

Recollections of an Old Scrubwoman

Interviews with Bernice Higgs by Larry Redmond (LCR)

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LCR: This is June 9, 1984.

This is your 80th year, huh?

Ms. Higgs: Yeah! I never thought I'd live to be – I mean, I haven't gotten there yet. I got in the year.

LCR: That's right. You start living in the year before you actually get the birthday for the year.

Ms. Higgs: Yeah, this is June. Heaven on earth, I could be gone before September.

But anyway, I was talking to Arthur about the whole thing, we were talking about the Presidential candidates, you know, because there's a lot of talking about it, since Super Tuesday is over, the last one, and a lot of people have been talking about that.

So I said, Oh, well, since after all, Arthur, we are – what's the President's name?

LCR: Reagan!

Ms. Higgs: [Laughs]

LCR: How soon we forget!

Ms. Higgs: My word! He's still in there.

LCR: He's still in there, doing it!

Ms. Higgs: He's still in there. That's how I can close him off. I can just shut him off, because after all, to me, it's first God and then Reagan, in my mind, so anyway, I said, let me tell you one thing. We are, after all, he was talking about what he's doing about Social Security, and Arthur used to work at the Post Office. And of course he said they got a cost of living raise, in the government, you know, in the Post Office, and he said they didn't get it this year. First time. And of course, we didn't get a cost of living, our cost of living increase of last year, we didn't get it until this year, we didn't get one last year. And then they cut that, we didn't get much.

But anyway, I said, you know, I guess he would do more than that. After all, we are a minority race in this country, because there are more poor white folks than us in here, and there is, you know, and I said, I don't know, notwithstanding you came from Atlanta, you said you didn't live in the country. But honey, there were as many white

people out there, white women out there with them sunbonnets on, chopping that cotton, and picking that cotton with them long sacks, and as many white men out there plowing, plowing them mules up and down them rows, it's like they were us out there. That's just the way it was. I said, they were poor. Now I had the kind of a father, that's why he left there. He left there before, I guess, now when I look back, I must have been about five or six. I was nine when I came to Memphis, and Papa was dead. He died in Little Rock, you know. But he was determined that he was not going to be a sharecropper. When we were there, we had a cow, I shall never forget her name – her name was Mary. [Laughs]

LCR: Mary the cow!

Ms. Higgs: Yes, we had a cow, and to this day I love picket fences, white picket fences, because we had a white picket fence around our house, and we had hogs, and chickens, and guineas, and geese, and I said, there was this old white woman who lived next over, not far from Mama, and it was nothing for her to come over and borrow a cup of sugar or something from Mama. They just did, they were just as poor as we were. My father was just the kind, that he just didn't believe in doing that. We had, he believed in having things, and killing hogs, and raising the garden, you see, that's the kind of man that he was, and what he could not stand was, when – after he did all that, we had our own hogs. Papa could never stand having to go and, you went to the store and bought things, and if you didn't have the money, see, Mr. Charlie had a book, you know, and put your name on the book, you didn't get any receipt. He put down what you were charged for, what you bought and how much it cost. At the end of the year, that's when they settled up. So you didn't have any receipt to prove that something wasn't added to it or whatever. That was what he could not abide. There were so many of them who couldn't read and write, and it wouldn't have meant anything to them anyway, to have given them a receipt, because that was long before, they discouraged, they didn't allow you to have education anyway, and they didn't allow you to have schools, because you went to school when they weren't picking and chopping, you see, in the winter months. That's all the time you had school. When it started time for the spring, all of a sudden when you had to chop and pick that cotton, you were in school.

Anyway, Papa couldn't stand that, so we left there. And then when we came back, I can remember the good things that we had, the garden, turkeys, geese, and ducks, and guineas, and chickens, hogs and the cow. We had milk and butter. That's the things that you had. Milk and butter and meat, and they made sorghum, they made molasses. And Mama put up preserves, because there was a lot of, everybody had peach trees and apple trees. And right now, where my grandfather Alfred ran that place right there where my Mama died, in '67, peach trees and I think apple trees, and then a pecan tree. We went there and Bernice picked up some pecans off the ground, because Mama died, she must have died in February. And always berries, blueberries and blackberries, and what we called huckleberries, people call them blueberries. Blueberries are nothing but cultivated huckleberries, you know. They have the same taste. And everybody had pickled things in jars, quarts and pints. That's the kind of thing that we had. We didn't used to go into the store every time you – we couldn't, because there wasn't but one store, and if you didn't have the money, but Papa always had a little money, and we could go to the little store in town, but after we went to Little Rock, that

was a different story, you see. We lived differently because he, we didn't, we had a garden there, and that house had a picket fence around it. That's where he died, in that house. But people who have never lived in the country don't know about watermelons –

LCR: - and putting them under the bed.

Ms. Higgs: No! And having – and milk, putting milk, to keep from turning, before you could churn it, some had wells. People tried not to have wells, because one or two times kids had fallen down the well, but we had a pump, and anyway they put the milk down in the well to cool. But then my Mama used to take the milk and put it in cool water. And that was before, there was no ice box, there were no ice houses. The only ice house was about, they had those long, I don't know how much those pieces of ice weigh. You wouldn't be able to remember ice men.

LCR: I remember ice men.

They had them in Chicago.

Ms. Higgs: And I can remember, because – but anyway, they packed the ice in sawdust, and you'd go there and get some ice. We didn't have an icebox to put it in, so they put it in tubs and wrapped rags around it, and used to put the milk around that. That's how you kept it cool. And of course that's why people used to, I guess perhaps it's one of the throwbacks, I don't like a lot of leftover food. Because you couldn't leave old food, because especially in the summertime, it was sour. So you'd have to eat what you cooked, because you couldn't keep it, because it'd be spoiled the next day. You had no place to put it.

LCR: That's right.

Ms. Higgs: Since I've been grown, since I've taken nutrition, I have learned that the more heat you put on food, the more nutrients you take out of it. So it's no good anyway, it fills you, but with empty fodder, nothing to it really.

But that's, there's nothing like a good, haven't had an experience of living a farm life. In the country, knowing how things grow and getting eggs out of the nest.

Somebody was telling me the other day that the hens, Rebecca was saying they had some pigeons on the porch there, and she saw these eggs, and she thought it would be a shame to move them, it'd be a crime to take, so she thought, well, maybe she could move it some other place, but by the time she got back to it, something happened, and the pigeon sat on the eggs, and she didn't know how long they had been setting. And by the time she got back around there, she had been setting there long enough for the eggs to be ready to hatch, and she didn't realize that, and here were these two little pigeons coming out of the pigeon eggs.

LCR: Pigeon chicks!

Ms. Higgs: You see, we had these henhouses with these nests in there, boxes with hay in them, and the hens would go in and lay and you'd gather the eggs. And milk – somebody said, this was not too long ago, and the child saw a person milking and she wouldn't drink it.

LCR: Is that right? It didn't come out of a carton, so she wasn't going to touch it.

Ms. Higgs: She didn't! She wouldn't drink anything that came out of that cow. What they had to do – who was it that just told me that? – a couple of weeks ago; they had to go and they went to the store, because they didn't have a carton to put the milk in, so they had to go and keep that carton there to put that milk in.

LCR: And keep putting milk in the same carton, wash the carton, tricked the little girl.

Ms. Higgs: And she wouldn't drink it!

LCR: That's because she knew!

Ms. Higgs: She didn't know!

LCR: Like, real milk comes in cartons! Eggs come in cartons. Butter comes wrapped up in paper in a store.

Ms. Higgs: I wonder what she would have done had she seen butter, and if she had to see a hen laying an egg.

Of course, they have different ways of churning now. We just had one of these tall crock churns, with a dasher in it, which you'd move up and down. You ever see one of those? In an antique place?

LCR: No, I've seen one in the Historical Society. I took the kids there once.

Ms. Higgs: A crock, about this tall? It's round, and it's got a hole in the top, and the dasher is wooden, with a cross bottom at the bottom of the dasher.

LCR: In fact, this woman was sitting there –

Ms. Higgs: How many days I have done that! Stop splashing that milk now ... !!

And the way you can tell if the butter is coming, I said, Mama, the butter is coming! You could see those little flecks of butter on the dasher. And she could look at it and tell if she thought it was enough, because what they would do was take the – see, the cow would give so much milk, say two gallons in the morning and two gallons in the evening, and that'd be four gallons a day.

LCR: That's a lot of milk!

Ms. Higgs: That's a lot of milk. Even with 3 or 4 kids, you can't drink up all that milk, but see, the hogs would get it.

What they would do, she would let it turn, clabbers, and then you'd take the cream off, and put it in with some that has turned, and that'll make more butter, but just the regular clabber, you don't fool with clabber, you just give that with the hogs.

Unless – some people like clabber. I like clabber. Clabber tastes good.

LCR: What does it taste like? Buttermilk?

Ms. Higgs: No – yeah, but it kind of has a little different taste, because all the butter is out of it, you know, but it's good. It's curds but it's something like – well, that's what cottage cheese is, but see, cottage cheese has so much additives to it, there's no relation, you can't tell it tastes anything like plain clabber. No comparison at all. When they skim it, and put the cream in the churn, you could probably get two pounds of butter. And it didn't come up in sticks, either!

LCR: It didn't? You didn't open it up and pick out Jewel's lightly salted?

Ms. Higgs: Have you seen a butter dish? Round, and you had a butter mold, it was wooden. See all things were wooden. I got a wooden potato masher in there. Ever seen a wooden potato masher?

LCR: No!

Ms. Higgs: I got a wooden potato masher in there. And this butter mold, the way you'd do it, you'd scald it, and then you'd put cold water in it, and then you'd put this butter in it, after you picked the butter out, and you'd wash it, to get all the milk out of it, until the water was clear, with cold water. Then you got a butter paddle, like about that wide, something like a spatula, only with a short handle. I had one but I gave it to somebody when I came here. You'd work the butter and get it all washed and clean, till all the milk was out, then you'd put a little salt in it, lightly salt it, and then you'd paddle it into that round butter mold, and the butter mold had a design in the top, like a flower, and it had a little stem, you could push it out and it would come out upside down. That little flower design would be on the top.

LCR: So in the mold itself, the design was on the bottom.

Ms. Higgs: Uh-huh. Then the butter dishes naturally were round, like a –

LCR: Candy bowl or something.

Ms. Higgs: Yes. Round, and it only held a pound of butter. Put it in there and covered it over with a soup plate. It had a top to it, an indentation where the butter fit down in there, and you'd put a top over it, and that was nice and yellow. The color of the butter depended on what the cow ate. You could tell the difference in the color of the butter by what the cow ate. In the wintertime, when there was no green grass, the butter became pale. And what they would do, they would take butter and start in the fall, when the grass is starting to get less, they had some way they would wrap that butter in

cheesecloth, pound by pound, and they had – cheese used to come in wooden, round boxes because the cheese was round, cheddar cheese. Cheese don't even taste the same any more now, and it's not because of what you think, that it don't taste like it did when you were a kid – in the first place, it's not aged as long, and they put additives in it, whatever they do to it, it's definitely not the same. But anyway, always one of these cheese boxes, it was round and wooden and had a top to it, and Mama and Ms. King and Aunt Bee, they wrapped that butter in cheesecloth, I don't know if you can even buy cheesecloth, and put a top on it, and they would keep it in the kitchen, as long as it was cool. What they were saving it for was Christmas, to cook them cakes with, because they wanted the cakes to be yellow.

LCR: They didn't want to cook Christmas cakes with pale butter.

Ms. Higgs: No, honey, because that was one of their delightful, one of their pride and joys, cooking Christmas cake, jelly cake, and coconut, and chocolate, and pound cakes, and what they called a fruit cake, I don't know if they were like fruit cakes that people make now, and pies, sweet potato pies. I didn't know until I was – until I started working out – that sweet potato pies were not supposed to be stacked on top of one another. That's the way it's supposed to be. The reason they were stacked on top of one another was, they didn't have no plates, with all those individual pies on. It was like a safe. What they did, they'd have about four pies stacked on top of one another. And when you got a slice of pie, you got four slices.

LCR: Like a slice of cake.

Ms. Higgs: Yes! [Laughs]

And whenever you went to a person's house, she took pride in opening her safe door. Did you see Madi's safe? Did you see what Alberta had? They saw Ms. King, and so and so, and Margaret King, they'd be talking about your Aunt Vivian's mother-in-law, and Luvinia, and Ms. Lockhart, all them old souls have gone, those old people around there, living in what they called the Quarters, and they called it the Quarters because it used to be the slave quarters, where the slaves lived. They had some something to them. There were very few, about two of the original slave huts, cabins. But they were still saying the Quarters. The cabins were made out of logs. They were just log cabins. Because they had no sawmill to get lumber. They were just logs.

LCR: Tree trunks.

Ms. Higgs: Yes. And they cut certain size trees and put them together, and they didn't have wooden floors, they had dirt floors.

My great-grandmother, she was a slave. She could remember the quarters. And there was one man, Half-Acre, I guess he was the only one left who lived in one of them. He didn't have a wife, I'm guessing he didn't have any people, I can't remember now. He lived there alone. And he didn't have wood, he still had that bare floor, just bare ground.

That's just the way – Now I lost my train of thought. So you're going to turn it off.

LCR: No, we can keep it running, it's no big thing.

So when do you think they started putting wood on the floors? Was that part of the renovation they would make when –

Ms. Higgs: Oh, yes, I guess about the time, in my, in 18--, I was talking to Roxie, 18 and 70, because by the time they had the sawmill – because what lumber they did have – they had lumber, because they built the white people's houses with it. They didn't build their houses with that, and there weren't too many of them at that time, when they built those, they built them especially for the slaves. There were no white slaves there. But what they called the Big House was naturally built with wood, planks and everything else, and they had floors. Oh, no, not the cabins, they didn't have that. And of course, as Grandma would say it, they had a very – because there were some slave masters who were kind, all of them weren't really cruel, else how would any of them have survived. But a few of them, my grandmother said, they didn't have dishes but they had pans that they ate out of, and they ate with their hands.

After that, I read that in England, the king, King Henry the So-and-So, whatever, he didn't use silver either, he ate with his hands! So they weren't, they thought it was degrading making them eat with their hands, because these that came over here, they let a lot of them out of jail, you know, when they came. You know that. Anyway, that's another story. Grandma said that some of them, they had pans to eat out of. They had this one big pot they would cook, but she said, some of them, they just built a trough in there, and poured it in the trough.

LCR: Is that right?

Ms. Higgs: Just feed them, and they'd all go down there together, like slopping hogs, get it out of the trough. And of course, I can understand that, because I have lived long enough to have seen some of the things that were almost as bad. And as Arthur was saying this morning – I said, well, Arthur, you came from Atlanta, Georgia, and Mississippi and Alabama, and Arkansas and Kentucky, that's down South, and other states, and Texas. Maryland and Illinois, this in the East and Midwest, I said, but honey, you can put all of them in the same pot and they'd all get out about the same time. Some were worse than others. Some still are. Still, it's just they use, the same game is going on, they just changed players and they're a little more subtle. Still it's the same game. I have lived long enough to see it.

LCR: Aside: Honey, why don't you go sit on the swing? You don't want to do that?

Ms. Higgs: Did you know she was going to come?

LCR: Mm-hmm.

Ms. Higgs: Well, you think we should knock off, she's getting restless.

LCR: Yes, she's getting restless.

Ms. Higgs: Maybe you'd do it another time.

[Recording ends.]