live here with my son Spencer. Then when we came back in 1996, two years later Spencer died, and then they sold all of this. They put it all up for sale. This is a major—you talking about ten or twelve houses around here and eight acres of land in the city. So this is pretty major stuff. We wasn't that when we started. We bought the seven acres and four or five of the houses, and we'd already bought this house here just to have for Spencer and them to use. And then when we came back, then we decided we would move in this house here. And then we bought all of this, and then we started the center here as a memorial to my son Spencer. So what you call the John Perkins Foundation is really an underground ministry. What works here is the Spencer Perkins Center. But the foundation is my support.

White: Well, now that we've been brought up to date on the organization, something that's always confused me a little bit, let's get back to early days in Simpson County.

Perkins: OK. I came in Mississippi. And so I started going to these schools and teaching in these schools, telling these Bible stories in school, and actually this was a misjudgment on the part of—when I was arrested in Mendenhall, they misjudged it.

White: What year was that?

Perkins: In 1969, in December, a couple of days before Christmas.

White: And you were arrested for? Charges?

Perkins: What happened was they had arrested a young man in Simpson County, and they had beat him up. When I was in a store, two of us was in a store, and a boy came in there, Garland Young, was almost drunk, and he was talking loud. And they had called the police for him, and we didn't know it, but I could see how he was behaving that they were going to arrest him and put him in jail. And so I ushered him out of the store and put him into my car, me and another guy, and carried him home. On our way home, they had already called him, and they then arrested him. They came and stopped the car. And when they arrested him and took him to jail, we wanted to go up to see about him. And I got a bunch of kids, and we went up there to see about him. The kids were rehearsing at our church. And so I went to church, and I said, "They arrested Garland." And everybody knew Garland. And one of the girls said, "They going to beat Garland up just like they did," this other boy they beat up. And so we all jumped in the car and went up there. And you know what they did? Arrested us.

White: For showing up.

Perkins: Yeah. And this, if—I don't know. All those folks probably dead. It was a terrible misjudgment on their part.

White: That's the first time you'd had any overt problems like that.

Perkins: First time. First time. Now, we had had the Ku Klux Klan, be riding by the house and all kind of harassment, and we had been harassed by the highway patrol and that kind of thing because of my civil rights, other activities. I had been harassed, but those wasn't Simpson County's problems. I mean, Simpson County and us was on good basis.

White: Until that happened in 1969.

Perkins: Absolutely. Absolutely. See, that's what most people don't realize. And then when I was arrested, and we was arrested and jailed, then the whole community came out, which was a misjudgment. I don't know if there's anybody down there have ever calculated what happened because you get angry, and you start acting, and it was a miscalculation on the basis of that deputy that arrested us who was isolated. And it was probably isolated racially, and he did not know the impact, the people from all over Simpson County and all around, by twelve o'clock that night was at that jail. And now they are in a mess. The sheriff come. Even the DA come.

White: Was the crowd black, or was it mixed?

Perkins: Black.

White: It was black; it was a black crowd.

Perkins: The crowd was black crowd that was there, and it was massive. I mean, you look back. And then what happened was they tried to take the kids out of jail. The kids didn't want to go out of jail.

White: What age were they?

Perkins: These kids was from probably ten to my own kids, sixteen.

White: OK.

Perkins: OK? And the kids said, "We're not going unless Doug"—Doug was a white boy who worked with us—"unless Doug and Reverend Perkins leave." And they didn't know what to do with that. So they sent for the sheriff. The sheriff came. The sheriff sent for the DA. The highway patrols came. Goon Jones(?) was heading the highway patrol; he was there, and they was in a pickle because they really wanted to beat us up. They couldn't beat us up because all the crowd was out there. I mean, it was a, really a situation that was created in a miscalculation in just a few hours because people from all over the county came. And when they did decide that they was going to remove the kids from jail, physically remove them from jail, they had to figure out what to do. It was a big deal. And so they start removing the kids from jail, and the kids started screaming. Now, can you imagine that the kids screaming, and all of their parents outside there? And the kids was putting on a show, somewhat. It wasn't as real; the kids were putting on a show. They was doing that to dramatize

what it is they want to do, and the people outside thought that their kids were being beaten inside the jail. And you can imagine what it was like. And Goon Jones was outside, trying to tell the people really, really (laughter) that they wasn't beating them.

White: Goon Jones is Lloyd Jones, isn't he?

Perkins: Lloyd Jones, yeah. And then what happened was I came to the window of the jail and spoke to the people out the window. And as I look back on it, it became my I-had-a-dream speech. It wasn't (inaudible) I-had-a-dream speech, but it became my I-had-a-dream speech. And I sort of articulated the situation we was in and said that "We could take advantage of this. We should not go back to buying nothing else at no white folks' stores. We shouldn't do anything until all of this thing was dealt with."

White: Was that the first time there was a cohesive movement in Simpson County?

Perkins: It was the first time there was a cohesive movement in Simpson County, and what made it, what happened, it was—so the civil rights movement was going, and we had lawyers, and we drew up a legal document. When I say legal, an organized document of our demands. And you know as I think about it, that's what makes the printed page such a powerful thing. That's what makes an idea. That's what philosophy is all about, is about taking ideas and putting those ideas on paper. It's like the Constitution. (laughter) It's like the Declaration of Independence. It's like the Mississippi Constitution. It's like any other. And so we laid out—and we had these lawyers to do this—our demands. And then we began to act out of those demands, and we started boycotting. And now that's then what—and it was two days before Christmas. And the next morning, Vera Mae and them went on the streets in Mendenhall and stopped all the cars from coming. And when they saw Vera Mae on the street, and Vera Mae said, "Reverend Perkins in jail"—and I had no knowledge of. I was just doing my work.

White: You didn't know how widespread—

Perkins: How widespread. And now I look back. It was a funny kind of popularity. It was a grass-roots popularity because the black preachers, you know the black preachers didn't like me. I don't know if you had any knowledge of that.

White: I had suspected that.

Perkins: The black preachers didn't like me. Know what the threat to them was? I lived in Mendenhall, and I was the first black. Reverend Reed lived in Mendenhall, but he was a bishop. But all the churches was under him. That was different. There had never been, there was never, that I know of, a black minister who had a constituent both of the children in Mendenhall and a broader constituent of the people in Simpson [County] and the surrounding counties ever before. Now, I recognized that early on because both of the fear in me, and I recognized it in the love of the

people who embraced me. And the people who embraced me was the toughest people in Simpson County. And they embraced me, and I recognize the fact today, and I talk about it in my book *White Revolution*. I don't know if you've got that book or not.

White: I don't have that one.

Perkins: You need to get that book. I'll give it to you, *The White Revolution*. It documents this. It's a bestseller, bestseller in Europe, bestseller around the world.

White: But you had white support in the early [19]60s.

Perkins: Oh, yeah.

White: Quiet white support.

Perkins: Quiet white support. And some of those white people I asked (inaudible). Mr. Barnett there in Mendenhall who was a blacksmith, he did all of my work. That man, you was not—a racist is somebody who act upon their prejudice. We all are racists, but we act upon it in a negative way. That's what it becomes. We behave on a negative way. He wasn't a racist. I could name you some other people there in Mendenhall. They was culturally adjusted, probably like you. Probably like you, culturally adjusted but really did not act. So there was decent—

White: But how was that support affected when the boycott started?

Perkins: Uh-oh. That brought it to an end. Then the law and the Lloyd Jones and them took over. And I suspect that then I became famous. OK? After that. I suspect that Lloyd Jones became just as famous. Lloyd Jones became famous in Simpson County. (Inaudible) I became famous in the world. (laughter)

White: There is a difference, isn't there?

Perkins: That's (laughter) a whole difference. And I suspect that that incident because that incident, you got to remember. You don't know this. That incident ignited Jackson State deal. Lloyd Jones was the leader of the shooting up in those buildings in Jackson State. His deposition had been taken by a black, girl lawyer who was my lawyer that day.

White: Same day of the Jackson State—

Perkins: Those girls being shot up in a girls' dormitory. You get the idea? "Today a nigger girl interrogated me, asking me questions about something!" So it was a— (End of digital file named tape one, side two. Beginning of digital file names tape two, side one.)

White: (Editor's note: At the beginning of this audio, the tape recorder's batteries began to fail. Parts of the recording are inaudible.) We had talked about your white support, that you'd had for eight or nine years, disappearing overnight when the conflict came out around when you got arrested and the boycott started in 1969. Were there any white ministers or black ministers who played any part in your early years in Simpson County?

Perkins: Yes, in the rural. The rural people and the rural pastors outside of Simpson County and D'Lo, they supported me. And then of course I met Dr. Oberon(?).

White: Bob Oberon?

Perkins: Bob Oberon, and the first time I sit down with him, I had been to a group meeting, and he was there at this meeting. And I think it had to do with Mississippi Baptist Seminary, and a white gentleman was there from Mississippi who was going to Africa as a missionary. And that's how I met him. And it was intriguing to me, given the fact now that I'm from California, and had come here sort of as a missionary, and had been all a part of a multicultural community, and then came back to Mendenhall and had adjusted to the Mendenhall community in terms of developing a ministry among the blacks in Mendenhall and also throughout these counties, working with people and was pretty well known even here in Jackson by Dr. Davis and those guys who head up to state convention, the white convention, who all knew me. And so when this man wanted to go to mission, that sort of puzzled me, a white Mississippi person going to Africa as a missionary, and there was no relationship between the black church in Mississippi and the white church. And now all at once, we making a jump over to Africa. That was confusing to me, and it's not logic. It's not logic. And so it so confused me till, and I sort of knew Oberon, that I decided I'd sit down and have a conversation with him because it was oppression, now. This was an issue. "I got an issue here." Really, I probably wanted to try to straighten it out and find out about it. He probably could have convinced me of needing a mission board in Africa. But when we went there and started talking about it, and we started talking about it, and I said, "Dr. Oberon, how on earth do you guys send missionaries to Africa when there's no relationship between you and me here?" And I said, "Here in this church, you in this nice, lighted, beautiful church, and we down there in the poverty and the crime." And I said, "This is where the kids going to get locked up in jail at, is from this neighborhood and community. I'm down there, and y'all's church have no relationship to me." We communicated. We dialogued, and as I look back on it, I think it was one of the first times probably that a black man had ever met a white man in Mississippi about issues outside of work, job and with some intellectual, social, political, religious dialog that had to do with moving a moral society. Probably the first time we ever met together and talked together. And somehow or another we came off as equals in each other's sight, and that's a breakthrough. That's what dialog is about. That's what detente is about. That's what negotiation is about. I mean, that's why Israel and Palestine can't (inaudible) because it's only as people see each other as equal with something to contribute to each other, to move the society from where it's at to somewhere else, that you get a breakthrough. President Carter said

that when he was doing the [Camp] David Peace Accord between Begin and Sadat, he said it wasn't until he could get [Begin] to see Sadat, an Arab, as an equal human being. It wasn't until that, that there was dialog and breakthrough. That was a breakthrough when Pastor Oberon and I met. We came off to each other as equal, and the possibility of contributing to the way of being of Simpson County.

White: Did it go any farther than that?

Perkins: No. He went to his church. I can tell you. I'd rather not call names. (laughter) But people who met me at the cleaner and told me that their pastor was behaving funny, and he was behaving funny in [his] relationship to me. And they thought Pastor Oberon went crazy. I bet you if you would get to the—and he jumped out of the window at the Baptist Hospital and committed suicide. And I bet you that he felt a deep rejection within his congregation. I don't know. There might be another side, but I've never heard another side come up. The only side that's gone public has been my side. And I've never got a lawsuit. And I spent the night in Nashville with his classmate. He read my book, and I spent the night with his classmate. So there would have been a big disturbance. It look like it would have come out, and it look like it would have come out legally in my book because I talk about Pastor Oberon; I talk about Goon Jones. I mean, I call names in there, and there was never a legal—and I'm sure that the lawyers in Mendenhall and everywhere had looked at it. And I know our publishers looked at it, and our publishers took it serious when they published the book and all of my books. And that was an important time in both his life, and it was an important time in my life. It was me concluded that culture had won, that Southern culture had won and that the solution to the problem would be in your court, education, that the solution to the problem was for black, young folks, it was an education outside of Mississippi. (Inaudible) I concluded that the Mississippi educational system was too tied to the economic system in Mississippi and too tied to the culture control that was already enslaved and controlled. And so the most damaged people—we come to understand that in the civil rights movement. We came to understand in the civil rights movement that the most dangerous people in Mississippi—I don't know if you know that or not—was the black school teachers. They were the most dangerous people, that they was the highest paid people and that they were the most difficult people because they had adjusted their lives to the economic (inaudible). They had adjusted their life to that economic system as it exists.

White: To fit the system as it was.

Perkins: Right. And we would get in an argument about that the segregated school was better than the integrated schools.

White: Well, this was at the point that the schools integrated in Simpson County and everywhere else, 1970.

Perkins: Right, right.

White: What kind of early interaction was there? Was it good, bad? What was the (inaudible) interaction?

Perkins: Mendenhall and Simpson County might be—and you guys don't know this—might represent—it did. It did. The little Mendenhall school over there on the hill, the little private school. What is it called? Mendenhall Academy.

White: Simpson County Academy.

Perkins: Simpson County Academy. It might have grown, but it had very little great influence in those early days. It might have grown; I don't know what it is now, but out of that came—Simpson County might represent at one period—if I was a historian and doing all that, I would look at it. I suspect that from [19]72 (inaudible) period. Simpson County was probably the best (inaudible) school community, relational place in the state of Mississippi, without a doubt. Let me tell you what made it. Let me tell you what made it, and I can feel it now. I can go down to Simpson County now, and you can feel the (inaudible) Mendenhall having a black police chief. What happened when the kids integrated in the school that first year of the full integration. OK? My kids went there three or four years before. But the full year of integration, the kids across the track that was in my Bible studies and all the kids, Dolphus and all of them, all of that—

White: Dolphus Weary, you're—

Perkins: Yeah. He was already gone to college, but those kids understood the reality, and when they went to Mendenhall School to the high school, they went with a sense of dignity that the average children don't have because of that ministry in Mendenhall. They went with an awareness. They went with a—we had summer club. We talked about integrating the school.

White: Preparing (inaudible).

Perkins: Preparing for education, and what they had to do and all of those kind of things. OK. The first year then, and of course in Mendenhall High School and in Harper High School, the most important person is what they call Miss High School. That's the most important person in the school, and everybody have to vote for that person. When Mendenhall school integrated, it was like 55 percent black high school and about 45 percent white. It was right near the same thing, equal. (Inaudible) And when they voted, they voted absolutely along racial lines. It was no thought that no black person going to vote for no white person, and it was no thought that no white person (inaudible). Who do you think became Miss—(laughter)

White: Whoever had the 55 percent, I would imagine.

Perkins: Yeah, and it was a black. You know what that principal did? (Inaudible) I mean, Simpson County is not a bad county. It was some uninformed people who made decisions as you look back on it, and (inaudible) ignorant. I won't do that. I just call them uninformed people that was so limited in (inaudible) understanding of the society and made these terrible things. (Inaudible) the black kids, the day when they found out—they found out at night. OK. They found out at night, and they had to come back to school the next morning. This is the first time you going to hear this history. (laughter) (Inaudible) practice (inaudible), the guys, the football team, the basketball team and all the black athletes—(End of digital file named tape two, side one. Interview continues on digital file named tape two, side two.) Oh, Lord have mercy. They didn't know what happened. And so the teachers started coming out there, and they said, "We not going to go back until this girl is put back in her position." Even the principal, the black people up there, came down to my house to get me to come up there to get the kids back in class. And I said, "Are y'all crazy?" (laughter) And the black principal, I said, "Are you crazy, man? Do you know (inaudible)?" And so what happened then was it was such a dynamic event that for the first time the white kids sided with the black kids. (laughter) I mean, they got upset because there was white—athletic people like to be—I'm athletic. I'm competitive. I like for you to beat me, but let's play the game.

White: Or try. (laughter)

Perkins: But we got to play the game; (laughter) we got to play the game, and you win. That's what athletics is about, teaching me how to lose, but you beat me. (laughter) And so those white kids didn't like it. They didn't like it because they recognized the unfairness of the thing. And those principals, they (inaudible) understood those white principals. And of course by the time it got back downtown, the white—

White: That shook the old system up. I don't think there's any doubt of that.

Perkins: And then that, it was that sense of equality. That's what I'm getting at. It was that sense of the kids moving, both the white kids to a sense of realizing the injustice within the system. And I think that's what made Mendenhall—and Mendenhall have not had that much conflict.

White: It was not one of the hotspots in the county even from the early years.

Perkins: Oh, no, no, no, no. And I think that that's a difference between an informed people. The idea of a democracy is that you govern the people who want to be governed. And the people want to be governed by some basic, high moral principle. And (inaudible) you want to be governed by those principles.

White: Well, a level athletic playing field had something to do with the—

Perkins: Absolutely.

White: —integrating school system being effectively done in Simpson County, didn't it?

Perkins: Yeah. That was it. It was that same year that they won the state championship, and that was impactful because now you got white and black—it was probably equal on that team. And that has all kinds of—

White: Your son was on that team.

Perkins: Yeah, my son was. Spence was on that team. (Inaudible) that team, and he was what I guess you would call a point guard then. He was a high scoring person. He went on to college and was high scoring, and finally he got his degree in Belhaven.

White: Well, how many more years did you serve in your ministry in Mendenhall before you moved to Jackson?

Perkins: See, I was beaten in February of—in the Brandon jail. I was beaten in [19]71.

White: You were charged with what at that time?

Perkins: I'm trying to think of what I was charged. I was charged with contributing to a delinquent of a minor in Mendenhall because all those kids were locked in jail, and it was my fault. (laughter) And—

White: You were moved to the Brandon jail?

Perkins: No, no. Later out of the boycott is what. They followed the bus. The kids from Jackson came down to participate in the boycott, and so they followed the two van that brought them back until they crossed, they got into Rankin County.

White: Crossed the Simpson County line into Rankin County.

Perkins: Right. And then they arrested us.

White: Was that on Highway 49?

Perkins: Highway 49.

White: Close to Piney Woods School.

Perkins: Right. They followed them; they started chasing them there. They (inaudible) there, but they didn't arrest them till they got in what we call Plain(?). Plain does no longer exist, I don't think.

White: It's now Richland.

Perkins: Richland, yeah. That's where they arrested them at. Then when they arrested them there and one of the girls then, they (inaudible) a car behind didn't arrest, went to the phone booth and called us back in Mendenhall and said that they was arrested. Then the three of us got in the car then. They was in the Brandon—they was taking them to Brandon. And then we got to go to the Brandon jail, and that's when they arrested us. When we got to the Brandon jail, I mean, that was—we called it an ambush. We called it an ambush. They might have been surprised to see us. I think they were, to come to the jail because if I'd have thought about it again, now, I never would have—that was stupid of me. I misjudged going to the Brandon jail. When I got to Brandon jail, all the highway patrol, Lloyd Jones and all of them were there, and the head detective for the Mississippi Highway Patrol was the son of the jailer of the sheriff in Rankin County. So this had been a well planned deal. And so when we got there, they locked me in jail and locked the three of us in jail, and they went on, and you can't imagine. You have no sense of the torture that we went through. I mean, it was torture. I was knocked out, a couple of times, unconscious. I marvel at what the head can take. Sometimes now I have, sometimes now my head will hurt, not with a aspirin that will remove it. Sometime my head will hurt like it hurted then. I don't know if it's an illusion or not. And then when they beat us up and tortured us in that jail cell, kicked us on the floor, the thing that you sort of know: there is something in the racial behavior. And I think it's the (inaudible) that torturing people sexually, that the fear of the sexual behavior of a black person is a threat. It's a major behavior thing. And they wanted to stomp me in my groin. They wanted to disarm me.

White: Unman you.

Perkins: Unman me. Unman me. That's the word. Unman you. And it's spooky, but it was that night in jail that showed me the, I can call it the nothingness of racism and hatred. I saw the end of it, and it was frightening. And I saw the end of it, and I saw that it was in me.

White: In all of us.

Perkins: It was in me. And that I saw nothing but war and bloodshed, and I guess that was my Christian conviction came out. I said, "God, if you let me out of this jail alive, I want to preach the gospel that's stronger than my race. I want to preach a gospel that's stronger than my economic interest. I want to preach a love that can save white folks and black folks." I truly believe that the gospel and love of God is the way, and it's the power of God. And I said, "I want to preach." That was the deciding element of my life. And there are a lot of things went into my life (inaudible). And my first book that I got, my uncle subscribing for a newspaper for us on a yearly basis, me working in that field in Shivers for fifteen cent, my recognizing that I grew up without a mother nor father, and I had not had love, and I found that love, and in Simpson County, me seeing the problem with Dr. Oberon committing suicide. I tied

that to people having come (inaudible) of their culture so much so, I don't think that he saw no way out of it. And then I saw that Brandon jail experience as the horror of horror of what racism had made those people, Goon Jones and all of them, into animals.

White: And you devoted the rest of your life to racial reconciliation.

Perkins: And I devoted the rest of my life to racial reconciliation. And I say that now at seventy, almost seventy-three. People try to get me as a hero. I don't even talk about this philosophy. I don't know if you know that. I've traveled all over the country; they have to pull this out of me because what has happened to me is that my desire to do and the reward of, personal reward of doing it, I'd feel like I would exploit the society. I'd feel like I was using what happened to me as a means of my own elevation, and I hope it been a (inaudible) of my own humiliation and my own, the kind of humiliation that come from the idea that God resists the proud and gives his grace to the humble. I hope that that come through. And so what it look like to me has been the bad avenues of my life have ended up being, in my old age, has become the virtues that sustain me.

White: Well, thank you, sir. That sounds like the perfect ending to an interview. Thank you, sir.

(end of interview)