

Recollections of an Old Scrubwoman

Interviews with Bernice Higgs by Larry Redmond (LCR)

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LCR: Tell me – let's start off with when you were born, and what you can remember about ...

Ms. Higgs: When I was born? Born in Greenville, Mississippi. My grandparents, my grandfather – they lived in Benoit, Mississippi. We had a lot of people who lived in - have you ever heard of a place, Mound Bayou?

LCR: Only from you.

Ms. Higgs: Well, that's a whole black town. We had a lot of relatives there, not just one, but my mother's first cousin died there last year, so there's just one in-law there now. But then I came to, we came to Benoit, and my father and my mother went to Little Rock, because my father, Walter Minnis, could not stand working on the plantation, so he took his family and went to Little Rock, Arkansas.

LCR: When was this, do you know?

Ms. Higgs: It must have been – I was born in 1904, and that must have happened about 1909.

LCR: Do you have any recollections of that time and the trip, how did you –

Ms. Higgs: How did we get there? Yes, indeed, because we had to go by boat. We had to cross the river. You had to go down to the river –

LCR: By boat?

Ms. Higgs: We had to cross the river. We had to go down to the river –

Child's voice: Daddy, what time is it?

LCR: It's 10 minutes to 5.

Ms. Higgs: Then we got – oh, I shall never forget how we had to cross that river, on that boat. I don't know how long it took us to get across, but I know we got across. And people had boarding houses then, and my father met us there. He was going to get there - he wasn't there. We spent the night and he came the next day. Because you couldn't just get the bus, you know. It depends on how the roads were.

LCR: What kind of boat was it? Was it a steamboat, like a regular Mississippi steamboat, with paddles on the back?

Ms. Higgs: Yes, a Mississippi river boat, the kind where they blow the whistle. It was a steamboat. And that's the kind it was.

LCR: What season was it? Was it cold?

Ms. Higgs: Yes, it was. It had to be in the early, before Christmas, in September or October, because it was cool, it wasn't downright cold but it wasn't summer, it had to be in the fall. So we stayed there and my father came.

LCR: Wait a minute. I thought he was with you on the boat.

Ms. Higgs: No, he had gone before to get a job and a place to live. Because he left there, because he was determined he wasn't going to stay on the plantation.

LCR: How long after he left did you come? What was the interval?

Ms. Higgs: Oh, Larry, at that age –

LCR: I know, I'm just curious.

Ms. Higgs: It might have been a month, or a couple of months. Anyway, it was long enough for him to have gotten this job in a sawmill, and gotten a house, and gotten some furniture. And I shall never forget, it was a big five-room house, and we didn't have enough furniture to put in all those rooms. But he had gotten there. And when we got off the boat, we stayed at this lady's, this rooming house. And she always – people used to always think I was a smart little girl. And she liked me, and she had to go around the house, to these rooms, lighting the lamps, and I guess checking the fires, because we had no heat. And she gave me this bag, I shall never forget, of peanut brittle candy. And honey, that was more candy than I had ever had.

LCR: In your whole life!

Ms. Higgs: Yes, which I guess turned out to be a good thing, because to this day I still have all my own teeth, so it was a blessing in disguise. So I went around with her, and we came back to our room, where my Mama and brother and sister were, and the next day my father came.

LCR: How many of you were there?

Ms. Higgs: Samuel – he was next to me, he was two years younger than I was, then Sister, and then my –

LCR: Was she older or –

Ms. Higgs: She's younger. I'm the oldest one.

LCR: She's below Samuel.

Ms. Higgs: Yes.

LCR: And her name was –

Ms. Higgs: Vioska.

LCR: And you called her Sister.

Ms. Higgs: And that girl that was here today, Samuel, that's his granddaughter. Doris. That's my brother's granddaughter. Doris Minnis.

LCR: I see.

Ms. Higgs: Doris Minnis.

LCR: There's you, Samuel, Sister –

Ms. Higgs: And now that I know, Mama was pregnant, and Walter was born after Papa died. And his name was Walter Minnis, and that was my father's name, Walter Minnis.

LCR: So she named this child after Walter. So that means he must have died just after you got to Little Rock.

Ms. Higgs: He did. Now that I go back and think about it, he didn't live very long.

LCR: How old was he, do you know?

Ms. Higgs: He was older than my mother, I don't know, looking back on it now, they considered people "old" – I guess he might have been a man in his '50s. He was older than Mama. Then we stayed, my mother's sister came over after Papa died, Jessie, to be with Mama until the baby was born. And of course she tried to get Mama to stay, because Papa had started buying this house –

LCR: How did he die, do you know?

Ms. Higgs: He wasn't sick a long time, at least he wasn't in bed and off of work. He must have had some kind of respiratory, or he might have died of a heart attack. I can't recall. But anyway, he wasn't sick and lingering for a long time.

LCR: And then Aunt Jessie came. She came from –

Ms. Higgs: She came from Benoit to be with Mama. She tried to get Mama to stay, but Mama wouldn't stay, after the baby was born, there was nothing but for to come back to Benoit.

LCR: I wonder why she did that?

Ms. Higgs: I never did like – she always used to say, I used to say, “When are we leaving this place?” You see, when I started to school, I went to a Catholic school, because the school that we had – we were on the outskirts of town, and they had a school out there, but Papa thought it wasn’t good enough for me, so the people that lived across the – they weren’t called highways then, they were called pikes, and there was a gravel highway all the way into town, just a gravel road, but it was the main thoroughfare, like the Edens. The pike, that was the main road that went from here to yonder.

LCR: Wide enough for two wagons.

Ms. Higgs: Oh, yes. Sometimes you had to get out and hold the horses. So I went to school there, with the Harrises. They had a grocery store, they lived across the street. And they had a little girl, and I went to school with her in Little Rock.

LCR: Black girl?

Ms. Higgs: Mm-hmm. We stayed all week at the school, and they came and got us on Friday afternoon. That was my first encounter with the Catholic, with sisters. I had never seen them before, naturally these sisters with these long regalia that they wore.

Of course, after my father died, we came back. We had to leave there. And I didn’t go to school – in Mississippi we only had school for three months because you had to be out in the fields. You had to chop and pick, when it was too bad to do that, they had school, but that was in the wintertime when the children went to school. All the summer when we were chopping and picking, until the fall, there was no school, not for us. And they didn’t have schoolhouses anyway, they held school in the church. And it had just been – well, in the ‘60s, that they built a school in Benoit. But they had a white school, right on that same street that my father, my grandfather’s house was. They had to move that house to build that white school, they had to move it to where it is now, to build that white school. But naturally, no black children went to that school. Now it was standing there right in the middle of all the blacks.

And my great-grandmother, who had been a slave, was in Memphis with her daughter, who was my great-aunt. That’s now I got to Memphis. My mother - they were crazy about their grandmother. She was blind, and she smoked a pipe, these carved clay pipes.

LCR: You were sent to Memphis to live with your mother’s grandmother.

Ms. Higgs: With her great-aunt, yes. And that’s how I got to go to school. I was nine then. She would tell me about – [Interruption]

Back to my father. I always say if my father had lived, I would really have been – had some education. I loved him. And I can remember, in Little Rock, there are pine trees - have you ever been where pine trees grow, and all the needles, and you can just smell the pine, and it’s not swampy, you don’t get bogged down in wet leaves, it’s dry and there are pine needles, and as kids we used to take the pine needles and pull them

together and make beds, and play. And I remember my father with Samuel on one side and I had his other hand, just going through the woods from one neighbor's to another, and he could sing, and we'd be skipping and he'd have us by the hand, and I loved my father. I always said the two men who were kind to me and loved me, they died. That was my father, and my father-in-law, Aunt Vivian's father. He knew his son. He knew what was but he was always good to me and kind to me and I loved him. But I could always remember my father singing and reading the Scripture to me. I shall never forget how he could read the Scripture. And he always had prayer. And the devil - Papa would be kneeling down by the bed and be praying, and he would pray these long prayers. And you were supposed to have your eyes closed, and Samuel and I would be looking at him and wishing he would soon get finished. Especially at the breakfast table, we wanted him to finish so we could eat. Papa would be saying these prayers - that would be just the devotion, and he would always read the Scripture. Now I know what he was reading. He was reading in Deuteronomy and in Proverbs. My son, and children obey you parents for this is right - he would read that to us. And I will always remember that as long as I live, I have that pleasant memory.

Even after I came to Memphis and lived with my great-grandmother. She was blind.

LCR: Was it glaucoma, or do you know?

Ms. Higgs: Well, who knows. Nobody knows. You certainly had no doctors, one doctor for the entire plantation, so you didn't know what you had, you'd just be blind in old age. She was going blind. She wasn't blind when I was born. Now I understand. She was going blind, and she wanted to - I was her second great-grandchild. My mother's older sister, Little George was her first one, he was named for his father - they called him Little George, his name was George Jr. And Mama said they were walking down the road, and grandmother wanted to carry me, and Mama said, you can't carry her, because you might drop her. And she said, I won't drop her, so they let her carry me. And she was going along, and you know, you lose your field vision before you lose your central vision with glaucoma, and she was going down the road, and all at once she hit one of them clods and she stumbled and went down, and Mama was grabbing me, and she said, I didn't let her hit the ground! I didn't let her hit the ground! And they always teased her about that.

And she smoked that pipe and had that tobacco and pushed it down there, and it had a cane stem. You could usually go out in the woods - you can't go out in the woods and get them now, and somehow they pushed holes in them and let them dry, and made whistles and things, because you were so close to the woods, you could get a lot of things. They sold them in stores too, of course.

Mama - she got some sparks on my apron, and she'd say, watch your grandma so she won't catch fire.

It was a blessing in disguise, that I got to come to Memphis and go to school.

And she would sit there - now I understand, being blind myself. You sit and you reminisce a lot, and you think of things, and you see, she was born - we didn't get

freedom until 1864, so therefore ... my mother was born in 1882, so she wasn't too far from slavery herself. Grandma would always say that they had a kind master, because they didn't separate she and her husband. Because they used to separate them and send you to one place and the children to another place and you would never see them again. But she said he didn't separate them. His name was Alfred. They were able to stay together, for which she was always grateful.

Honey, as late as, I am sure, well, it had to be in the '50s, they still had those houses, what they called the Quarters, and they were just the slave quarters, there in Benoit, with a log cabin, with no - by that time they had put in board floors, but then they had just the ground, just dirt, and Grandma used to tell me they had sagebush (I don't know what sagebush is), and it grew and put it together somehow when it dried, and that's what they would sweep the floor with. That was your broom. And their master treated them very well. But there was some that brought the foods from the big house, and they had troughs, like for the pigs, and they would just pour the food in the trough and they would gather around there and eat. But theirs didn't do them that way, and she was always glad for that, and they didn't get many beatings, because some of them would beat them so. They were always naturally glad when they were freed, but it didn't make too much difference, because they didn't give them anything, and they still had to be dependent on them because they had nothing. They were supposed to get 40 acres and a mule. That was what they were promised. And some few got it. Mama and then probably know others, but I only knew one, that was the Sykses, and they had their 40 acres, or they had some land, their parents had and it was handed down to them. But my grandfather bought his.

LCR: Was that your grandfather or your great-grandfather?

Ms. Higgs: My grandfather. I didn't know my great-grandfather. He died. He didn't get anything. Grandma and her husband got nothing.

My mother's mother, who was named Cynthia, she had a son named Simeon. My great-grandmother's name was Kate, and his name was Alfred. Of course, the Hendersons, they gave them the name Henderson because that was who had them.

LCR: That was the slave owners' name. I wonder if she ever knew her African name. But that would be too recently. She probably never had an African name.

Ms. Higgs: No.

My mother's mother died when my mother was born, she died in childbirth. So Mama never did know her. And her father, my grandfather, never married again. He raised those three girls with the help of my great-grandmother.

LCR: So your mother had two sisters.

Ms. Higgs: Yes, Jessie and Madi. My mother was the baby, Madi was the oldest and Jessie was the next one. My children know them, your Mama knows them.

LCR: Which was the one you called Aunt Babe?

Ms. Higgs: She's the one that's dead, Madi.

LCR: Why did you call her Aunt Babe? Because your mother was the baby.

Ms. Higgs: I don't know. They called her Baby when we came along. And her grandchildren live here.

LCR: Oh, is that right?

Ms. Higgs: She has a grandson here.

LCR: I guess all of those would have been Hendersons too, right?

Ms. Higgs: No, she was a King. She married George King.

LCR: Your grandmother was a King, because she married George King –

Ms. Higgs: No, no, my grandmother was a Robinson. She married Oscar Robertson. Aunt Babe was a King.

LCR: But she was originally a Robinson.

Ms. Higgs: Yeah, she was originally a Robinson. The Robinson girls were Jessie, Alberta and Madi. Not in that order – Madi, Jessie and Alberta, in that order. And then after my grandfather married again, he had another daughter.

LCR: This is Mr. Robinson.

Ms. Higgs: Oscar Robinson. You know, Larry, they came from, they must have come from the western. They tell me there was a fellow who studies anthropology, and he wrote this book. And you know who Margaret Mead is? He and the guy who wrote, you know, the guy who wrote this book that I couldn't stand because he wrote such –

LCR: Yeah, Baldwin, they wrote a book together.

Ms. Higgs: But anyway, according to the features of my grandfather and his brothers, they must have come from one part of Africa that had – now these men were tall men, and they had these high cheekbones, and thin lips, and a ridge – but they were black, see, they were black men.

LCR: Sound like Watusis.

Ms. Higgs: No, they weren't Watusis. I don't think, from what I hear, I don't know. But anyway, they were tall and thin-lipped, and they were all black. My uncle, I wish I had to show you, his brother, my grandfather's brother, but I gave it to Willa, because it was Willa's,

and my cousin Roxie – Roxie is the oldest person on our side of the family. And Roxie and Mama were first cousins. They were brother and sister's children.

Marie: Was Aunt Carrie, did she have the same grandmother and –

Ms. Higgs: Mmhmm, no, Aunt Babe and Aunt Jessie and Mama were the three whole sisters by Pa's first wife, Cynthia. They he married again, and he married this, that lady was named Carrie, and so little Carrie is named for her.

LCR: Was that her daughter?

Ms. Higgs: Uh-huh. My grandfather's daughter. My mother had been dead. And her mother died also. And my grandfather married again. He was the marrying kind ...

LCR: I guess!

Ms. Higgs: He married Miss Kate, so he was married three times. But he didn't marry anybody, he never had a stepmother with his girls. Never did. He waited until they were up and out before he married.

LCR: He raised them, and then he married.

Ms. Higgs: And had Little Carrie. Then he married Miss Kate, for companionship, you know, and then she died. And after then, you see, he would have married again, after she died. If it hadn't been for Mama. I think they should have let him go and marry.

LCR: They didn't approve of him marrying again?

Ms. Higgs: No. But he needed some companionship, and – don't you think?

LCR: Why, certainly. Except maybe by then they got to thinking that their Daddy was bad luck for women.

Ms. Higgs: (Laughs) Those women took the chance, so that's what they should have thought!

LCR: Everybody who married him died!

Ms. Higgs: I know, but I think all they thought about was that house. And they thought that this woman that he was going to marry –

LCR: - was going to get that house.

Ms. Higgs: - had some children, and I think that's all they were thinking about.

LCR: Interesting.

Ms. Higgs: So then, they would be at home with their husbands, and he'd be there in the night, and somebody could have been there and –

LCR: - look after him.

Ms. Higgs: Get in and drink the water and see how it feel, you know?

Anyway, now they left, now the place is – I remember my sister, when Mama died, she did nothing about it, so they fussed and fell out about it, and nobody had the will, and she said Aunt Babe had the deed, and all of that, and that my sister, she didn't do anything about it, and I told her, let me know if you have the, I just wanted to know if my name was on the deed, and I will sent you the money to pay the taxes, because I would send Mama the money to pay the taxes, but she never would, she'd never tell, so I just said, forget it. So Bernice and Marie said, Mother, don't worry about it, worry about something that, you can't miss something that you never had.

LCR: Yeah, that's true. How much land did he have with that house?

Ms. Higgs: Well, he didn't have that much, about a half acre then. It had been going on, cut down and cut down.

And the same thing about Roxie, she said she'd consider it, and so she must have had 25-30 acres, so she sold hers, and she left her brother –

(Pause)

Ms. Higgs: Larry, how do you ... ?

LCR: Don't even worry about it, that's just the way you sound.

Ms. Higgs: (Laughs) Oh, dear. I sound so dumb!

LCR: Don't worry about it. So anyway, Aunt Roxie, now. Where did she fit into all of this? Whose baby is she?

Ms. Higgs: Oh, well, she and my mother are brothers and sisters' children, that's all. She's a lot of things. Oscar Robinson –

LCR: - had the brother or sister.

Ms. Higgs: Charlotte, I mean Mary Jane, was Roxie's mother. And you know, Mound Bayou – of course that down is, these days, I understand that lease is going to run out about 1990. They had a – some person bought that land, that whole town, and the way it was supposed to be, couldn't no whites go in there and buy or own that. It had to be for Negroes only.

LCR: How did that come to pass? What was –

Ms. Higgs: Someday when I find this, I'll have to find it and show it, and let you read it. But of course what they had done, they had stranded them there, right enough. At first they

wouldn't even put the electricity over there. They put the pole on one side of the road and wouldn't even string the wire across the road to Mound Bayou. They build a hospital there, nice hospital. Rebecca, her uncle was a contractor, and they went in and built that hospital down there, it has been the sisters or something, to give the people some medical facilities, because otherwise they'd have to go all the way to Cleveland, that's the nearest town, and naturally there were all white doctors there, and do you know that hospital is closed almost? A lot of things they did, they cut them off from, because, well after all, you can – who owns all the facilities? You know, the pump and the electricity – the town does. But anyway they said that what they were trying to do was to go down and buy up this land. Since you don't listen to the radio, you don't listen to – they had a whole meeting out here at St. Mark last month, trying to inform the people, and there were people down at the church who still belong, neighbor Nash and others, they still own land in Georgia and Alabama, you see, a lot of people are going back down there, and that land, they said how many million acres that have been bought that we have lost. You can't afford to buy it anymore, the whites have bought it up, and we can't just – we can't get it. And we sold it for little or nothing. Now you take that land that Roxie had. She might have sold it for a thousand dollars an acre or something. But she did sell it to a black.

All right. Right here. Joanne Cole, sister-in-law, she's got 190 acres of land that she will not sell, and her children are trying to blackjack her into selling it, and she won't sell it, and Joanne say she doesn't see why she doesn't sell it, and of course the children don't want to live there. And I said, Joanne, I said, 190 acres?

LCR: Folks is fools sometimes!

Ms. Higgs: Aren't they?

LCR: We don't want it! Land down there – we aren't going to do anything with it?

Ms. Higgs: And they're going to sell it to the white folks.

LCR: For little or nothing.

Ms. Higgs: Yes! And they might give them a good price, but that's beside the point.

LCR: It'll still be little or nothing compared to what it'll probably be worth.

Ms. Higgs: Of course! But the thing is, owning some land. But then what do they do, then they sell that land and move into a city, like Chicago or New York or Detroit and all these places.

LCR: And spend the money on a car.

Ms. Higgs: And there's nothing here for them. So anyway, that's what Mound Bayou has come to now. Her sister-in-law is here. Now that land that's down there, she has a boarder here, over on the west side, Julia, she has got nine children. All of her children are some kind of professional, doctor or whatever. They wouldn't even look at Mound Bayou, and their mother could sell that land tomorrow for fifteen cents for all they care.

And so I asked Roxie last week, I said, is Ida going back? She said, well, she just got out of the hospital and she doesn't know, but Julia said she just assumed, because she's not going down there, that none of her children are going down there. It seems a shame.

LCR: Yes, it does.

Ms. Higgs: That you have a nice – the houses are nice, because they have gas and everything, water, everything that Mound Bayou can give them, because they're not just left there with any kind of work, naturally they – but as soon as this lease runs out ...

LCR: Yes, you're gonna to see some stuff.

Ms. Higgs: That's right. Let's see if these whites gonna bring stuff in there, just watch them, because it's more – they just gonna do it. They want to do it. It's too bad that she just don't sit right there, and Julia wouldn't have sense enough to pay the taxes and rent it to someone, because they have had lots of, before her brother died, and she had it renovated and everything, because there's a nice bathroom and everything. But that's—

LCR: That's another story, I guess.

Ms. Higgs: Yes, indeed. Another story, honey. It's too bad, too, that these children – but I guess they aren't as interested in buying as they are out here. I don't think it's too far from here, but they'd rather stay here.

LCR: Well, there's work here, anyway. At least there used to be some work here.

Ms. Higgs: Yes, I suppose, it's just like – nothing is as it used to be. You go down there, and you can look for miles and miles, you see these rows and rows and acres and acres of cotton, and people in the field with these cotton sacks. And cotton gins – they are no more.

LCR: That's right, out with the dinosaur.

Ms. Higgs: Cotton pickers took over. Cotton choppers. I asked someone if there are still a gin anymore, and she said she thought yes, there was a gin that was right around down in Gibson, not on the plantation any more.

LCR: Gibson, was that the name of the plantation?

Ms. Higgs: Uh-huh.

Gibson Plantation. It's an operation they called Gibson. Plantation. Sharecroppers. You worked – I don't know how you could share, I wonder?

LCR: I think the system was, that you were supposed to share in the profits at the end of the year.

Ms. Higgs: I'm laughing because it's so ironic, because they didn't.

LCR: Absolutely not!

Ms. Higgs: You see, you worked all the year, and they had a book, and you'd go there, see they got you there, going or coming. If you had enough to own your own self, and have to go there and take up stuff, you see, get stuff on credit, that will stop you from owning something at the end of the year, they're going to put something there anyway, because – see, Papa would – we had a cow. I shall never, Old Mary, that was her name. We had a cow, and we had hogs, and that house was near a lake, and then we had geese, because geese have to have water. And we had chickens, and hogs, and geese, and guineas. Everybody had guineas. Because guineas are like – have you ever seen a guinea?

LCR: I don't think I have.

Ms. Higgs: Well, guineas are kind of grey speckled –

LCR: Yes, I have. They're like little chickens, not as big as a chicken, are they?

Ms. Higgs: Oh, they're bigger. And they have a little topknot, something like a rooster. But everybody used to have a guinea, because guineas, next to dogs, they're good watchdogs. And everybody had hen houses, and minks were, they'd come at night to the hen house.

LCR: Wild mink.

Ms. Higgs: Uh-huh. Coming in the hen house to steal your chickens. And so whenever you'd hear a guinea, you knew it was a mink or something, was out there that wasn't supposed to be there. And naturally everyone in those days hunted, and they kept shotguns, just sitting in the corner. That's one of the pride of the house, shotguns, Winchesters, because everybody hunted. You just grabbed the shotgun to go see what was going on. With a lantern.

But that's what we had. Cows – we had milk, and butter, and eggs, and that kind of food was not – we were used to that kind of food. My father was – and you shelled the corn, and took it to the mill and ground it. And sorghum grew, and they raised sorghum and sugar cane, and then the men knew how to cook syrup.

LCR: They boiled it down.

Ms. Higgs: Yes, they knew how to do that. And they'd kill the hogs, and everybody, three or four families had a smokehouse but they came together. So and so, they said, they got the smokehouse, and certain wood, you see, oak would make the best wood to smoke meat. By the time they killed the hog and salted it down and then whatever process you had to go through with before you hung it up in the top to smoke, then they'd build a fire, and I don't know how long it took to smoke, but they smoked it. Then you

smoked hams, and Papa, that's what he did. We had milk, and butter, and eggs, and that's a pretty good diet, you know? And raised a garden.

LCR: That's everything you need right there.

Ms. Higgs: You see, he didn't owe so much, and then he wouldn't owe anything, and the cotton that he grew, however many bales he made, where you got so many bales, and so much for the seed money, they wouldn't charge him so much. You paid for everything out of your pocket, you see. Nothing came out of the Mr. Charlie's part. But Papa, evidently, they took too much out of what he was supposed to – and you couldn't, whatever they said you owed, you didn't question that, that was on the books. You didn't get no receipt for when you went there, or what you spent. If you went and got a bucket of lard (Mama used to make lard, when they killed the hog they rendered that fat, and it would be just as nice and white as that you bought out the store) but if you didn't do it, and a lot of people didn't do it, whatever you had, if you had to go and get rice, or whatever, the stuff you bought in the store, they wrote it in the book, but you didn't get no receipt for what you got. That just wasn't the way to do it. And you don't know what they wrote on the book. But at the end of the year, when everybody went up, and it was settling day, and they'd go and see what Mr. Charlie, how he had added up the books, and what you were to balance or what you cleared. And if the people cleared \$100 or \$200, you were rich, you know? After how many, families, worked all the year. And my father couldn't stand it. He couldn't take it. And then people cooked. \$10 a month was what you got for cooking. That's \$120 a year. A year! I worked for \$3. \$3 a week. That was big, because I was getting \$2.50.

LCR: Of course, it bought a lot more back then, too.

Ms. Higgs: Yeah, but still, honey, compared with what they were getting, they were getting more than you were, doing the same thing.

LCR: Absolutely.

Ms. Higgs: And with the taxes and all, but you could take a quarter, and that's what they figured, that you were saving nothing, having nothing, just to get by on. You'd take a quarter back, a nickel's worth of neck bones, and a nickel's worth of meal, you could get by. But those were the way things were, and you know, we haven't gotten too far from that now.

LCR: That's about the truth.

Ms. Higgs: If you examine it, and take it as a whole, I don't know if it was Thomas Todd, or who was it said that, we haven't gotten too far from that now. He said – you've heard of him, haven't you? Thomas Todd, he's a lawyer?

LCR: You've mentioned him to me.

Ms. Higgs: Yes, he's supposed to be very good. And he said come to America and to North Carolina, and they have some farmers down there right now, they in the throes of

trying to survive, and these white folks want to take that land from them. They're really struggling trying to get federal money that's supposed to go equally to farmers – they didn't say what color the farmers, they just said farmers, but anyway, Thomas Todd was saying, yes, a lot of you are – to a bunch of young people – you know, you don't know about it, and some of your folks don't even want to hear about it, but you need to know where you came from, to know where you're going. Or you'll find yourself back where you were. And don't be ashamed to say where you came from. Because that doesn't matter, it all depends on what you are now, what are you doing now.

As Reverend Johnson said – Reverend Johnson is 83, and his mother died and left him and his sister and his Aunt Bea raised, and he said, we had a hard time. Aunt Bea – we had chicken feet stew. And we had the chicken feet, and I went to this market, and in those days they'd just cut the chicken feet off and throw them away, and they did, I can remember that! And he said, the butcher gave them to me, and I brought it and Aunt Bea would pour that hot water on them, and clean them, he used to laugh, that school teachers and all kind of uppity niggers belong to St. John's. Try to forget where they came from. They didn't want to hear about it. He said, you get tired of hearing about Aunt Bea, don't you? Well, I'm going to tell you anyway. I said, sell, Brother!

LCR: Say on! (Laughs)

Ms. Higgs: Well, I have rambled enough now. If you want something specific; but I'm just rambling.

LCR: That's good.

Ms. Higgs: I forgot about that. I really forgot! (Laughs)

LCR: That's good, that's what I wanted you to do.

I take it – now, when you were talking about settling day, this must have been before you moved to Little Rock.

Ms. Higgs: Correct.

LCR: Because you were talking about your father.

Ms. Higgs: Oh, yes, he didn't go back to that stuff.

LCR: So you went to Memphis at the age of nine, to live with your grandmother.

Ms. Higgs: Yes, my great-grandmother lived with her daughter. Irene Moore.

LCR: And that was your great-aunt. How long did you stay there?

Ms. Higgs: Until I married, honey.

LCR: Is that right?

Ms. Higgs: Yep.

LCR: Where did I get the idea that you went back and forth from Memphis to Benoit?

Ms. Higgs: I did. I went back in the summertime, and at Christmas time I'd go back down there, to see my mother and my sisters and brothers.

LCR: How did it happen that you got to be sent to Memphis, and not Sammy and –

Ms. Higgs: I was the oldest girl, you know.

LCR: But you had a sister.

Ms. Higgs: She was younger, she was younger than Sammy.

LCR: But still, I mean – did you ask to go there?

Ms. Higgs: I didn't want to stay after I came from Little Rock.

LCR: I see. You wanted to go to school.

Ms. Higgs: Yes. I wanted to go to school.

LCR: I remember from some of the other talks that we've had, you were talking about books that you had that you were trying to read, and somebody was getting rid of these books.

Ms. Higgs: Yes, my aunt did, in those days –

LCR: Was that in Memphis?

Ms. Higgs: Yeah. And she, in those days women didn't work out, because it just wasn't the thing for women to go outside the house and work out as they do now. Men were supposed to take care of women, and that's what men were supposed to do. Not like this age, now, men don't take care of them, this is a different generation altogether. But anyway –

LCR: All things will pass!

Ms. Higgs: (Laughs) But anyway, women stayed home, and they didn't go out to work, and if you did any work at all, you took in laundry. You washed for white folks.

LCR: What was her name again? Irene?

Ms. Higgs: Irene. Moore. And everybody called her Irena. Grandma was her mother. And my mother's grandmother. And my great-grandmother. Grandma was staying with her daughter.

LCR: You say Grandma, but you mean, she is in fact your great-grandmother.

Ms. Higgs: Yeah.

LCR: I'm just trying to get this on the record, because when I come back to this stuff, I've got to be able to figure out who these people are.

Ms. Higgs: Yeah, Kate Henderson is my great-grandmother, and then Cynthia Robinson is my grandmother. And Oscar Robinson is my grandfather, which is her husband. Alfred Henderson is my great-grandfather, who is Kate Henderson's husband.

LCR: Before I leave this, how long did your great-grandmother live while you were there?

Ms. Higgs: Let me see. I guess she must have lived about four years.

LCR: After you came to Memphis. What did she look like?

Ms. Higgs: She was a black woman, when I say black I'm not talking about what y'all are talking about – like me. And she had long hair, it come down to about here.

LCR: To her shoulders. Did she straighten it?

Ms. Higgs: No. It was long and white. And we always would comb it, she'd let us comb it, and she always kept it tied up, kept her head rag on. People used to be always talking about head rag Mama, she always kept something on it, kept it tied on it. I guess to keep it from getting – I don't know why she did, but she always did. But I used to comb it for her. She could comb it herself, but I always just liked to comb it, and I would plait it in three plaits, you know, two on the side and one on the top.

LCR: Like schoolgirls.

Ms. Higgs: And we would talk. She would – it used to always make me so sad to hear about those things that she would tell me, like eating like slop, and I remember now how sad it used to make me to hear that. Her daughter, she was crazy about her Mama, she was good to her. And they had a chair, that she had cut the top off, and she'd push a slop jar under there, and that's what her Mama used. She knew how to get her out of her bed. I recall the day before she died, it was a nice day, and Mama was washing a quilt that got ragged, and grandma said, Rena, what are you doing? She said, I got the quilt in soap, I'm washing. She said, let me wash it. She said, Mama, you know you can't wash. She said, Oh, yes, I can, and she said, if it's ragged, what you washing it for? She said, well, I'm washing it so I can let it dry so I can use it for padding, so if you get sick I want to have something to put under you so it won't get to the mattress. So Grandma said, no, you don't have to worry about me. I've been all the trouble to you I'm going to be. The Lord is going to take me on, He's not going to let me stay here and be any more bother to anybody. She had a cane, so they all laughed, and Miss Fleming lived next door, so she was there, and she was saying, You gonna be here a long time.

LCR: She'd already been there a long time. How old was she about then?

Ms. Higgs: I guess she must have been about, close to 90. So anyway, she got up and went on back in the room. She and I slept in the same room because they had these big beds. I don't guess you know about big beds with the tall foot and head – do you know? I had a smaller bed in the same room. And that morning, she waked up and was making a sound, and I got up, and my aunt was in the next room, and I called her, and she ran in there and Mama had her propped up in the bed, put all her clothes on, and the doctor was just a block up Polk Street, and she put on her clothes and ran up there, and next door called Miss Fleming, from across the street. It was early in the morning. They came, and by the time Dr. Connor got his clothes on and got down there - he just walked down the street, you know – she was dead. Lord, have mercy. So they had to bathe their Mama, and put that pillow under her head, and I think of her, she just ran out of the house, she was so – so hurt.

We took her back to Benoit, on the train – naturally everybody in Benoit knew Aunt Kate, Aunt Kitty – They bring Aunt Kitty home! And all the people were in Benoit at the station, and the wagon was there to put the body in, take her on down to the church, and then Aunt Bea and all the rest were walking behind the wagon. There were no hearses. I was hurt, that day. But anyway, all the crying, I remember they were all crying, and I felt left out, so I just started screamin' too, at the top of my voice. And it wasn't because I was hurt, either, I was just –

LCR: You were just showing off!

Ms. Higgs: They were crying, and I just thought it was what you were supposed to do. (Laughs)
Yes, indeed, that's been a long time ago, honey.

LCR: You must have been, what, 12, 13 around then?

Ms. Higgs: At that age at that time, you weren't as sophisticated as 12 years old now. Miss Mary used to say, At that age, I didn't know my Mama from my Papa, only one wore a dress and one wore pants. And that is the truth, you know, you just didn't.

LCR: These days, they on the verge of becoming grown, you know.

Ms. Higgs: Take that little child in there. Both of them, Maya and Kristen – they know as much now as I knew then, you know?

LCR: Kate Henderson.

Ms. Higgs: Kate Henderson, yes, indeed.

LCR: You know, there's a guy at work by the name of Jack Henderson, he's about my age. I wonder if he is any relation to those Hendersons.

Ms. Higgs: I don't know, I really – you know, Grandma and them – I don't know where they got them from, but my father, came from Aberdeen, Mississippi. It's an unusual name. You don't hear Minnis much, do you?

LCR: No, I think your family, your side of the family, might be the only Minnises I've ever heard of.

Ms. Higgs: And some of them spell it "Minnice." And some spell it "Minnis." But there's a lot of Minnises. Of course Sammy Jr. has seen them. He has six boys, Doris had four. And then my other brother, Walter Jr., he has – perhaps I don't know whether Walter, because he turned Muslim –

LCR: What he calls himself.

Ms. Higgs: But I think his children, because he and his wife are not together. She's in Memphis. And I understand he's in Texas. He was in California.

LCR: This is a pretty interesting little episode. I guess I didn't really know Kate that well. You've told me a lot about her in the past, but I think this session might be as much her story as anybody else's, because –

Ms. Higgs: She was the one who could go out and get all kinds of roots –

LCR: Oh, yes, you told me that. She was the one that would go out and make little medicine things out of roots and things from the woods.

Ms. Higgs: Yes, roots and boil tea. And she was the one who cured Uncle's pneumonia with cow manure.

LCR: Oh, yea! What was that little concoction she had?

Ms. Higgs: Cow manure!

LCR: Boil it into a tea.

Ms. Higgs: Yes – have you ever seen cow manure?

LCR: Yes, it comes in little pies, like.

Ms. Higgs: Yeah, about this big around. My brothers liked to play with them. They'd pick it up and sail it away.

LCR: I know!

Ms. Higgs: And then hogs' hoof tea. After you take the feet off the pigs. You dried that, and there's something in that hoof that's some kind of medication. When they finally did get a doctor to come, and the doctor told them Uncle had pneumonia, and the crisis would pass in nine days. I don't know, I wasn't even born, but she said that Grandma

came over there and Grandma said, for them to go out there in the pasture and get some of those –

LCR: Cow chips?

Ms. Higgs: And came back, and flour used to come in sacks, and they'd wash the out, and she put that cow manure in that bag and tied it up and poured some hot water over it, and made some tea, and made some hog foot tea, and they had to give Dr. Martin – I shall never forget that name, because there were only two, Dr. Martin and Dr. Williams. Dr. Martin would rarely come to us, he went to the white folks. Dr. Williams told them how much of this medicine, whatever, and drink tea. And they sat there and took turns sitting there giving Uncle this tea, and on the ninth day – and rubbing him with quinine and lard to grease his chest, and put this red flannel on, they knew what to do, and let me tell you, it looked like he was coming back this way after the ninth day, and on the tenth day he was sitting up, asking for a little rice. And I said, which tea do you want? They had them in different pots, you know. They said, Do you like that cow shit tea? (Laughs) He was so shocked, she never let him forget it.

LCR: I know she didn't! Next time he got sick, he'd have died before he had any more of that!

Ms. Higgs: I don't care what they would have given him, he would have sworn they were giving him that cow manure tea. It might have been catnip.

LCR: He would have known, and wouldn't have cared, he wasn't going to take it.

Ms. Higgs: He's just have gone on and died. But you see, Grandma could do all this, there were certain trees, where she'd have to get the roots, and she could make tea and do things, take the leaves and dry them, and make some kind of ointment.

LCR: I wonder where she learned that?

Ms. Higgs: In Africa, honey.

LCR: She wasn't in Africa, was she? It was just passed down.

Ms. Higgs: Yes, but they brought it here. It was passed down from her mother.

LCR: Somebody was passing it down from generation to generation.

Ms. Higgs: It's passed down. Just like I told you about, there are certain traditions that are passed down, and still go down. I told you about opening your pots, did I tell you that?

LCR: No, I don't think so.

Ms. Higgs: Now you know I don't like, I don't care about people moving pots on the stove.

LCR: I know that.

Ms. Higgs: Well, that is a tradition that is passed down from way back in Africa.

LCR: Do you know –

Ms. Higgs: Yes, because they said, the hand is quicker than the eye. See, in Africa, you've heard about them putting spider in the dumplings, you've heard that expression, but they were just certain people, they'd just bleed them, and witchcraft was one of their things, and they did it, they practiced it and they did it. And there are some tribes, they still do it. They could just, if you were cooking, we had a missionary, Miss Watson, to return every year, to make report, from the field, matter of fact I have a book you'll probably find when I die, because I can't see to look for it, of the things that she encountered as a missionary over there, and some of these very things are in there. And that's one thing she said, that they are very particular, very peculiar about the foods they do not bother the pots, that you might be cooking something in. They can do it so quickly. They could have it in their hand and just reach up and put it in, and she said, you could be killed for that. But you see, nothing like that, in a kind of way, it was just passed on and down. Now it bothers me no end for people to come in and open my pots on the stove, because I don't think you going to put nothing in there, but it is just something that's there.

[END]