

Mississippi Oral History Program

Simpson County Historical and Genealogical
Oral History Project

An Oral History

with

Vera Mae Perkins

Interviewer: Joe White

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An Oral History with Vera Mae Perkins, Volume 1217, Part 25

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Biography

Vera Mae Perkins was born Vera Mae Buckley to Rozel Williams and Garland Young in New Hebron, MS in August 1933. Her mother was a cosmologist and her father was a farmer, then a longshoreman in New Orleans, LA. Vera Mae had one brother and one half-sister from her mother's second marriage. She went to school at Lilly Hill in Simpson County. After graduating from high school, Perkins dropped out of Alcorn to marry Rev. John Perkins in June 1951. While her husband was in the service overseas, Vera Mae moved to Hattiesburg, MS and attended Young's Beauty School. The Perkins' had eight children together, four boys and four girls. They moved back to Jackson, MS in 1960. It was shortly after that Vera Mae and John began traveling to local public schools and teaching Bible lessons for six years. With growing support from the community, the couple established the Voice of Calvary Mission. Their ministries would continue growing and expanding throughout the country, including California where Vera Mae and John used to live. The couple continued their evangelical efforts with much support, subsequently moving to Pasadena, CA in 1982, Dallas, TX in 1995, and finally back to Jackson the following year, where the Perkins' have remained since.

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AN ORAL HISTORY
with
VERA MAE PERKINS

This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi Simpson County Project. The interview is with Vera Mae Perkins and is taking place on May 8, 2003. The interviewer is Joe White.

White: —Thursday, May 8, 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 Mrs. Vera Mae Perkins in her home in Jackson, Mississippi. Ms. Perkins, could you state your full name, please?

Perkins: My name is Vera Mae Perkins.

White: And before you were married, your name was?

Perkins: Before I was married, I was a Buckley(?).

White: Then Miss Vera Mae Buckley.

Perkins: I was Miss Vera Mae Buckley.

White: When and where were you born?

Perkins: I was born in New Hebron, in the country of New Hebron.

White: On the Simpson County side or the—

Perkins: In Simpson County.

White: In the Simpson County side. New Hebron is in—

Perkins: In a house.

White: New Hebron is in Lawrence County, but you were born over on the Simpson County side.

Perkins: Right.

White: Well, that's good because I'm from Simpson—

Perkins: That was our town.

White: And who were your parents?

Perkins: My parents were Rozel Williams and Garland Young.

White: OK. And what did your mother do for a living?

Perkins: My mother was a cosmetologist.

White: And what did your father do?

Perkins: He was a longshoreman in New Orleans.

White: Worked on the river?

Perkins: Before he went, he was a farmer, before he went to New Orleans.
(Inaudible)

White: Were they both from the New Hebron area?

Perkins: Yes.

White: Originally?

Perkins: Yes.

White: Do you remember what their parents' names were?

Perkins: My daddy's mother's name was Maggie (inaudible).

White: I'm asking you to pull some memories out here. I realize that.

Perkins: My mother's parents' names was Ozzie Williams and Vrillie Williams.

White: Ozzie?

Perkins: Ozzie, O-Z-Z-I-E.

White: And Vrillie.

Perkins: V-R-I-L-L-I-E, Vrillie Williams.

White: Williams.

Perkins: And my dad's mother was named Margaret, M-A-R-G-A-R-E-T, I think was the way she spelled it, they spelled it.

White: And they were all from around New Hebron?

Perkins: And she was a Young, yes. They were over in Simpson County. But by my daddy being born out of wedlock, he took her name, but his real father is a Buckley. And I grew up a Buckley.

White: OK. So that's where the Buckley—

Perkins: And in order to get my birth certificate, I had problems getting my birth certificate because I wrote and asked for it in a Buckley's name, and then they had to search me out and find different things (inaudible) to get it in my father's name, Vera Mae Young.

White: Yeah. So your parents separated when you were young? Is that right?

Perkins: Yes. I was about five years old.

White: And you were raised by your mother then?

Perkins: I was raised by my mother's mother, my grandmother. And when we moved out to, we moved off the river (inaudible) in Simpson County. Pearl River, I guess. We used to live down there, and when we moved out near New Hebron, three miles from New Hebron, then my grandmother knew my grandfather was a Buckley. And so she raised us as Buckleys, my brother and I.

White: Yeah. That was a bit confusing on the names, there (inaudible). (laughter)

Perkins: Still confusing.

White: It's still confusing. Did you have any brothers and sisters?

Perkins: I had one brother, (inaudible) another son, eighteen months older than me.

White: What's his name?

Perkins: His name is Grady C. Young.

White: Grady? No sisters, huh?

Perkins: I have a sister by my mother's second marriage whose name is Vrillie Shelby(?).

White: The same name Vrillie, again. (Inaudible)

Perkins: She's named after her grandmother.

White: Vrillie Shellie?

Perkins: Shelby.

White: Shelby. And who did your mother marry the second time?

Perkins: Otis Shelby.

White: Otis Shelby. And they still lived close to where they used to live around New Hebron?

Perkins: No. Otis didn't live at New Hebron until they retired. They lived in Hattiesburg. He lived in Hattiesburg. That's where my sister was born, and my mother had other babies, but she lost (inaudible) for the lack of prenatal care. And I went to school, after I finished high school, after I dropped out of college and got married, I went to Young's Beauty School in Hattiesburg (inaudible) my mother (inaudible).

White: OK. So you at first just wanted to be a cosmetologist like your mother had been, then. Is that right?

Perkins: I wanted to be a school teacher.

White: School teacher? Let's get back to your earlier education. When you were living with your grandmother, were there any other children in the house, or did you grow up as a—

Perkins: Yes. Her children. My grandmother had several children, and my uncles were living in the house and one aunt.

White: Pretty big household, then, wasn't it?

Perkins: And my mother and I. Yeah. Some of them were married by then.

White: You remember all of their names? All of her children?

Perkins: Yes, I do.

White: Could you name them, please? Putting you on the spot here. (laughter)

Perkins: Leezel(?), Rozel(?), Ezel(?), Beezel(?), Barry(?), Isidar(?), Nikers, N-I-K-E-R-S, and Ozzie Mae.

White: For a while there, I thought you were going to make them all rhyme. Five of my great-grandfather's children's names all rhymed like that, too.

Perkins: Yes. My mother's name was Rozel.

White: Where did you go to school?

Perkins: I went to school at Lilly Hill, Simpson County.

White: Is that close to New Hebron?

Perkins: Yes. And when we lived about two and a half miles from school, I started to school when I was about five and a half or six. And that was a long way for a little child to walk. I was walking with my uncles and my brother.

White: Walked two and a half miles.

Perkins: Yes, to Lilly Hill. That was a little [two]-room schoolhouse. I went there till the fourth grade.

White: How many grades did they have in the school? One through four?

Perkins: Five or six.

White: And it was basically a two-room schoolhouse. How many teachers did they have?

Perkins: I can remember (inaudible). That's been over fifty years ago. I can remember Professor Buchanan(?), Mrs. Bradford(?), Mrs. Trautman(?), and Professor Buchanan's wife. I can remember four right now.

White: That was a pretty full staff on a two-room schoolhouse, wasn't it? About how many students do you remember being there? I'm really pressing your memory.

Perkins: All the students school-age in the community. It could have been fifty.

White: You were basically all taught in the same two rooms? Separated into small groups?

Perkins: Yes. I remember there was a big room.

White: What kind of courses were offered? What were you taught?

Perkins: Well, I don't know what all I was taught.

White: Just basic school courses?

Perkins: Yeah. I remember my first book (inaudible) Jimmy Dale(?). (laughter)

White: Jimmy Dale?

Perkins: Uh-huh. And we had to learn poetry.

White: Had to recite poetry?

Perkins: Recite poetry from that little book. “Over in the meadow where the brook runs blue, lives an old mother frog, and her little frog, too. ‘Hop,’ said the mother. ‘Hop,’ said the frog. Hop, hop, hop where the brook runs blue.”

White: I remember that. I sure do.

Perkins: “Over in the meadow in the sand, in the sun, lived an old (inaudible).” I think where the brook runs blue was the fish, (laughter) and the frog was the sun.

White: I remember that. See, I told you I was going to pull on some memory strings here. (laughter) Do you remember any of your buddies, any of your friends from school?

Perkins: Oh, yes, yes. Irene Buckley, Alene Buckley, they were twins. They were my good friends.

White: Irene and Alene?

Perkins: Uh-huh, Alene and Irene Buckley. All of my classmates were my good friends. We were good friends. Viola Wool(?), Eddie Chatman(?). That’s been a long time ago. (laughter)

White: What kind of games did you play? Would you get out for recess?

Perkins: All the Way Around the Mulberry Bush. I got a mulberry bush back there just bearing mulberries like crazy.

White: It’s still in your backyard today.

Perkins: Well, it wasn’t then. My husband brought it and set it out. And I said, “Nothing going to grow on that tree. What you need to do is cut that thing down.” But this year, oh, I got—

White: You got mulberries, huh?

Perkins: Yeah.

White: That’s fantastic. It didn’t come from Simpson County, did it?

Perkins: No. (laughter) No. He brought it here from somewhere he was traveling, and somebody gave him a little plant. (laughter)

White: After you finished the fourth grade there, where did you go to school?

Perkins: My grandmother really believed in education. In fact she finished the eighth grade, and she used to help in the little one-room schoolhouse, back in her day. And she sent my brother, Grady(?), and my Uncle Michus(?)—he was her baby. She sent us to New Hymn.

White: That's the school at what's now West Union.

Perkins: That's West Union now.

White: Gosh, that was a long way from home.

Perkins: There was a dormitory there, and she put us in the dormitory. No money to pay for our schooling. When she killed hogs she would give a ham. She would give sweet potatoes, corn meal, some jars of fruit.

White: That sounds like the way my mother went through college at Teacher's College down in Hattiesburg, was by bringing produce and hams and (inaudible).

Perkins: Yes. That's the way my—

White: But you actually did that during junior high and high school. Did you graduate at New Hymn?

Perkins: No, no.

White: Well, let's don't jump off of New Hymn. We'll get to your graduation in just a minute. I'd like for you to tell us a little bit about what you remember about the dormitory and school life at New Hymn. How long were you there?

Perkins: I stayed there about two years, or no, I stayed there till I was through the sixth grade. My uncle stayed one year. My brother stayed two years, and I stayed three years.

White: I didn't know that New Hymn had dormitories at one time. About how many people lived there? Do you remember?

Perkins: Oh, it was (inaudible). It was girls lived upstairs, and they had about three—the boys lived in the farm shop or somewhere. That was years and years ago. OK? Then my grandmother brought me home, and the schools were consolidated, and the school bus started to run from our house on the low end of Simpson County to New Hymn.

White: Oh. So you were able to stay at home and ride the school bus then.

Perkins: Well, I still had to walk a mile and a half to catch the school bus because they didn't bring the school bus down to where I lived the first year. And I would catch the school bus and then ride twenty miles. It'd be twenty miles from there to get to—through Pinola, going a route through Pinola, down to (inaudible).

White: You know I think I forgot to ask you at the start of this interview when you were born.

Perkins: I was born August 16, 1933.

White: Nineteen thirty-three, so it's—

Perkins: I'm seventy in August.

White: You came back to school in about the fifth grade then. About twelve years after that would be about when the school—I'm trying to remember, figure out what year the schools were consolidated.

Perkins: I don't know.

White: You'd be about twelve years old, eleven or twelve years old, roughly, when you came back home from your two years at New Hymn.

Perkins: There's a discrepancy somewhere because I lived in the dormitory three years.

White: Three years, I'm sorry. I thought you said two.

Perkins: My brother lived two.

White: I probably just heard that. I was just trying to figure out a rough time when the school buses started running. What schools were consolidated? You may not remember (inaudible).

Perkins: Taylor(?) Hill, Lilly Hill, New Zion. I don't know what—

White: New Zion was the one out close to New Zion Church of Pinola, off [Highway] 28 West, out on [Highway] 28 and below the Strong River Bridge.

Perkins: I don't remember the other one. I didn't know all that.

White: But all of those were just closed and consolidated into New Hymn.

Perkins: Yes. There was a bunch of children at New Hymn.

White: And then how many years then did you stay at New Hymn after the consolidation?

Perkins: I stayed in New Hymn, I went to ninth—ninth grade I left New Hymn.

White: Ninth grade.

Perkins: The Harpers was the, Annie Belle Harper(?) was the [Anna T.] Jeannes [Fund supervisor] teacher.

White: Was the what?

Perkins: Jeannes teacher. Don't ask me what that means. I know it—

White: Jeannes teacher.

Perkins: Yeah. She called it Jeannes teacher, and she would go from school to school to school.

White: The rotating teacher then.

Perkins: She wasn't a teacher. She was an overseer [Anna T. Jeannes Fund supervisor]. I don't know what that means. We better leave that alone.

White: Well, I've heard that before, too, but I didn't know what it was. And there obviously is a phrase. She was a supervising teacher, in other words, a supervisor.

Perkins: She was a supervisor, um-hm. She would visit the schools.

White: Is this the Mrs. Harper from Mendenhall who was—

Perkins: Annie Belle Harper.

White: Her husband was principal of the school at Mendenhall, and then it was named after him, I believe.

Perkins: E.H. Harper(?), right. And then when they left New Hymn, the community got together and built a dormitory down there at Mendenhall. It's still there, two-story.

White: At Harper School?

Perkins: Two-story (inaudible) building.

White: Next to where the old Harper School was.

Perkins: Over where the old Harper School was, and I stayed in that building for three years, through twelfth grade.

White: OK. So you moved to Mendenhall then, basically, huh?

Perkins: With them, uh-huh. My grandmother, by this time I was having to walk alone. My brother, I don't know where he was. I know he had joined the—I don't know where he was. But my uncles had dropped out.

White: You were having to walk too far by yourself to catch the bus, huh?

Perkins: Yeah.

White: Well, what was it like living at the dorm at Harper School?

Perkins: Oh, it was OK. I liked it. The dorm never was finished. We just, the girls lived on the inside of the dorm, and the left side wasn't finished during my stay there. And some of the teachers—it's long. You been there.

White: Yes.

Perkins: Long building. A couple of teachers' rooms were on the right side, finished on that side, but from the steps on back it wasn't finished. And the matron lived downstairs by the kitchen. She was the cook (inaudible).

White: Did you have a cafeteria for the school separate, or was it part of the dormitory? Did y'all eat in the dormitory?

Perkins: We ate breakfast and supper in the dormitory, the dormitory children. But the school children ate at the lunchroom.

White: Right. They had a separate lunchroom.

Perkins: (Inaudible) down there.

White: Right. I'm from Mendenhall, so I do remember those areas in there. The old school building was still there when I moved to Mendenhall in [19]57, 1957, or somewhere along in there.

Perkins: Sure was.

White: You graduated at Harper in Mendenhall. Now, we're back up to cosmetology school, aren't we? Did you go to cosmetology school right after graduation, or was it—

Perkins: No. I went to Alcorn. My grandmother—I didn't want to go to college.

White: You didn't want to go to college, but you went to Alcorn—

Perkins: I wanted to get married. (laughter)

White: —in Lorman.

Perkins: I wanted to get married. (laughter)

White: Did you have anybody in particular in mind, or did you just want to get married?

Perkins: My sweetheart. (laughter)

White: Well, tell us about your sweetheart. (laughter)

Perkins: John.

White: This is the Reverend John Perkins, to whom you're now married. Right? (laughter)

Perkins: Yeah.

White: You mean he interfered with your college education?

Perkins: Yes, he did. (laughter) He did, and I was glad. The girls my age wanted to be married, wanted to be wives, wanted to be mothers.

White: Well, where did you meet Reverend Perkins?

Perkins: I met him at church.

White: In Mendenhall?

Perkins: No, at my daddy's church, down out from New Hebron.

White: OK. I wondered if he had gotten to Mendenhall that early. I knew he was from the Lawrence County side of New Hebron, I believe. What was the name of the church?

Perkins: Pleasant Hill Baptist Church.

White: Pleasant Hill Church. Was it in Lawrence County or in Simpson County? Do you remember?

Perkins: You know, tell you the truth, those kids go to New Hebron School, so it must be in Lawrence County.

White: It's hard to tell where the county line is, in there somewhere around New Hebron.

Perkins: I lived at the tip-end of the lower end of the county, so that must be Lawrence County. But Taylor Hill children lived in Simpson County, so Lawrence County come somewhere down there above (inaudible), I think.

White: Well, you know I interviewed your husband recently, and he sort of indicated that he didn't go to church too much when he was younger. He must have gone to church enough to meet you.

Perkins: Well, he went to church during the revival time.

White: OK. Well, he did say he went to church particularly during revival. But you met and fell in love with him. Why did you fall in love?

Perkins: He fell in love with me the same day he met me. (laughter)

White: He fell in love with you, then.

Perkins: He told me he was going to marry me. "I know a girl that'll make me a good wife." That's what he said, and he was talking about me.

White: Somehow you weren't too interested in college after that, huh?

Perkins: Fifty-two years later, I'm—(laughter)

White: Well, when and where were you married?

Perkins: I went to Yuma, Arizona. I caught the train when he called and ask my mama if he could marry me. My mama told him, "Yes." And he sent money for me to buy myself some things.

White: Where was he, then?

Perkins: He was in California. He was in the service. He had a twenty-one-day furlough, and by the time I got there on the train, fourteen of those were gone.

White: Oh, me.

Perkins: So we were married two weeks before he was supposed to go overseas.

White: So when was that? What was the date of your marriage?

Perkins: Nineteen fifty-one.

White: Nineteen fifty-one. Are you like me? I never can remember my anniversary. Do you remember?

Perkins: June 14.

White: June 14.

Perkins: And his birthday is June 16. I was his birthday present. (laughter)

White: Well, good. That sounds like a good birthday present. You did not go back to Alcorn University at that time.

Perkins: Oh, no. (laughter)

White: How long had you been in school there?

Perkins: One year. In fact, I didn't finish one year. I just put one year down because I was just fooling myself. (laughter)

White: At that point you were not interested in teaching anymore, huh?

Perkins: No.

White: Well, where did you live after you married?

Perkins: I came back to Hattiesburg and went to cosmetology school. My mother—I loved doing hair. And I graduated from Young's Beauty School.

White: Young's Beauty School in Hattiesburg?

Perkins: Yeah. And I took my state board here in Jackson. We drove up to Jackson for the state board.

White: And where did you practice cosmetology?

Perkins: Oh, when he came out, I was ready.

White: You stayed in Simpson County while he was in the service, while Reverend Perkins was in the service?

Perkins: Oh, no.

White: You didn't?

Perkins: I was in Hattiesburg.

White: I'm sorry. I meant in Mississippi. I didn't mean in Simpson County.

Perkins: In Mississippi, yeah, Mississippi. Then I went to California, and I had to take—Mississippi, you can graduate from beauty school; you can do 1500 hours, but in California you have to do 1600 hours, so I had to take what they call a brush-up course. And that took three months, and so that's what I had to do before I could start to practicing. Of course, I would always do hair in the house and make two or three dollars or so. And then I started working at the beauty shop in Monrovia. That's where we lived.

White: Right. Monrovia, California?

Perkins: California, uh-huh.

White: And along the way you had a couple of children, I believe.

Perkins: I had a lot of children.

White: All right. We'll talk about that in just a minute. We're getting fairly close to the end of the tape. How long did you live in Monrovia?

Perkins: I'd have to count that up. (laughter)

White: Was your husband in the ministry then, or was he just working?

Perkins: No. He was just working.

White: What did he do for a living while you were in California?

Perkins: He worked for a food company called Shop and Bag.

White: Shop and Bag.

Perkins: Uh-huh, Shop and Bag.

White: That was a national company, wasn't it? Pretty big company.

Perkins: Well, I know it was a California company. They had a lot of store.

White: Pretty large company.

Perkins: Yeah. I think it sold out to (inaudible).

White: Right. (End of digital file named tape one, side one. Beginning of digital file named tape one, side two.) —or you had a few children?

Perkins: Yes. We had eight children, four boys and four girls.

White: Four and four. That sounds like a good mixture.

Perkins: It was a good mixture. I was glad when the last two were girls.

White: Can you tell us about them, when they were born?

Perkins: I can tell you their names.

White: All right.

Perkins: Spencer, who is in heaven now.

White: Right. That's the son you lost about five years ago.

Perkins: Five years ago. Joanie.

White: Joanie.

Perkins: She's an attorney. Her office is right down the street.

White: In Jackson.

Perkins: In Jackson. Philip, Philip own his own business. He's got an eighteen-wheeler, and he drives, delivers logs or something around here. Derrick, Derrick is a son who ran (inaudible) center in California that we started in 1982. Deborah, Deborah works as a secretary down in Santa Ana, California. Priscilla, Priscilla works as Joanie's secretary down in the law office. Wayne, Wayne is in prison.

White: In Mississippi or somewhere else?

Perkins: In California.

White: California.

Perkins: Elizabeth, the youngest, works with her daddy here at the foundation.

White: Perkins Foundation in Jackson?

Perkins: Perkins Foundation, yes. That's all.

White: That names them all, huh? (laughter) Well, how many of those children did you have in California?

Perkins: I had Joanie, Philip, Derrick, Deb, Deborah.

White: And that's when you were practicing cosmetology in California?

Perkins: Yes.

White: And then when did you guys move back to Mississippi and why? And you need to tell us a little bit of the background of your husband, I think, at some point in here, too.

Perkins: We moved back to Mississippi. We arrived in Jackson, Mississippi, June 9, 1960, but before then the Lord had to really deal with me in the sense—and who am I, saying, “The Lord had to deal with me,” the sovereign God? Deal with this little, infinite person. I didn't want to come back to Mississippi to live because my growing up in Mississippi was very hard.

White: Pretty painful, huh?

Perkins: Pretty painful. The little education that I got, it was hard to get.

White: Obviously so if you had to move from home for several years to continue school.

Perkins: Right. And my neighbors, it was a white family on down the road from my grandmother's.

White: When you were growing up?

Perkins: When I was growing up, my grandma ran a little store, and those young boys would come over to the store. They would—

White: Young white boys?

Perkins: Little white boys come over to the store, teenagers, and they would call my grandma; they would just talk to her to make her have to say, “Yes, sir,” and, “No, sir,” to them and “Mister,” to them. And they would call her by her name, “Vrillie, so-and-so and so-and-so. Vrillie.” “Yes, sir. No, sir.”

White: She didn't have any choice, huh?

Perkins: She had a choice, but she didn't use it. I didn't like that. Didn't like it at all. Still don't like it. Kids come here, now, they have to call me Mrs. Perkins. We have a lot of work groups coming into this ministry, volunteering work. They got to

call me Mrs. Perkins. “Why do I have to call you Mrs. Perkins?” I say, “Because this is reparation.” (laughter)

White: That’s a good name for it, isn’t it? (laughter)

Perkins: The little children come; sometime they bring their little, younger children, babies, and (inaudible) call, “Vera Mae. Vera Mae.” I say, “No. I’m Mrs. Perkins to you.” (laughter) But most people—I like Grandma Perkins. I’m old enough now to be Grandma Perkins.

White: Grandma Perkins is OK.

Perkins: Grandma Perkins, I like for people to call me. Most people call me Grandma Perkins.

White: I noticed you had that sign on your parking place out here.

Perkins: Even the volunteers, when they come, they call me Grandma Perkins, and I like that.

White: But at any rate, the Lord had to speak to you pretty heavily to get you to consider coming back to Mississippi.

Perkins: Yes. John got sick. I don’t know. He had ulcers, but we took him to—

White: Stomach ulcer?

Perkins: Stomach ulcer, and I remember, what sticks with me now, is we went to—I took him down to the Long Beach Veterans Hospital in Long Beach, and doctor examine him. His vital signs, everything was OK. And they saw a scar in his stomach. The ulcer had healed. They couldn’t find anything wrong with him. But he kept losing weight and losing weight, and he was sick, and I felt like the Lord was saying to me, “Vera Mae, it’s time for you to accept my will for you and your family.”

White: Reverend Perkins by that time had decided that the Lord was calling him to come back to Mississippi, too, huh?

Perkins: He did. And six months, took me six months to get me. We had a big house. I had five bedrooms, and at that time I had five children.

White: Living a little better than you did in Mississippi.

Perkins: Yeah. I had outside toilet facilities here. Out there I had two whole bathrooms, and then a half. That’s the way they used to build those houses back, older houses. And I liked it. And I was doing hair, and he was working, and we was climbing the economic ladder, and I liked it. The Lord saw differently, and his way is

always the best. I tell the young folks, I say, “Best will to be in is God’s will.” And when I (inaudible). I got on my knees that morning, and I prayed. John had told me, “Vera Mae, call my boss and tell him I can’t come to work today.” I got on my knees by the bed, and I said, “Lord, (inaudible) what you want with me, I’m saying yes.” I was going to pray that the Lord raise him up, but I prayed for myself. I confessed that I (inaudible). “Lord, I can’t raise these children alone. Seem like you’re going to take him home with you, if I stand in the way of him doing your will.” So.

White: So you gave up a five-bedroom, two-bath house and moved back to Mississippi to do the Lord’s work.

Perkins: (Inaudible) (laughter)

White: And you didn’t move into a five-bedroom, two-and-a-half bath home in Mississippi, did you? Where did you guys live here when you moved back?

Perkins: We arrived in Jackson, June 9. I had an uncle living here, and we went to his house over on Dansby Street, took a bath. He didn’t have a shower. We took a bath. Bathed all the children and put on some clean clothes, and then we went on down home.

White: Went back to Simpson County.

Perkins: Went back to Simpson County to my grandmother’s house where I was raised, and that’s where we lived for nine months.

White: That’s when you were starting to form what became Voice of Calvary, Mendenhall Ministries.

Perkins: Yes. We went into the public schools and held chapel programs, using a flannel board, visualize Bible lessons, singing songs. Kids loved it.

White: It was then, as it is now, nondenominational, right?

Perkins: Nondenominational.

White: What kind of reception did you get in the public schools?

Perkins: “Here come the Bible teacher. Here the Bible teacher.”

White: Good from the kids and good from the schools—

Perkins: Good from principals.

White: But I’m going to hazard a guess here that it probably was predominantly the black schools that welcomed you.

Perkins: That's the only ones. The school wasn't integrated then in the [19]60s.

White: No. They were not integrated until around 1970, and this was ten years earlier, basically.

Perkins: Right, [19]60 to [19]66, I believe it was.

White: Sixty until [19]66 you spent visiting the public schools.

Perkins: Yes, we did fifteen, sixteen every month.

White: Fifteen or sixteenth a month. What were some of the—

Perkins: Well, there's twenty school days in a month. Right?

White: What were some of the schools you visited?

Perkins: OK. New Hymn.

White: Which is no longer there. It's now West Union.

Perkins: West Union. We visited Parish(?) High School in Hazlehurst, Prentiss Institute Junior College.

White: So you went out of Simpson County, too.

Perkins: Oh, yes.

White: From the first.

Perkins: And we did some over in the county next to us. What is this county? Rankin County, uh-huh, all those big schools.

White: Was it hard to make enough money to feed your children?

Perkins: You know, when we left we had—when John left his job, we left California in a 1957 Chevrolet, (inaudible) with five kids, four sitting in the back, my baby sitting in the front. She was born in January, and we left in June, about six months old. And we had a eleven-foot, U-Haul trailer. We had all our flannel boards, children's clothes, my deep freeze. I brought the deep freeze with me because I knew I had to feed my kids. We couldn't bring a stove or anything.

White: Just a deep freeze.

Perkins: Didn't even bring a TV. Had a floor-model TV. And I said, "Lord, I'm leaving it all to follow you." (laughter) I haven't regretted it a day. The best will to be in is God's will. Sometime in Mendenhall when we didn't know where the next meal was coming from, sometime I would say, "Why me, Lord?" You know. But folks fed our family.

White: Did you raise a garden when you lived out at your grandmother's place there?

Perkins: Yeah. Not a garden. We planted turnips and stuff in the field, peas in the field.

White: Put all that up in the freezer?

Perkins: Yeah.

White: Did you do any canning, then, too?

Perkins: Yeah. Well, I didn't can in jars. My freezer was my storage place for food.

White: At some point you and Reverend Perkins decided to move to Mendenhall. Did you move from your grandmother's place straight into Mendenhall, or did you live some other place in between?

Perkins: We moved from Mendenhall—we moved from New Hebron to Mendenhall, but in the meantime, one of the ladies of the church had a house that her son had built, and he and his wife had moved to New Orleans.

White: In Mendenhall, you're talking about. What church in Mendenhall was it?

Perkins: Oak Ridge. Not Mendenhall.

White: Oh, I'm sorry.

Perkins: That's at New Hebron.

White: At New Hebron, OK.

Perkins: I'm going from my grandmother's to Mendenhall, by the way, so we put—yeah. And I brought two beds with us. We put the beds up over in that house, and I got a stove from some place, and I put it over there, but it wasn't no gas over there. Wasn't any lights.

White: No electricity (inaudible).

Perkins: Nothing! (laughter) And it just sat over there, and we stayed at my grandmother's house. And my rent was two dollars a month.

White: Two dollars a month. Well, it wasn't worth much more than that if you couldn't cook or eat there. (Inaudible)

Perkins: I remember we stayed over there probably two nights out of the whole nine months. (laughter)

White: That was a dollar a night, then, wasn't it? (laughter)

Perkins: And I had the kids to go pick up some sticks, put it in the fireplace, and make some flitters. Make a fire in the fireplace and make some flitters. But—

White: Corn fritters you talking about? Cornbread, is that what you're talking about?

Perkins: No, no. Flour flitters.

White: Oh, flour flitters, OK. I got you.

Perkins: Like pancakes, where they—you know.

White: I thought you were talking about the corn meal, but you were talking about flour. OK.

Perkins: But in the meantime he was looking for a place, and we happened to go to Mendenhall. And Mr. Peacock, a white man, had built two nice houses, little houses, two-bedroom, and we rented one of those.

White: And that was close to where Mendenhall Ministries is now?

Perkins: Yes. We opened one of his building, used to be a storefront, one of his buildings right in front of Artice(?) and Carolyn's(?) house now. Used to be a storefront. That was our mission building. We called it the Voice of Calvary Mission.

White: I remember that.

Perkins: And we stayed there—let's see. We stayed there; we stayed in that house maybe a year or two, in that little, two-bedroom house. And then neighbor right down the street, live in Chicago, had a white house down there, and it could have been—it was two-bedroom, but you could make three out of it, and it had an inside bathroom. We moved in it, and that's where Wayne was born.

White: You had three more children after moving back to Mississippi.

Perkins: Yes. Wayne was born in that house. That's getting closer down to the church.

White: Right. The ministry, meantime, was—

Perkins: Wasn't no church there, then.

White: Right. The ministry was growing. How was it growing?

Perkins: It was growing. We started holding Bible classes. It started from Bible classes, children Bible classes. That was our ministry. And then John was teaching Sunday school up at Nazareth, and Nazareth people—

White: That's a Baptist Church.

Perkins: Yeah.

White: Nazareth Baptist Church.

Perkins: He was talking about some of those honky-tonks and stuff that was going on down there below us, and they threw him out. And then—

White: Some of the honky-tonk members must have been supporters of the church at the time, huh?

Perkins: They were. They told the pastor.

White: Well, if I remember right, there were a couple of very obvious honky-tonks on the main street.

Perkins: Yeah. And then we started a church in the mission building. Our first Sunday we had eighteen. (inaudible) and our children. You won't believe this. That first Sunday, Reverend Wadel—you know Edwin R. Wadel(?)?

White: Yes.

Perkins: Founder of (inaudible) Pioneer?

White: Yes.

Perkins: I was saved in his ministry.

White: Is that right?

Perkins: He came, looking for us, and he found us in that little mission. He came and sat in the back. I didn't know who he was.

White: The first Sunday.

Perkins: First Sunday, he and his wife. I didn't know who he was. I thought this was a policeman coming down to put us out of (inaudible).

White: Check on you, huh?

Perkins: Yeah. And when we got through with the service, he didn't have anything to say. We got through with the service. I was sitting at the piano. I was playing "There Is a Fountain Filled with Blood." He introduced himself, and I said, "Reverend Wadel?" You know up North it's Wadel, but down here it's Wadel.

White: Right. Difference in the pronunciation.

Perkins: And I said, "I was saved in your ministry. You remember when you used to come to New Hymn School? I remember the Bible lesson that day. I don't remember none of them, but I remember that one. You were telling the story of Zacheus(?), and you was doing the flannel board." And I said, "Our ministry is patterned after your ministry when you used to hold chapel program, visualize Bible lessons in the schools. Our ministry is patterned after yours." He was so happy. He was so happy. We took pictures together. And then when the flood came, it messed up a whole bunch of my stuff.

White: Let's see. The flood came in in 1974 or somewhere along in there, I believe.

Perkins: Something like that.

White: And it—

Perkins: We had already moved down, built a house, then when the flood came.

White: You had more than two bedrooms to put everybody in at that point.

Perkins: Oh, yeah. I got a Jim Walter House. I go down there now; that house looks so little. (laughter) OK. Now, you put us back on track.

White: All right. I'm supposed to get you back on track? I think we're on track pretty well right here. We're talking about the early years of the ministry. I know you didn't have any support from the white churches openly then. Reverend Perkins had indicated to me in an earlier interview that sometimes you guys didn't get too much support from the black churches, either.

Perkins: Yeah.

White: I don't mean that as a negative thing, but what type ministry did you have, and what experiences did you have?

Perkins: I just told you about Nazareth.

White: Right. If you preach against honky-tonks, you might get run out of one church, huh?

Perkins: Preach against sin. (laughter) Now, what were you asking me?

White: We were talking about the early years in Mendenhall, just what you remember. Where did your children go to school?

Perkins: They went over across to Harper.

White: To Harper School. That's before integration days. At some point or other, you folks started a school with your ministry. You started with Bible school.

Perkins: Yeah. Jogging my memory, now. (laughter) Genesis One, I remember when it started. I don't know what year.

White: Genesis One really sprang from Bible school, though.

Perkins: Right.

White: That's what it was.

Perkins: Right.

White: And it's still in existence there. It's under Mendenhall Ministries, which I think spun off of y'all.

Perkins: Right. And it's doing well. They have a waiting list.

White: Have a waiting list for students there now?

Perkins: Um-hm, that's what I hear.

White: I know they're very active in the community and have been for years, in Christmas parades and everything else as well as the religious aspect of it. What was the school like when it first got started? I know there was no building to start with.

Perkins: By that time we had built the house, and our church moved into our house.

White: Your old house.

Perkins: No. The Jim Walter house. And then we built—we had Saturday night Youth for Christ meetings. And he said, "We need a building." Said, "I'm going to California. I'm not coming back till I get enough money to build a building. Y'all pray for me." He stayed gone six weeks, and when he came back, he had enough

money to build that building, and we called it the Glennon Belle(?) Hall then. We had a little sign up there. Glennon Belle was my husband's Bible teacher. Mr. Wayne (inaudible).

White: California?

Perkins: Yeah. That was his wife's name, and she had passed away, and we named it the Glennon Belle Hall, the first church building. Well, we called it the school building, and that's where we had—we moved in it and had our Youth for Christ meetings and just a whole bunch of stuff. And then he had to build another building, a little chapel. I don't know if you've been in it or not, the little chapel.

White: No. I've never been in the chapel. The California support, I almost forgot to ask. When Reverend Perkins first got into the ministry and first was called, he was supported by and was involved in a group in California. Was that a church, or was it just a group of people?

Perkins: No. It wasn't a church. What's the name of that group? That group were the Fishermen. That's what they called themselves, Fishermen something. And they would go out witnessing every Sunday afternoon and Wednesday.

White: Was that (inaudible) meeting. Was that the way you pronounced it? The (inaudible) Christian Family?

Perkins: No, no, no. (Inaudible) We still talking about way back yonder.

White: OK. You're talking about years ago. Oh, that's what Reverend Perkins started out in California, wasn't it? OK. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to jump ahead here. The original—

Perkins: You were thinking about support.

White: The support group in California.

Perkins: From the Fishermen's Group. And we had seventy-five-dollars worth of support. And some months that \$75 didn't come in, but I had my grandma, and we had greens and bread and stuff. We ate OK.

White: Later, I think in 1984 according to what Reverend Perkins had told me, that he had cofounded the Christian Family. Was that—

Perkins: (Inaudible)

White: (Inaudible) in California.

Perkins: Christian Family Center. Karamba(?) is a Swahili word. They went to Africa, and they came back with that word. My son Derrick. He is the one.

White: He had gone to Africa.

Perkins: Karamba, Karamba. That means, “Let’s get together and push.” They gave an example. A house burned over there when they was in Africa, and the guys came through hollering, “Karamba, karamba.”

White: Everybody got together and helped.

Perkins: Got together to rebuild the house.

White: Well, who went to Africa then?

Perkins: John, Spencer, and Derrick.

White: OK. And that led to the founding of that organization.

Perkins: Their name.

White: The Christian Family (inaudible) in Pasadena.

Perkins: That mean we wanted to bring the community together and build. “Let’s get together and push.”

White: So while he was getting support for the ministry in Simpson County, (inaudible) and everything, he was also giving back to the California community by witnessing out there, huh? Both directions. But you got a little money together and started building a new building there in Mendenhall?

Perkins: That’s a different thing.

White: Now, I’m just talking about—

Perkins: Which building?

White: I’m just talking about the overall ministry. You said he had gone to California to try to raise some money. We were talking about (inaudible).

Perkins: Yeah, that’s when we first started out. That was in the [19]60s.

White: Right. OK. Now, I’m just getting us back to that point.

Perkins: He built it. Yeah, we built it.

White: The school building.

Perkins: School building and then built the church building. Then the gym. Well, our health center was built before the gym. Well, I don't know, but we built the gym/health center.

White: The mid-1960s is when that was, isn't it?

Perkins: Yes.

White: Somewhere along there.

Perkins: All of that was going on.

White: And that was to get the youth of the community there and interested in sports and exercising.

Perkins: Yes.

White: Did that work pretty well?

Perkins: The name of the ministry then, the church was the Berean(?) Bible Church.

White: Berean Bible Church.

Perkins: And Voice of Calvary Ministries.

White: Voice of Calvary basically has been an umbrella group, then, for all these different ministries.

Perkins: Yes, yes. Ministries was because there was more than one ministry. My husband, when he talk, he (inaudible) ministry, but it's ministries.

White: At some point, too, during the mid-1960s, I think you began to work as a ministry with the federal government programs, Head Start, and things like that for a while.

Perkins: Yeah. I started the first Head Start program in Simpson County. And I stayed the head of it for three and a half years.

White: That kept you pretty busy, didn't it?

Perkins: Yes, it sure did. I had a baby during that time. I had to go to Tuskegee. I was expecting Elizabeth, my baby and youngest child. In order to be qualified to be head of the program. I had to go to Tuskegee Institute in Alabama and take the early childhood development course.

White: To get certified for it.

Perkins: To get certified for it, and then during that time, when my baby was born—
(laughter)

White: What type of things did the Head Start program do? What did you first start setting up in Simpson County?

Perkins: Setting up in Simpson County, first we had a place, and we had to have a bus driver to go out into Simpson County, bringing kids in. And then we would have chapel programs with the—(End of digital file named tape one, side two. Beginning of digital file named tape two, side one.)

White: We are at the founding now of the Head Start program, which you ran for about three and a half years, I believe you said, as the director. Did you get involved with other parts of the ministry? I know—

Perkins: Yeah. I taught a class, taught a Head Start class. I had a bunch of kids.

White: So you got into teaching, then, before it was over with, anyway.

Perkins: Sure.

White: You had mentioned earlier something I didn't pick up on. You had said you were playing the piano in church. Where did you learn piano? Where did you learn music? Was there music in your home when you were growing up, or was it just a church-associated thing?

Perkins: Church-associated. I'm not that—

White: Did you have a piano in church when you were growing up?

Perkins: Yeah. But I'm not good.

White: Well, I wasn't good, either, but I used to play at church a little bit in Pinola when I was the only one around who could play. Were you self-taught, or did you have a music teacher?

Perkins: I was self-taught and had a music teacher.

White: When you were in school then?

Perkins: No.

White: You didn't have a music class at school. That was what I was getting to. You had—

Perkins: No.

White: You just—

Perkins: Our only thing extra was home economics.

White: Took private music lessons later then.

Perkins: I took private music lessons later.

White: Was that in Simpson County?

Perkins: No. That was after I was grown.

White: After you were grown. I had not asked that question a while ago, and I was afraid I would sidetrack you when you were talking about it, and that's the reason I wanted to ask about your training in that. What point did you and Reverend Perkins decide that you had done as much as you needed to or should have done in Simpson County and moved to Jackson?

Perkins: Oh. We didn't—

White: A lot of stuff happened.

Perkins: We didn't decide that.

White: A lot of stuff happened here. That's the reason I want you to tell us.

Perkins: We didn't decide that we had done enough and needed to move to Jackson. After he was beaten—he was beaten in—

White: In the Rankin County Jail.

Perkins: Yeah.

White: He had told us about that in his (inaudible).

Perkins: OK. Well, I won't go into that. But he had surgery. He had a portion of his stomach taken out where they had kicked him. Mr. Goon Jones kicked him in his stomach and in his groin, and as a result he has to live, suffering from that the rest of his life. He had surgery; he had his part of his stomach removed, and that was a sad time for me. He was working with the co-ops of Mississippi.

White: Yeah. I believe he told us he was traveling around the state a good bit with the co-ops at that point.

Perkins: That's right. And when he took ill, he was in Mound Bayou, in the Delta, and they put him in Shelby Hospital, just a mile or two above Mound Bayou. And they had to give him surgery, and I remember I was going up there. My youngest child Elizabeth was with me, and she was in the back seat, playing, and I was driving up there. That's a long way to drive up there.

White: Yes, it is.

Perkins: And she said to me, "Mama, you're not mad. You're just sad, the reason why you're not talking, aren't you?" I told her; I said, "No, I'm not mad." She could tell as a four-year-old or five-year-old kid. She could tell that something wasn't right, and I was thinking, "Is he going to come through this surgery? Lord, is he going to come through it?" And it was bad. He was in bad shape. And I got to the hospital. He had written a note on an envelope. He said, "To Spencer, now, if I die, I want you to drop out of school and take care of your mother and the family."

White: That's pretty serious. Knowing him, I know it was serious for him to advise his son to drop out of school. Where was Spencer in school at the time?

Perkins: Spencer was going to school; I think Spencer was in college in California. I think. Well, maybe not. I don't know where he was in school back then. I can't recall that.

White: Well, thank goodness he didn't drop out. He became a pretty good minister after that, too, himself.

Perkins: Yeah. Yeah, he did. And that's when we moved to Jackson, coming back from Mound Bayou. I saw this new subdivision out there. I [said], "Nobody live over there but white folks, I'm sure." I saw it going, and I came back, and I saw a black person, driving out from there. I said, "Oh, let me go down in here." And it was all black. And I went back—

White: What part of Jackson was that in?

Perkins: That's the Presidential Hills.

White: The Presidential Hills.

Perkins: Just north of here, I guess.

White: Yes.

Perkins: The doctor had told John, “It’s too much pressure for you to be in Mendenhall, now. You need to leave.” And John told me to find a house, so I found a house. It was a four-bedroom house, two baths, nice, nice house, 6838 Harry S. Truman Drive. A lot of those are named for presidents. So she let him come home to sign for the house.

White: To sign the paperwork on the house.

Perkins: To sign the paperwork on the house, and about time when I took him back, because he had to stay up there something like six weeks to recuperate.

White: At the hospital at Shelby.

Perkins: He stayed in the hospital a week or two. Then she let him ride down here. Then he went back, and he lived—

White: He had a female doctor, in other words, huh?

Perkins: Yes. She was a Catholic lady who wanted to be a missionary. And she didn’t ever become a missionary, so she became a missionary and did her work there in the Mississippi Delta. So he had to stay in the community with a friend for something like four weeks.

White: Recuperating.

Perkins: Until she could let him come home to stay. He still had to go back and get checked over.

White: And that’s when the ministry the Voice of Calvary (inaudible).

Perkins: And the house was through with escrow when he came home, and we just moved to Jackson, but we had not left the ministry in Mendenhall. We traveled back to Mendenhall for another year, but on weekends we’d come up here to our second home, we called it, getting out of all of the pressure. And we stayed there. Weekend we’d come, but we had to go back down there for church because he was the preacher. (laughter) And we would leave there Friday. It was a big (inaudible).

White: I’m sure it was. And at some point y’all decided to turn over the Mendenhall portion of it to the new minister.

Perkins: Dolphus Weary.

White: Reverend Dolphus Weary.

Perkins: And Artice Fletcher(?).

White: And Artice Fletcher, Reverend Artice Fletcher. And at that point it became Mendenhall Ministries down there.

Perkins: Yes. After a year or so.

White: And you moved Voice of Calvary Ministries—and I use that ministry in plural as you do—to Jackson.

Perkins: Here, to Jackson, and we bought a house over on St. Charles Street. And that's where it all began.

White: What did you start here in Jackson? I know that somewhere in between here now, also around 1984, is when Reverend Perkins went back out and founded the Haramba(?) Christian Family Center in California that we had talked about earlier, and made his trip to Africa. And I know he was probably doing a lot traveling. Were you doing much traveling during those years, too?

Perkins: I was doing some, but I had to stay home. Our children were still at home.

White: You had a few children in school by that point, too, didn't you?

Perkins: Yes. I had eight children in school at one time. When Spencer graduated from college, he graduated from Belhaven. When he graduated from college, Betty was first grade.

White: Oh, me. (laughter) You did have them sort of spread out there, didn't you?

Perkins: Uh-huh, yeah.

White: And basically the ministries in Jackson, is it centered around West Jackson, around this area where you live now?

Perkins: Exactly, you exactly right. We call ourselves working in a target area, and this definitely has been our target area. We put most of our time and resources here.

White: Well, I know you not only live here, and you have the Perkins Center next door on Robinson Street; farther out on Robinson, you also have several other facilities, a campus as it were, out that way, don't you? Isn't there another building farther out the street?

Perkins: Everything inside the white fence is Perkins Center.

White: This fence right here. OK. But I thought there was still a Voice of Calvary—

Perkins: Oh, I know what you talking about. Voice of Calvary Ministries, we're different from Voice of Calvary Ministries.

White: All right. What are you now?

Perkins: We are the John Perkins Foundation.

White: OK. At a certain point—we have not discussed this—Voice of Calvary Ministries was taken over by your son. Is that right?

Perkins: Yes, at that time, 198[2].

White: Right, 1982, and that's when you and Reverend Perkins went back out to Pasadena and founded the other center.

Perkins: Right.

White: OK. Tell us a little bit about that move then. Your son, Reverend Spencer, stayed here with Voice of Calvary Ministries.

Perkins: Right.

White: And that center of that operations is farther on out Robinson Street, now.

Perkins: Yeah. And there is a young man who named Liam Tucker(?) really took on the ministry here. Spencer was something like the assistant. He really led the ministry, and Spencer was something like the assistant. Spencer teamed up with a young man named Chris Ride(?).

White: All right. And you and Reverend Perkins, I know we got to finish up here in about three or four minutes, but you and Reverend Perkins then went back out to Pasadena. So you did—

Perkins: We moved to Pasadena in 1982.

White: You did get to move back to California at some point. The Lord let you move back out there for a while.

Perkins: Sure did. Sure did. And we stayed twelve, thirteen years.

White: Thirteen years.

Perkins: Uh-huh.

White: And then at what point did you come back to the house here and the Perkins Center in Jackson?

Perkins: We moved back to Mississippi in 1996. We left California in [19]95. We stayed a year in Dallas because we didn't want to get too close to Spencer and Chris. (laughter) We didn't want to be too close to Derrick and Rudy(?), so we stayed in Dallas for a year to be with Philip. He was living in Dallas then. We had an apartment to be with our two grandsons out there for a year. They need to gotten to know us a little better.

White: So basically then the Perkins Center is now home base.

Perkins: It's home base.

White: Right here on Robinson in Jackson.

Perkins: It will be here. When I move again, I'm moving on up. (laughter)

White: When you move on up, huh?

Perkins: Moving on up.

White: Well, do you still consider Simpson County home?

Perkins: Simpson County will always be home. All my folks are buried down there, my mother, my daddy buried (inaudible), which that probably (inaudible) my grandmother and all of the Williams, my mother's folks, down there, my church, Oak Ridge Baptist Church.

White: You still have a lot of relatives living down that way?

Perkins: Not very many. They all died; most of them dead.

White: A lot of them moved out, and a lot of them moved up. Is that right?

Perkins: Moved up, out and up.

White: Well, I've certainly enjoyed talking with you. Thank you very much.

Perkins: It's been fun. (laughter) You really have jogged my memory. I'm telling you. I need somebody to talk to me and pull it out of me.

White: Well, maybe we can come back and talk about canning vegetables some time.

Perkins: You know, I'm writing this book, and I can never think about all this, think about some things I need to put in there. Y'all are good interviewers. (laughter)

White: Thank you very much.

Perkins: You welcome.

(end of interview)