

**University of Mississippi
Center for the Study of Southern Culture**

**Black Families in Yalobusha County
Interview with Yvonne Townsel and Margaret Letcher**

**March 25, 2021
Interviewer: Keon Burns
Length: 70:34**

[Interview Begins]

Keon Burns: 00:20 My name is Keon Burns. Today is March 25th, 2021, and I will be interviewing Mrs. Yvonne Townsel and Margaret Letcher for the Black Families in Yalobusha County collective. To start the interview, would you both mind giving me your full names and your date of births?

Margaret Letcher: My name is Margaret Letcher. My date of birth is May 21, 1946.

Yvonne Townsel: My name is Yvonne Townsel. My date of birth is May 29, 1969.

Keon Burns: To begin the interview, Mrs. Letcher, could you tell me about where you grew up at?

Margaret Letcher: I grew up on a small town in Mississippi called Oakland, Mississippi in Yalobusha County.

Keon Burns: What are some of your earlier memories growing up in Oakland, Mississippi?

Margaret Letcher: 02:21 Oh, just going to school, and there was my family with my brothers and my sisters, my father and my mother. I started up at a little ole school down there called Big Branch school. I

can't remember what the teachers name was, but all of us were in one classroom. All of the grades were in one classroom. That is where I started school there, till they build a school down there call Oakland high school and elementary school. I started Oakland elementary school, and I graduated from Walker high school.

Keon Burns:

Now, when you were in the school, you said, all the grades were in one building. How many teachers did y'all have?

Margaret Letcher:

If my memory serves me correctly, we didn't have but one teacher. She taught all the classes. I can't remember her name. I would have to ask my older brother who was there.

Keon Burns:

Was education a really big part of—really important to your parents that they pushed that on you to pursue education and going to school?

Margaret Letcher:

03:50

Yes, it was important for all of us to graduate from high school. They didn't push college on us a lot, but they was adamant about us finishing high school, all six of us.

Keon Burns:

Were your parents educated? Did they both go to school? Do you know?

Margaret Letcher:

No, my mom did not go to school nor did my dad.

Keon Burns:

What did they do for work, your parents?

Margaret Letcher:

04:27

They were sharecroppers. My daddy worked the farm on this guy's place, his last name was Jenkins. I can't remember what his first name was, but his last name was Jenkins. He was a white man. My mother didn't work. Every so often, she may iron people's clothes for some of the White neighbors that

lived around us and that was it. Majority of the time, she was a homemaker.

Keon Burns:

Did y'all have--. I know you said, your dad was a sharecropper. Did y'all have a little personal garden, or did your dad?

Margaret Letcher:

05:00

Yeah, my daddy had a garden. We always had a garden where we made tomatoes, cucumbers, okra. We had sweet potatoes and white potatoes. In our day, they called them ice potatoes.

Keon Burns:

Would you say y'all were pretty self-sufficient in terms of food and clothes?

Margaret Letcher:

I didn't hear that question.

Keon Burns:

Would you say, growing up y'all were self-sufficient? I know you said, the y'all had a garden outside where y'all would pick food to eat.

Margaret Letcher:

Oh Yeah! My daddy although he worked, there was not one day that I can remember that we went hungry. We always had food to eat. We always had clothes to wear. Everybody had clothes and shoes to wear. He made sure of that.

Keon Burns:

07:02

Was Oakland [Mississippi] a majority black town or majority white town?

Margaret Letcher:

You might want to say it was probably equal. During my time in school, the black kids went to a separate school from the white kids. We walked to school, and the white kids rode the school bus to school.

Keon Burns:

Do you remember any other differences in terms of schooling? Y'all had to walk versus they had public transportation to get to school?

Margaret Letcher:

No, I don't. My daddy was a very strong man, if it rained and it's wet outside and muddy, then he got in a wagon and drove us. I guess you could say drove the wagon to school, and he would come pick us up in the wagon if it was rainy and muddy outside. That is how we got to and from school when the weather was bad. If the weather was not bad, we would walk to school. When we did start riding the bus to school, we would have to walk from where we lived to I can't remember the road name. We walked up there and caught the bus there and rode to school.

Keon Burns:

About how far of a walk were both of those. The walk to the bus stop and the walk to school?

Margaret Letcher:

It wasn't that far. We probably didn't walk a tenth of a mile, maybe a mile it probably was and that far. Okay now, I am talking to you now. The first school that we had, and we went to that school name was Leake Branch. That was the first school that we went to Leake Branch. It just popped in my mind.

Keon Burns:

09:13

When you went to that school, it was time to harvest crops in the field. Do you remember if they would cut school early for y'all to get out to help harvest things? Or did y'all go pretty much year-round?

Margaret Letcher:

We went to school the whole--. We started school I think after Labor Day in September. We went from September to May. My father did not keep any of us out of school to work in the field. Well, I guess he did. My two younger brothers missed one year of schooling to help with the crops, but they went back to school the following year.

Keon Burns: Did you ever get out and work in the fields during the summertime when you were out of school? Did you ever get out there?

Margaret Letcher: No.

Keon Burns: Do you know if your dad was involved in, or your mother, was involved in any type of activism or civil rights in Oakland, Mississippi?

Margaret Letcher: Not that I am aware of. Not that I am aware of.

Keon Burns: 11:00 Did y'all go to church back then when y'all were in Oakland [Mississippi]?

Margaret Letcher: Yes, we went to church. Our church name was Springhill Missionary Baptist Church. I don't know where the dividing line is that divides Oakland from Water Valley, but I went to church at Springhill Missionary Baptist Church. Every third Sunday we had service.

Keon Burns: Was it a pretty big congregation from what you remember?

Margaret Letcher: Huh?

Keon Burns: Was it a pretty big congregation from what you remember? Or was it a smaller church?

Margaret Letcher: It was a small church, but we had quite a few people there. We only went to church on the third Sunday, but we had Sunday school every Sunday. We walked two and from Sunday school. That was quite a distance, but we had to get up every Sunday morning and go to Sunday school no matter what. Unless it was raining outside, we went to Sunday school.

Keon Burns: Did your parents force y'all to go, or was it just?

Margaret Letcher: No, that was just the rule, you went to school, and you went to church. And you went to Sunday school. We went to B-C-Y or whatever it is I can't remember what it was. We went there. My father was a Superintendent of the Sunday school and a Deacon at the church. My mother was just on the motherboard.

Keon Burns Would there be other members from your community that you recognized at church? Was it like a Community Church where everyone went there?

Margaret Letcher: Yeah, all of the family folks and all of them went to church. We had my uncle George that was up in Taylor, Mississippi. He went to Springhill. My cousin, my auntie, my uncles, my whole family went to the church.

Keon Burns: Did any of your teachers also go to that church? Or any other students like that will be at school with you?

Margaret Letcher: No, none of my teachers went to my church.

Keon Burns: 13:47 Moving forward a little bit, do you remember if any of your parents was registered to vote or would go and vote?

Margaret Letcher: My dad was registered to vote. My mom wasn't because before--. I don't think black people signed the polls into the 60s, I believe. I think that's when they had the right to vote, I am not sure. My mom had died. My mom passed when she was 50 years old from breast cancer.

Keon Burns: Do you remember your dad having any problems or resistance when he went to vote, or when he registered to vote that he talked about?

Margaret Letcher: No, no, no.

Keon Burns: Do you remember the first time that you went to register to vote? Or voted?

Margaret Letcher: I don't know when the first time I voted. It had to be over 50 years ago. It has been a long time.

Keon Burns Yes ma'am. Were you still staying in Oakland, Mississippi at that time?

Margaret Letcher: Huh?

Keon Burns: Do you remember if you were still staying in Oakland, Mississippi at that time?

Margaret Letcher: No, I wasn't in Oakland. When I graduated from high school, I flew to Chicago. And I was in Chicago for almost two and half years, and I moved back to Memphis for fifty years.

Keon Burns: Do you remember around what year you graduated?

Margaret Letcher: I graduated in 1966, May of 1966.

Keon Burns: 15:43 So back when you were in high school, do you remember when James Meredith integrated into the University of Mississippi?

Margaret Letcher: Yeah, I remember that when he went to Ole Miss. Was it Ole Miss?

Keon Burns: Yes ma'am

Margaret Letcher: Yeah, Ole Miss.

Keon Burns:

Do you remember some of your feelings or thoughts about that at that time?

Margaret Letcher:

You know, I just remembered him going to school there, and the white people didn't want him there. And having to have somebody go in there with him with guns to make sure he was safe if you want to put it that way.

Keon Burns:

Did that make you kind of fearful at all or feel like your safety may have been in jeopardy?

Margaret Letcher:

No, I never felt that way because my dad always taught us not to be afraid of anybody. We wasn't. We wasn't never afraid of anybody. I never had No Fear of white people because my daddy always taught us not to be like that. He taught us not to fear people, and if you told somebody you were going to do something you did it. At that time we were sharecropping with my father. I can remember on the Saturday people would come to the house and ask him to let us come and help them in the field. My daddy would say, no they don't want to help you, and they would go head on. They didn't try to make him let us. My dad would say, no if they don't want to help you then you just gone leave them alone. They don't want to help you. They will be at home, and I guess I grew up with that in me. Stop being afraid to tell people no or afraid of people.

Keon Burns:

Do you know where your dad got that from did he talk about his parents, your grandparents, is that where he got that from?

Margaret Letcher:

I don't remember my daddy's parents, his daddy or his mama, I don't remember them. But apparently he must have got it from them because all of those brothers, it is four of those brothers, and all of them are the same. They were very, very strong men. They didn't mess with you and you didn't mess

with them whether you were white or black you did not mess with them a set of family men. That was a sure thing.

Keon Burns

Do you remember if your dad was a gun owner or? Or would go out and hunt?

Margaret Letcher:

Yeah, he had a shotgun he would go out and hunt. My dad was a Mason. He would go out and hunt. He kept a shotgun sitting right at the front door. There was daddy's shotgun sitting right at the front door.

Keon Burns:

Is it safe to say that y'all always felt pretty protected growing up?

Margaret Letcher:

Yeah, we were protected.

Keon Burns:

20:23

Do you remember what led to you moving to Chicago?

Yvonne Townsel

Here we go. Here we go.

Margaret Letcher:

I went to take my cousin up there to her daddy. Her daddy was my Auntie[’s husband], and she was my first cousin. At took her up there for the summer and he convince me to stay. I stayed there for two years, and after two years I moved back to Memphis. And that is where I have been ever since.

Keon Burns:

How did your uncle convince you to stay in Chicago? What were some of the things--?

Margaret Letcher:

It wasn't at my uncle, it was my cousin.

Keon Burns:

your cousin, my bad how did your cousin convince you to stay up there.

Margaret Letcher:

I don't know. He told me to stay up there and get a job in work. And I did I stayed up there ain't got a job at this place called--. My first job was a place called precision valves. Where they made the little straws did you stick in a spray can, those little straws. We worked them that was the first job that I had.

Keon Burns:

Did you enjoy the work or the money while you were up there in Chicago?

Margaret Townsel:

Yeah, I enjoyed it. I missed it because I had cousins up there. We are a close family even to this day. The Chapman side of the family is very close.

Keon Burns:

What led into you leaving Chicago in deciding to move back to Memphis? Do you also have some family in Memphis at that time?

Margaret Letcher:

23:00

We get into that I just had a relationship that ended up with my two oldest girls which is Yvonne and Traci. And that didn't work out. I moved back to Memphis because my sister was in--. My third oldest cousin Rina was here. Also, my second oldest sister rose, they both was here in Memphis and my brother.

Keon Burns:

You had a lot of family in Memphis when you move back down. Did you move back down--? I think it would have been the same year that Martin Luther King was assassinated in Memphis?

Margaret Letcher:

Martin Luther King was assassinated in what?

Keon Burns:

I think it is 68?

Yvonne Townsel:

The fourth of April, 68.

Margaret Letcher:

He was assassinated in 68. I was in Chicago when he was assassinated. I moved back down here in 70 I believe. My oldest daughter, Tracy, was born on March the 29th and doctor king was assassinated on April the 4th. I believe.

Keon Burns:

Do you remember what some of your feelings were at the time?

Margaret Letcher:

When?

Keon Burns:

When Dr King was assassinated.

Margaret Letcher:

I don't know because the only thing I know--. I wouldn't say they were rioting in Chicago where I worked at, at that time I was working at another job which was downtown on State street. I do remember one thing somebody said, this white lady. They not go bother me because I don't hate negros. I always will remember that. And all you can do is just turn around and look at her.

Keon Burns:

How did you feel when she said that though? At that time?

Margaret Letcher:

I don't know how you would feel. I couldn't even tell you. I felt like you white, and at that time it was sort of like you white. I can't stand you, but I don't know how I felt about that.

Keon Burns:

26:36

So, when you move back to Memphis where are you able to find--. When you moved to Memphis, sorry, where are you able to find work down there?

Margaret Letcher:

I found work through a--. Because I consider myself a single parent, I had two girls. I worked at different jobs. I always worked because I knew I had to take care of those two girls of

mine. Even if I had to ride the city bus to and from work, I work to take care of my two girls.

Keon Burns:

I see it, it sounds very--. it almost sounds like you had a similar mentality to your father.

Margaret Letcher:

Yeah, because we were taught to work. We was taught to work. I have three brothers and two sisters that I was raised with. We all worked. We worked every day. My oldest brother, which is E.L., he graduated from down there in Oakland, and he drove a school bus and moved to Memphis. He worked at Kroger's as a truck driver until he retired maybe about 10 or 15 years ago. My brother, Ronnie, he passed away. He died. He worked at that plant down there.

Yvonne Townsel:

Big Yank.

Margaret Letcher:

What is the name--? I can't think of the name of it.

Yvonne Townsel:

Big Yank.

Margaret Letcher:

Nawl, it wasn't Big Yank. It was where they make carburetors. He worked there, but he passed away. Then my baby brother he moved to California. He worked at the LA county over 25 years, and he retired. And he taught school for a while. he came back to Memphis and taught school at White Station School right here off of Perkins and off of White Station at the deaf school he taught out there for a while. We all were taught to work like get up and go to work. That is what we did, we all worked. Then the last job that I worked in the Memphis area was transit authority. I worked that for twenty years then I retired. I have been retired for eleven years.

Keon Burns: How did that feel when you got to retire? What was the feeling?

Margaret Letcher: When I got to retire?

Keon Burns: Yeah.

Margaret Letcher: You know, it felt good. It felt good. I thought about it. Oh my God, I won't have to get up at 3:30 and get ready to go to work. For about the first year or maybe more than that I still get up in the morning time. I would get up every morning. I wake up at about 4:00 o'clock then I would try to force myself to go back to sleep because I didn't have to go to work. into this day I still get up it's 6:00 o'clock every morning.

Keon Burns: Now you said when you were working, working you had to get up at 3:30 every morning?

Margaret Letcher: I had to get up at 3:30 when I worked in the radio room. I started out driving a bus for Memphis transit. After I went into supervision, I had to work the radio room period. You had to be in the radio room at 4:00 o'clock in the morning. Radio means I was up there directing buses in getting all of the calls that come in. You know, if you need it to catch the number 31 across town and you were on the 52. I had to know where those two buses connected, so I can tell the driver I need you to stand by at that location and wait for them. The 31 across town it has riders for you. This is what I did.

Keon Burns: That level of dedication, waking up at 3:30 that early and working every morning. Is there part of the legacy that you wanted to pass down to your daughters? And show your daughters also how to work?

Margaret Letcher: 31:41 Yeah, I taught them to work. You have to work. It does not matter, you need to work, you need to go to work every day. And Yvonne can attest to that my dad. My daddy he worked in the field, but every morning at 4:00 o'clock my daddy would get up. And step out on the back porch, and he will look up toward the heavens, and call say master, master. He would start to praying. I remember that. We came from a strong, strong family background. We are all strong. Now my brother, I had three brothers in the military. Ronnie was in Vietnam. Willie James was in Vietnam. E.L. was in Cuba. All of them was there in service in the military at the same time back in those days. I can't remember which one of my brothers--. Raymond was in either South Vietnam or North Vietnam. Willie James was in North Vietnam or South Vietnam. They was in different areas in the same branch. Willie James was a marine. Raymond and E.L. was in the army.

Keon Burns: Would any of your brothers tell you about some of their experiences while they were in the military?

Margaret Letcher: No, they didn't talk about it. They never talked about it. Even my baby brother which he is in Texas now, he never talked about his stay in the marines in the military. Now my brother that passed away down there in Mississippi, Raymond, well we call him Raymond his name is Ronnie. I remember him saying when he got ready to come home, they started to shooting at the ship. I remember him saying, the I am not going to make it back home, but He made it back home by the grace of God. They never really talked about it.

Keon Burns: Did they all have the same demeanor when they got back were they all still kind of the same people that you remember before they went off to war?

Margaret Letcher:

Yeah, they had some problems. Things was rough for my brother Ronnie. I guess whatever went wrong over there, whatever happened over there he was just not strong enough to shake it. He was not strong enough to shake that. It bothered him a whole lot when he came from over there. It bothered so many things. I can even remember when he was up there in that hospital in Oxford [Mississippi]. I can see that so clearly. They kept saying, he was talking about they shooting at him. My other brother say, "Did y'all look in his wallet to see why he was saying that?" Because he was having those, I guess flashbacks. He thought they were shooting at him, but that hospital up there never did look in his wallet to see that he had DD12. I think that is the card that they had in there. He always kept it in his wallet. He had a rough time there, my baby brother and my other brother. I think they came out okay. my baby brother still sort of you know sometimes you can look at him and tell if he wondering about what, why, and what all this is. My oldest brother, E.L., they came out okay, but Ronnie never could shake it.

Keon Burns:

Could you explain to me what--. Did you say DD12 that was in Ronnie's wallet?

Margaret Letcher:

That is a military discharge thing that they have in their wallet that they keep with them at all times. I think it was. Yvonne could tell you about it because her husband got one.

Yvonne Townsel:

DD14.

Margaret Letcher:

Is that what it is.

Yvonne Townsel:

It a form that he was in the military, and he was honorably discharge from the military. But you have to think about it, at

the time in the 80s when my uncle was going through everything that he was going through before he died. My uncle had been affected by the Agent Orange. He was one of those people who was affected by it. As you know now, and with the PTSD now things of that sort in counseling was not available so he had it really rough. The DD14 is his paperwork that says he was honorably discharged from the military, but it also shows that he did have issues.

Margaret Letcher:

He has issues at times. Well at that time when black men came from over in Vietnam. We know that they did not get any respect. They could not find jobs. It was just back to the same ole, same ole. That is what they wanted them to come back to. You fought over there in that war for what reason? I don't know because when you came back you could not even get a job here. And my baby brother left and went to California, and he picked up jobs here until finally he went to school out there, the college out there. He got him a job working for the LA county, and he worked there until he retired. My oldest brother drove for Kroger until he retired.

Keon Burns:

Do you know if your brothers were they drafted to go to the war? Or did they volunteer, sign up to go to the war.

Margaret Letcher:

I can't remember if they were drafted, but I do know then once all three of them were there, my daddy was told that all three of them should not have been there in that war. One of them sons should have stayed at home. That's because of the Sullivan rule. In World War Two, World War One or World War Two, the Sullivan brothers there was seven of them. All of them were killed, so that killed their family line. All three of my uncles should have never been in the war together. All of them should have never went because if something would have happened to all three of them then that would have discontinued my grandfather's line, his family line. It's

actually a military policy. It is called the Sullivan rule that three brothers are---. The only three children or how ever you want to put it are not suppose to be in a war, so they can continue the line. So E.L. even though in he was in Cuba.

Yvonne Letcher:

No, he was in Korea mom.

Margaret Letcher:

Well he was down there in Cuba Bay of the Pigs or whatever they call it. As they would put it, he was never put in harm's way. But my other two brothers were and my cousin. His name was Floyd which is Dottie's [Reed] brother. They was all over there together.

Keon Burns:

Do you remember what your dad's feeling was toward his sons all being over there? Was it more proud? Was it more upset? Was it more difficult? Did he mind?

Margaret Letcher:

My daddy, well let me say this that whole, you had uncle George, uncle Alvin, uncle Red, uncle Robinson, and my daddy. Five of those four, they were very quiet people. They never, never, never kept up no ruckus. That's what they called it back in the day. They never did. My daddy was a quiet man. He was proud of his sons; he was proud of all his children. I guess he never knew how to express how proud he was of them. That set of family including my two aunties that I know I had another auntie. My daddy had another sister, a few sisters that I did not know. My aunt Pit and my aunt Val they was quiet people. They never ever got into an argument with him or nothing. I never remember my dad saying a harsh word to nobody. I also remember if you bother one of those brothers, back in the day you did not have a telephone. If you bothered on of them somehow, some way you gone look up and all five of them would be together. Or all four of them would be together. I do remember that. They was quiet

peoples, a quiet family, they did not argue. They did not curse. They did not fuzzi. They did not drink. They did not do any of that, but if one got in trouble, all the rest of them was there. They would be there for them, and we inherited that. If my brother in Texas would call me and say I need you to come, guess what I am going.

Keon Burns:

You hopping on the first thing smoking.

Margaret Letcher:

My daddy, his three sisters, like I said he has three sisters. But I only knew aunt Pit and aunt Val. I did not know the other two sisters. That is my family; my father was a good man. He was a churchgoing man; he was a superintendent of the Sunday school. He would get up every third Sunday and walk to Springhill or ride the mule and the wagon, so we would have a way until we got big enough to know that I don't want to be caught riding no wagon to church. We would rather walk. He go up there and make the fire in the church. We had them old wooden stoves. My daddy would go up there and get that wood and put it in there and make a fire. When we got two charge we would be warm, and when everybody else got there the church would be warm. That story may not be interesting to you but that is my family.

Keon Burns:

That is definitely interesting to me. Definitely interesting.

Margaret Letcher:

That is my fam. That is my family. My mom died at home, and she had breast cancer. She went to the male clinic down there in Greenwood, Mississippi. She did not recover from breast cancer. She died with breast cancer. My daddy never did remarry anymore. Even when we all left home, he did not remarry again.

Keon Burns: Do you know if you're dead served in the military at all? Or were your brothers the first group of people for your family that you knew of who served in the military?

Margaret Letcher: My brother was the first group that I know of served in the military. My daddy didn't serve in the military.

Yvonne Townsel: He did not serve, but he did register. We do have his draft cards. He did register for the military, but because he was the head of his house. He didn't go. We do you have on ancestry. We were able to pull up his card, the draft card. And also my great grandfather.

Keon Burns: Y'all were also able to pull up his draft card as well.

Yvonne Townsel: Correct. Sam Chapman.

Keon Burns: 46:36 What led you to become interested in collecting your family's history?

Yvonne Townsel: To know where we came from. I have always had that curiosity; I have always wanted to know. So I flew in one of my aunts. She was diagnosed with ovarian cancer. I left Memphis, and I moved away to keep her mind busy and not focusing on the cancer. It was something that she could do, she could call cousins and other family and other friends of the family and try to find things out. The ball just went rolling from there.

Keon Burns: What are some of the more surprising things about your family that you have come across in your research?

Yvonne Townsel: My mom, seeing my mom's DNA makeup that ancestry has. It wasn't anything that was spoken, but the European side of

her on her mother side is the most interesting thing that came out of it. So far, so far now.

Margaret Letcher:

But let them know, there is no record of my mom being born nowhere.

Keon Burns:

Really?

Margaret Letcher:

There is not one record of her being born anywhere, but she had to be born because I am here. [Laughter]

Yvonne Townsel:

You can't find her in the census until she marries her first husband, Landry Morgan, in 1930 mom? I think it was 1930.

Margaret Letcher:

Yes, because she was born in 1910. We can't find any records of her until 1910. I am sorry 1930s when she marries her first husband. So there is no record and we have searched and look for it. And you will find that I even called Jackson trying to get down there in Jackson, Mississippi to find a birth certificate. Of course, we know that there is no birth certificate because her mom was a midwife. So somehow or another she delivered my mother. We believe that is what happened. The lady that raised her what was the midwife.

Keon Burns:

Ah ha. That is what I was going to ask. So she wasn't raised by her mother, she was raised by the person, the midwife?

Yvonne Townsel:

That delivered her. We think that is what happened. Again, anyone that knows the actual story is no longer here, so we are just assuming trying to put pieces together.

Keon Burns:

It may be a possibility that her mother died giving birth, and the midwife continued to raise her? Or maybe...

Margaret Letcher: Nawl, the mother didn't die.

Keon Burns: The mother didn't die. Okay.

Margaret Letcher: Nawl, the mother didn't die because the mother didn't die. I'm leave it at that.

Keon Burns: Besides, literally not being able to find a birth certificate for your mom. Are there any other kind of discrepancies like that that y'all came across as y'all have been researching y'all's family history?

Margaret Letcher: As far as?

Keon Burns: Just anything that kind of sticks out.

Yvonne Letcher: Anything that sticks out as far as my grandmother?

Keon Burns: Yes, or just the family.

Yvonne Letcher: It is a lot of things because records were not accurately keep for people of color. My great grandfather Sam Chapman does not appear, well I'm assuming he does not appear until 1899 when he married my great grandmother, (51:34) Tyler. He appears in the Water Valley Census at that time, so prior to 1899, the records that I have that I am assuming is him. Is (51:55), Mississippi. Again, with emancipation in 1865 you have a lot of people, you have former slaves that get left, some stayed, some change their names. Talking about what happened and slavery and things in their state they didn't want to talk about it. My great grandfather was born in 1877, so he was the first of his family line to not be born into slavery. I can only assume, and again, in 1899 he appeared in Water Valley where he married my great grandmother, 52:56 Tyler.

Which I can trace the Tylers all the way back to South Carolina. (53:05) died in 1910. He married his second wife, Avery, and they had the three--. Was it three mommy? Or two? Aunt Valarie, Aunt Pit.

Margaret Letcher:

They had three children together. Andrea some called Red Andrea that was her nickname. I could also remember that no one knew my daddy name.

Yvonne Townsel:

Yes, my grandfather was not born named Chapman. My grandfather's name--. And it took us, how long did it take us to figured to that out mommy?

Margaret Letcher:

I don't know, but we have never called him--.

Yvonne Townsel:

On the census, but I could find all of his brothers and sisters. I kept saying, " Mom it is somebody on here named (54:17)." Finally, she remembers my grandfather's name he was born with, and actually wasn't Dottie's brother.

Margaret Letcher:

They called him Gabby.

Yvonne Townsel:

They called him Gabby after my grandfather. So that is what I mean about this changing your name and picking up and leaving. Trying to get away from the past, thinking, you know, people just assuming that changing your name and moving will disconnect you from where you came from. But with that disconnection then that means your generation afterwards is disconnected also. That is where we are trying to read papers and the history and trying to see where our families came from.

Keon Burns:

From the earliest records, then y'all saw at least from the Chapman side of you all's family y'all have been in Mississippi, Water Valley specifically right?

Yvonne Townsel:

In Water Valley since 1899.

Keon Burns:

How have you been going about doing this research? what are you using to collect all of your sources?

Yvonne Townsel:

I go on ancestry a lot. I talk to my mom; I talk to my uncles to try to--. Sometimes the smallest memory I could break something wide open. When my Uncles were alive they would talk to their first cousins. I would always say anything that you think is minor may not be minor. It maybe the key to open up everything, and we found somethings out. We've just assuming because we don't have confirmation on some things that I have--. And I'm going to just go ahead and say it Mama. On my grandmother's, as far as my grandmother goes, my mother on her DNA test has a white man who came out to be her second cousin. So at this point, we are trying to figure out why is he so close. How is he so closely related to my mother? He is either second or third cousin, so that meant that they had to have shared a grandfather. So with that being said I was able to go through some records and find an individual that was a school teacher actually in Panola county. And they actually had a Quinton who was a servant there who abruptly left Panola county and moved out to Greenwood, Mississippi. Again, we don't have confirmation, but between Greg Pierce, is his name, and myself and conversations between us and him and his older brother. The connection is starting to reveal itself.

Keon Burns:

What are some of the challenges that you have come across in trying to do this work? And asking people questions and going on ancestry?

Yvonne Townsel:

Family members that were here that are no longer here that were given the information, or some are even here now were given the information. Rather it be gossiping to writing down or maybe just passing on the oral history. They won't talk. They won't tell. They feel like it is a secret that they need to keep. My mother told my grandmother (59:07) once all of her children were grown to tell them about her. About where she came from who her family was because she didn't live long enough for all of her children to be grown and to pass that information on to them. And I don't think anyone ever took the time to ask my grandfather about it. If they did, I don't think he--. Well, I can't say that, he did give any information out. This is something now that we are trying to piece together.

Margaret Letcher:

But you also go back to my daddy. A lot of peoples did not know my daddy's name. because here everybody thought my dad's name was Bigger, but his name was James. A lot of people did not know that, so sometimes people would say I knew Bigger Chapman, but I didn't know James Chapman. They are one in the same, so that's my family. My family was and still is a strong family. Whatever go on with my family, whatever need it is we are always there for one another, no matter what. If it is a first cousin on my daddy side, the first cousin on my daddy's side his name is James D. Robinson. Then you got the next second oldest is Otis Douglas then you got Isiah, lord knows that I don't know Mary Ann and I forgot her name Mary Ann's sister. Home the Chapman side of the family I think you got, 11 first cousins that are left. It is 11 of us. There are some more siblings who have children some of

the grandchildren have four chils. Romello I think that is his name. He is the last grandson ain't he?

Yvonne Townsel:

Yeah.

Margaret Letcher:

Donie's boy. He is the last grandson on the Chapman's side, so if he doesn't have any boys then after he leaves this world.

Yvonne Townsel:

No, we still have Bryan. We still have Devin.

Margaret Letcher:

Well Devin is older. Romello is the youngest of the grandsons, the Chapman grandsons. Great grandsons. There are no more Chapman boys. There aren't any more.

Keon Burns:

Do you feel as if--. Yeah, go head. I was just going to say before we wrap up the interview. First, thank both of y'all for doing this with me. And sitting down and doing this oral history together. Is there anything else that y'all wanted to add for the record?

Margaret Letcher:

No, I am good with it to know that my family is a strong family, and that it came from my grandparents all the way down to the last generation of the Chapman family.

Keon Burns:

Yes ma'am. Well alright--.

Yvonne Townsel:

I would like to say for me if I could be that spokesperson for the Chapman family. Growing up, spending time, getting to know my great uncle and my great aunts, looking back now me being 52 what a great experience to have had that. When my mother mention that my grandfather would go out on the porch and look up to the heavens and pray. As a ten, eleven year old, we would wake up and go to Mississippi and spend the summers with my grandfather. We would wake up, and he would be walking around outside of the house. And as an adult, now I know that as he was walking around the house he

would be praying around the house as he walked. And being able to experience that, it was something that is outstanding, outstanding. Really and truly. Being able to know my great aunt, we called her Pit. Her real name was Betsy Sanders to be able to experience her grabbing me by my face and telling me as an awkward teenager, “That you are a Chapman, you are beautiful.” Now, at 52 you can't tell me that I am not gorgeous.” [Laughter] You can't tell me that.

Margaret Letcher:

Pit always said that. She would tell you that in a minute. We are a beautiful people.

Yvonne Townsel:

Even with my great uncle Alvin, I was so scared of him because every time I saw him he was talking about shooting somebody. He was a tall man; he was the tallest of them all.

Margaret Letcher:

No, uncle George was the tallest and uncle Alvin. All of them were tall except for Daddy.

Yvonne Townsel:

Except my grandfather. My grandfather was the one that everybody, when we said move you moved.

Margaret Letcher:

Even with my uncle George, I remember him, but at the time, he had already lost a leg to diabetes. I remember seeing him, and just those experiences that you look back now and say, “Wow.” It was great I was able to experience all those people.

Keon Burns:

That is amazing. How does it feel to be able to go back and have that context for when your granddaddy was walking around the house? He wasn't just walking around the house doing something, he was walking around the house praying. So just doing this work and being able to go back and kind of, relive and reinvent those moments that you had with them. How does that feel?

Yvonne Townsel:

It feels good. It just let's me know the type of man that he was. Even when my cousins, my cousins they always loved scary movies. I can't stand scary movies. My cousin, Jamey, I remember me, my sister, and Jamey were in Mississippi, and people kept telling me scary stories. My grandad, I said, "Grandaddy, she won't let me sleep I can't sleep. I can't sleep because Jamey scared me." He let me get in the bed with him, and then the next morning he told me, "That I couldn't sleep in his bed no more because I kick like a mule. [Laughter] So you gone have to deal with it." So you know I had to be brave.

Margaret Letcher:

Yeah, it is a wonderful time, and when we get together now even Dottie and Otis and Clyde and me and E.L. and Willie James. We all get together now that is what we sit down and talk about. I think we don't want to forget those things because they keep you going. You remember how things were. Things are better now. Again, we look back and say, "We thought that things were bad when we were growing up." But sometimes you think about it, they were much better when we was growing than we are now. Much better. That is just how I feel about it. We thought we had a hard time, but that was not no hard time. Those were good times. Those were good memories. Those were good learning things for us that learn us because of the Chapman family. We learned how to work and take care of ourselves and everything. To this day, I have not had a brother or a sister or a cousin that I am aware of in the Chapman family to go to jail. None of them. None of them. That is how it was.

Keon Burns:

Well I sure do appreciate you all.

Yvonne Townsel:

No problem.

Margaret Letcher:

Thank you.

Keon Burns:

Thank you, and y'all have a nice day.

Yvonne Townsel:

If there is anything else that you need, my number is the same.
So you can give me a call back.

Keon Burns:

I definitely won't hesitate. Thank you.

Margaret Letcher:

Bye, have a great day.

[Interview Ends]