

Interview — Emma Gooch

Interviewee: Emma Gooch

Interviewer: Brittany Brown

Interview Date: October 30, 2019

Location: Water Valley, MS, Emma's Home

Length: 1:20:47

START OF RECORDING

BB: Alright. So we're going to jump right in. I'll have more so pointed it at you, so it can record you more than me. Thank you for agreeing to participate in the Black Families of Water Valley oral history project. This interview will take about an hour and a half of your time or again, however much you'd like to have the interview, however long you'd like to have the interview go on. But when we do reach the about 45 minute or one hour mark, I will, you know, see if we want to take a break, you know, get up, stretch our legs, see about how much more we want to talk about, or things like that. Just kind of a check point.

I do want to remind you that this interview will be publicly, will be made publicly available through the University of Mississippi's library digital repository. So it will be considered a public record after it's all done. This means the interview will be available and accessible via the internet. The main thing to be aware of aside from your own privacy usually pertains to revealing information about other people and discussion of illegal activities. I want to remind you that your participation in this project is completely voluntary, and you don't have to answer any question that I ask you if you don't want to. Since this is a life history interview, some questions may be difficult or painful to answer. If I ask a question that you don't want to answer, simply

tell me or point to the recorder if you still want to talk about it, but you don't want it to be recorded, and I will stop. I have a short list of questions that I might reference to during the interview, but these are only used to get the conversation started. It's really going to be to go in the direction that you lead it.

After we've completed the projects, I'll email you or mail you a copy of the interview, plus the transcript for your review. Once we come up with the final project, of course, you'll be invited and notified of everything of all the next steps that will be taken from here.

Okay. So today is Wednesday, October 30th. I'm here in Ms. Emma Gooch's home in Water Valley. We're going to go ahead and get started with the interview. So, from here, how would you like me to refer to you? Ms. Emma? Ms. Gooch?

EG: Emma, just call me Emma.

BB: Okay, well we'll go ahead and get started. Can you tell me about the place where you grew up?

EG: Oh, I grew up in Water Valley, Mississippi. I am on Martin Street. I've lived here since March of 1953. I'm the third child of 12, and life was pretty good for me because my father, he was very active in the community, and he was a World War II veteran. So we was raised with strict discipline, and education was one of the goals that he instilled in us during my childhood. I had a very good childhood. We were poor, but it was very good. My father kept us fed, and he kept us busy and stuff, and he was a commercial fisherman and a commercial hunterman, hunter. So I had an opportunity to learn how to fish and hunt, and I always, if he left me, always cried and my mom punished me for crying because my dad wasn't around. But I grew up as a daddy's girl, and he couldn't leave me. He took me everywhere. He went and taught me a lot of stuff about just life as far as how to deal with, you know, the

discrimination, and how to just live and let, just be happy, and not worry about tomorrow, but just live as the days come and stuff.

He did a lot of things. He built our house. He was a carpenter. He was a cabinet maker. He was all kind of people and stuff. And I really loved him. My mom was a very withdrawn person. She didn't have a chance to get a formal education, so life was pretty tough for her. And, but she was the one of the smartest women that I ever known. I look at how she raised 12 children and never, you know, killed any of us, and she did all the cooking, and she was a stay at home mom. She was always there, and we was never without our mom. And she thought us a lot about living. In her earlier years, she, you know, did house cleaning for Caucasians and stuff.

But then one day a white man slapped her, and my dad almost died behind that because he was trying to protect his wife, and it wasn't, you know—. So she stayed at home. She didn't go out in the public, and she made life very happy for us. We learned how to do, you know, cooking and cleaning and making sure that the house was clean. One thing about her, even though she didn't have a formal education, she made sure that all of her children did. She never let us, you know, not go to school or anything like that. You had to go to school, you had to make at least a C if you wanted to do anything other than go to church and go to school. You had to—. You couldn't make anything less than a C as far as she was concerned, and we just, I mean, we just had a good life. To me it was good. I was never worried about anything. Even when things are going wrong in the world, I felt like I was happy, and as long as I could go fishing with my dad, and we'd go bird hunting at night and possum hunting and made sure my grandfather had a possum on Thanksgiving, and it was really nice and stuff. Yeah. Stop it. [At this point, EG asked BB to stop recording.]

BB: We're back recording.

EG: Okay, and 1958, I started going to Davidson Elementary School, and life was good. I was a pretty good student. I had very strict teachers. I remember them all, how they trained us and kept us in check. And we had to go to school every day. And then in the harvest season, we were released from school and noon so that we could go work in the fields. My grandfather was a sharecropper for John Alexander, and we worked in the field until the harvest was done, and then we would start going back to full day school times like in, I say, late December up until school was out in May.

In 1965, they built, I think the new school, Davidson High School. I started going there. School was pretty good. I was pretty good student and sang in the choir. The choir had an opportunity to go to Jackson to the state choir competition. We came in third place. And then we had the best basketball team in Yalobusha County, the tigers and tigerettes. They went to state. They all made it all the way to state a couple of times, the boys and the girls. And after that I graduated from high school in 1970, May the 18th, 1970, and I left Water Valley.

I left Water Valley and moved to Davenport, Iowa, where I attended the American Institute of Commerce. And I was taught how to be a clerical clerk. I graduated from the American Institute of Commerce in 1971, September 1971. Moved back to Water Valley, took my certificate of proficiency to the unemployment office, but they still put me in a factory, even though I was trained to be a clerk. I worked at Big Yank Manufacturing from November of 1971 until May of 1972. And then I joined the Army, May 1972. I left here. I went to Fort McClellan, Alabama, where I did my training with the Women's Army Corps. After training—. Well training with the Women's Army Corps as a personnel specialist. I completed my AIT, advanced individual training, in August of 1972, assigned to Fort Eustis, Virginia, the 155th transportation company as a personnel specialist clerk, AWOL

and DFR soldiers that went AWOL and was dropped from the rolls. I had to locate them, turn them over to the military police. And then that was my first assignment.

Then in May of 1974, I attended the Southeastern Signal school at Fort Gordon, Georgia—. Augusta, Georgia—. After completing my signal school training, I was assigned to the finance center in Indianapolis, Indiana as a switchboard operator. I stayed there until September of 1976. Then I was assigned to the United States Army Communication Command in Japan, Camp Zama, Japan. I lived in Japan from 1976 to 1981 as a switchboard operator. After my assignment in Japan, I was assigned to the fifth infantry division mechanize, Fort Polk, Louisiana in the fifth signal command. And there I did line work, ran telephone cable, set up communications for field training exercises. Oh, let's see. And then after working in that for about three years, I went back to personnel. I was assigned to the 5th Adjutant General Corps at Fort Polk, Louisiana, where I did in-processing of all the soldiers that came to Fort Polk, Louisiana. I worked as customer service representative for the military—. ID cards, records, checks. I stayed there until 1983. Then I was assigned to the 69th Personnel Service Company in Karlsruhe, Germany as a records clerk supervisor, taking care of all the military personnel records for the engineer and companies and, you know, anything that pertained to soldiers' records and keeping them updated in the military system. I worked there from 1983 until September of 1984. Then I was assigned to the 90th P and A Battalion in Kaiserslautern, Germany, where I was inspector of all the personnel service companies in the 7th Army. From personnel shops, personnel service companies, making sure that they were up to standard as far as their personnel. Keeping account of all active duty and reserve personnel in the 7th Army.

Then in 1986, I was assigned to the 112th Military Intelligence Brigade at Fort Devens, Massachusetts as personal service supervisor. I took care of over 851 soldiers in military intelligence, making sure that their records were kept up to date, processing, rotating soldiers. I stayed there until 1988. Then I was assigned to the Adjutant General, 382nd Adjutant General Corps, where I took care of all the personnel for Fort Devens, Massachusetts. I Lived in Fitchburg, Massachusetts. They had a lot of TDY to New York and different places like that to make sure that the soldiers there—. And then when Desert Storm, I was a processor [for] the soldiers, reserve soldiers, for Desert Storm in 1991. I processed over 5,000 reserve soldiers going in country to Saudi Arabia—. Not to Saudi Arabia. Yeah. Then I retired in 1992, came back to Water Valley. I've been in Water Valley ever since.

Water Valley has changed, and leaving military life, coming back to civilian life was a big, I guess you might say, a big shock to me after living, you know, under codes and military conduct, and coming back to where everybody is just here. The work ethics and all of that was just different, and Water Valley and all that's just changed since I grew up here as a child. Growing up here, we had everything. We had bus stations. We had clothing stores. We had—. It was more than you could even imagine. All the different stores and the different things that we had that we were not really restricted to, but also black people had businesses. They had grocery stores, you know. They had just cafes and different things that, you know, was just mainly for African American people [phone rings].

BB: If you want to get that, you can.

EG: That won't mess that up? [pause recording for EG to answer phone.] I stopped at when I came back to Water Valley in [1992]. I came back here with great expectations. And August of 1992, I became a student at Ole Miss University

business school. Now, they call it University of Mississippi. I attended the University of Mississippi in the business school from August of 1992 until I got sick in 1994. I had a brain aneurism, so that cut my education. But that was one of my goals in life was always attend the University of Mississippi. And I had the opportunity to do that.

Both of my sons—. I have two sons, Christopher and Shannon. Christopher attended Mississippi State University. He graduated with his master's degree in accounting. Shannon is a factory worker. He works at BorgWarner, the main factory here in Water Valley, Mississippi. He has two sons, Shannon. I have two grandsons, and my daughter-in-law, Kacey, they live right across the driveway from me. So I get to see them on a daily basis, which is really fantastic for me.

But I can't understand how Water Valley has lost all of its vitality, I might say. There's really nothing here anymore. You got a dollar store, one grocery store, and a lot of restaurants as far as the town is concerned. Over 37 Baptist churches is here in Yalobusha County, and it's just not the town that I left as a teenager. It's more of if a person wanted to retire, this is the place to come. And that's what I did. I came home, and after my illness in '94, I just, you know, I just do yard work, take care of my house, take care of my grandkids, make sure my family is on key and everything. But life is different here than it was when I grew up here.

BB: So at the beginning of this, you talked a lot about your childhood and your parents and your siblings. Would you mind if we talked a little bit more about what it was like growing up with 12 siblings? I know you talked a lot about you and your dad, and you are such a daddy's girl, but what was it like growing up here and could you describe a little bit more about the place where you grew up? So you said you were out on the farm, and then moved to Martin Street. Your father built your

home. What was that like, you know, with 12 siblings, your parents, you said you were the third of 12. Can we talk a little bit more about that?

EG: It was fun. I had fun. I love all my sisters and brothers, and we got along very well. You know, we had the usual siblings' arguments and things like that, but we worked really hard and everything together. My mom taught us how to work together as a group, and she always told us that, you know, you don't have anyone else, so you need to make sure that everybody is taken care of, and you make sure that you do your part as far as growing up. I have two older sisters and they taught me a lot of, you know, as far as my education part, and they taught me how, you know, how they just grow up and be an individual but a collective group at the same time.

We all have different attitudes or everything, but we all grew up with, you know, just the love and care for each other. Then I have nine younger brothers and sisters, and they're a little different than the first three oldest ones. You know, we had to cater to them more. So as far as that, and right now today, the majority of them are spoiled because of us, because of the older ones, and life was good. I had no complaints. I enjoyed, you know, just being around my sisters, I never had to worry about anybody as far as friends. I used to tell people all the time, what I need a friend for? I got seven sisters. So it was that type of thing. We were close-knit, and we stuck together. It was just a joy to me.

I don't know if they feel that way 'cause they always say I was the bad one in everything because I mostly hung out with my father, you know, he was everything. I guess I was the boy that he never had until he had his four boys and stuff, but they didn't get to enjoy him like I did. He died when I was 27 years old. So I had him majority of my life, and my brothers, they didn't have him that long. So it's a difference as to how they viewed him as to how I viewed him. He was my world and

everything, but he taught me a lot. I had a good family. That's all you know. I can say we had our hard times and stuff.

We almost lost our land, but we went out and sharecropped and worked hard until we get our land back, and we have never lost it again. My dad bought this land that we live on now in 1953, and I guess back in 1957, for taxes, property taxes. We almost lost the land, but we—. The person that purchased the land for taxes, we went and worked his farm until we paid off the taxes and we moved back here, and we hadn't moved since. This is always been home to us, and now all the kids are grown. It's, let's see, one, two, three, five, six of us still live on the property that my dad purchased. My sister is in the house, the home house where we started out, and then we just kept building as far as it is now today. But growing up with my sisters and brothers was fun to me.

BB: What about your father? So you've talked a lot about your dad, and daddy's girl, and he was your world. If you're comfortable with that, can you talk more about the relationship that you and your dad shared and what was it like growing up as daddy's girl, you know, the things that you learned from him, whether or not his status as a World War II veteran influenced your decision to go into the military? I don't know if there's any connection there or even any memories that he may have shared with you as a veteran.

EG: He never talked about his service. He never talked about his service because he was in—. I think he said he went to Saipan or somewhere like that, and he's seen a lot of time. But one thing he told us about—. He'd never leave home again and he never did, not even as far as going to Jackson, Mississippi. He said he'd never leave home again after he served in the war. He was a rifleman in the war. He was very smart. He did everything, showed me how to do stuff. That's why I tear up stuff

now and I fix it, but he showed me how to, you know, how to do different things as far as even building a room. When he got ready to add a part on to our house, he just did it. Now, you know—. But he went to school to be a cabinet maker and everything. I have a lot of his certificates and service stuff, but he had, when he was in the military, and it was just something about him. He was just always great to me, and people say I look just like him, and I think I do too. That's him right there. And they say I look just like him, and he just, he was my dad. Just—. To this day, I miss him, and—. Just to be around him. I'd sit outside every day and wait for him to come home.

And it still hurts that he's not here to see my kids, to see what I did because he told me if I had the opportunity I would've stayed in the army and retired, and I really think that's why I did it because times were hard back when he got out down in '45 and stuff like that. But he did come home from military, and he did have an opportunity to go to trade schools. He did trade school, and then he was one of the first black men to work at the Coca Cola bottling plant that we had here in Water Valley. And everybody in town knew him. They call him Gay, but his name was James, but everybody called him Gay Gooch. And he and one of my cousins and Mr. Willie Owens and Mr. Benson, they worked in the Coca Cola bottling plant. He mixed the formula for the sodas and stuff. So we were never without Coke here in our house. And then I guess that's why I still love them so much now. Let's see. He always was at the ball games and stuff because he took care of, you know, if the Coke machines went down and stuff, he, he was just, you know, the person that was there to make sure that everything ran right at the Coke machines at all the ball games. So he got in there free. He worked really hard. After they closed the Coca Cola bottling plant, he worked at what they called, let's see, before it was Holley, it was, trying to

think. It was something else before it was Holley Carburetor, but he worked as a janitor. He worked as a janitor up at Ole Miss after the Coca Cola bottling plant closed down, after they moved that. They gave them the opportunity to buy it and run it, but, you know, as black folks, we didn't have the money and stuff to do that. So he lost that opportunity. After he stopped working there, he went to Ole Miss as a janitor. Then after he stopped working at Ole Miss as a janitor, he went to Holley Carburetors right here in Water Valley, and he was a janitor there until he got sick in 1976. He passed away from leukemia in 1978.

So it was, just, it was a good life. Even though we we're poor, you know, he made it good for us. We never had to worry because he'd hunt, fish. He even sold rabbits. Three dollars a rabbit, and that was my job and the four oldest kids. We always made sure that we cleaned the fish. We cleaned the rabbits—. That he had rabbits to sell to the public and fish to sale. Now he never fed us fish or the rabbit. He always went to the store and brought us whiting. We did not eat the, you know, the product, but everybody would just buy his—. You know, and that's what he did other than his job and stuff. And everybody wanted to hunt with him. He was a really, really good hunter. I know when he came on Saturday evening, my sisters and I had about a hundred rabbits to clean. And then we would always have—. 'Cause he used the nets like a commercial fisherman, and he would catch just fish all over. That's why I won't clean a fish today because I—. But it was—. All growing up—. It fed us and kept us in our house. And that's the way he did it.

BB: Can you talk about your family's transition from what people started to call Gooch Farm to your land now that you have? So you mentioned that one of your ancestors was a sharecropper out, I can't remember which specific family member.

EG: My grandfather, my dad's dad. He was a sharecropper. His name was Jim Gooch, and he sharecropped it for John Alexander. And right now today, the only house that's left on that farm, as far as where all the sharecroppers lived is the house that my grandfather and my grandmother lived in. For some reason they kept that house, and now it's remodeled and just as beautiful as it always was. We tried to buy it, but they refused to sell it to us.

Now you know, the person that works for them lives in the house, you know, like it was back in the day. Now we, all of my grandfather's brothers and, let's see, I think—. Will and Jim and Alice and Anna, his sisters, they lived on Alexander Farm. We—. Cotton, corn, sorghum, and all of that was done by the grandkids, like me and my older sisters and a couple of my younger ones, the two after me. We helped them work the farm along with a lot—. My cousins, and my grandmother, she raised a lot of my cousins and stuff, but we would always spend the summer there helping them to plant the crops, milk the cows, killing the hogs and stuff for winter time. We always was there to do that, and on Friday nights and Saturday nights, it was always a big party.

Everybody came to the Gooch Farm. My grandfather would barbecue and sell barbecue, and my grandmother, she made butter and baked cakes. She was one of the best cooks in the world. My grandfather called her Kate. He didn't call her by name. He always called a Kate or name was Emma. I was named after her, and my great-great-grandmother, her name was Emma. And we lived there until my grandfather died in 1971, and, of course after he—. My grandmother couldn't keep the farming up, she had to move, and she moved to Martin Street right next door to my mom and dad in a house that my aunt owned. But she was the—. She sold the candy. She did the (36:07) and she did all that while she still was living on Alexander Farm and stuff.

She could sew. She was a seamstress. She made all of our clothes when we were growing up. She was a seamstress. She was a Homemaker of America, and she was like Eastern Star. And my grandfather, he was a Mason. I don't know what degree of Mason he was, but I know he was high up in the Masons and stuff. I have all, a couple of his items from the Masons, and I have my grandmother's certificate of Eastern Star.

So we were, I won't say we were, we were poor, but we would, we could make do by working and doing other things to bring in money to the family and stuff. My grandmother never went to the field. She always stayed home, did all the cooking for everybody. She just, my grandfather kept out of the field and in the house, I guess like a man was supposed to do for a woman. He provided. She take care of the home, the family and stuff. And that's the way my dad did my mom, and that's the way my grandfather did my grandmother. You know, she did what she wanted to, but she was one of the best seamstresses here in Yalobusha County and stuff. But she had a whole bunch of grandkids to make clothes for, especially girls and stuff. So she kept us dressed really nice, and it was okay.

BB: And what were your grandparents' names again?

EG: My grandfather's name was Jim Gooch, and my grandmother's name was Emma Spencer Gooch.

BB: And these were your father's parents?

EG: Father's.

BB: And about how far back does your family's lineage go to, into Water Valley?

EG: I'm going to say, let's see, I say, I can see back to 1812 I can say. Because Ishmael Gooch—. He came from North Carolina in 1812 and—. Well, he was born in 1812, but I know he started having children in 1852 here in Yalobusha County.

BB: Okay.

EG: And my grandfather was born—. Jim. He was born in 1899. I mean 1900, so I can go all the way back to 1900 as far as my grandfather and his family. His oldest sister, she was born in 1885. And my dad, he was born in 1926, so I can go back all the way to 19—. I'll say just say 1900 because I'm not sure of the 18, but this is what I found when I did my family tree. That the first child, that Ishmael Gooch and Mary Brown had. Matter of fact, my grandmother, great-grandmother, great-great-grandmother was named Mary Brown, and she had Terry, who was the oldest child, in 1852, and he died in 1936. So I can, you know, for sure I can go back to 1900, and this is just something that I found in the ancestry when I did my little 14-day free trials. Excuse me. Yeah. And my dad's name, I told you his name was James, but they called him Gay. And my mother's name is Lucille. She was a Woodard. Lucille Woodard Gooch. Now, I didn't—. We didn't—. I never had the opportunity to know that much about my mother's side of the family. We mostly stayed on the Gooch side of the family.

And right now today it just seems like there's a distance, and I'm trying to learn a lot about my mother's family, but everybody's gone, and nobody knows this or that. So my mom's oldest sister, she just passed away in February. She was 93, and we, you know, like we said, we didn't sit down and talk and find out where everybody came. Cause my mother's parents were in Bruce, Mississippi. So we didn't—. Her father was from Bruce. My grand—. Her mother moved here from Bruce to Water Valley, but she married a man that, you know, we didn't know that much about him and everything. So I don't have that close knit to my mother's side of the family. But my father's side of the family was, you know, the family that we grew up with, knowing all about them and everything.

BB: Was there any reason why that distance was there on your mother's side of the family, anything that you can recall growing up?

EG: I'm not sure. I'm not sure. We just always was with, you know, my father's family and stuff.

BB: Okay.

EG: We'd visit, occasionally, my grandmother. But it wasn't, you know, like being out on my father's side of the family and stuff. And we'd go somewhere right now and then all of us in one place and we still separate like that, where the Gooch on this side and Woodards and the Caldwell's on this side. It just, you know, we went to my uncle's funeral back in, I think it was 2010, and I was sitting at the table and I looked up and I say, you see what we're doing? All of us that grew up together on my father's side of the family, even though they were close kinned to my mother's side of the family, we all just gathered, you know, here. This—. The way we grew up is how we gathered even then, and I told him, I said, I'm just watching this.

I used to do that when I was at Ole Miss. I'd come in the classroom first, and I'd sit here. And when I sit there, all the black folks would come on this side and sit, so I would sit there. It was a, I guess, experiment that I was doing. So as soon as all the black folks would sit up where I was sitting, you know, I'd come in, I'd be sitting, and everybody would gather here. I'd get up and move to the other side of the room and then I'd be intermixed with the, with the white people, you know.

But I noticed that that's how my family is. My family is just like that. My mother's side of the family was here, and my dad's side of the family was there. And I can't understand it. We didn't—. We mingle. We associated with each other, but it was nothing like my dad's side of the family. So I know very little about my mom's side of the family. I know who, well my grandmother moved to Water Valley when

my mother was—. She wasn't born, so I didn't get to know my great-grandfather, my grandfather on my mom's side. But I knew her mom, but she married another man, and they had about 12 or 13 kids together, and it was so many of them. And we just never, you know, mingled with them. And it's sort of sad now today when I look at it because right now, you know, I have aunts and uncles and cousins that I have never—. I know they're there. I know who they belong to, but we don't have any type of relationships as far as family. But they're family. And I'm still trying to figure that out. And then when you try to involve yourself, it does—.

It's just different, you know. It's not like when my dad's people come around and stuff. We're more close. We are more into family, and we laugh. We talk with each other. We have fun. Like I say, all his people right now, he has three sisters still living, and they live in Chicago. And that's where all my cousins in Chicago, on my dad's side, that's where they are right now in Chicago. So we go there, you know, and they come here. When they come here, they come here. But my dad's oldest sister, she married one of my mom's brothers, and she had, let's see, Kat had 13 kids, but they did the same way. You know, they just on the Gooch side of the family and not on the Caldwell side.

So I don't understand it, but that's the way the family life is. I got—. And I talk about my dad all the time because that's how I grew up on Sundays, you know. Sunday dinner, whatever was going on, holidays or whatever. We were always at my father's parent's house. We were never at my mother's, and I don't understand it, but that's the way life is. And today's still the same.

BB: What was it like, like thinking about free time growing up in Water Valley, where did, what were some places that you hung out in Water Valley or Yalobusha County?

EG: Mostly at church.

BB: So what was church like growing up? What church did you belong to, and what did that look like for you?

EG: I grew up belonging to Harris Chapel AME Zion Church, Methodist church, under the direction of Mamie Douglas and Dottie's mother, Helen Chapman and all those things that Dottie talked about, she had to do it. I had to do it. We were taught to, you know, speak publicly. You had to do public speaking in church. We had to sing. And whatever they wanted us to do, we had to do it and we were there every Sunday.

I was baptized in 1966, and Dottie's mother kept us on the road all the time. If they were having something at a church, we were there, and we had to perform and it was, it was great growing up, as far as, they took care of us. And it was—. Just making sure that we knew what the word was and making sure that we stayed out of trouble. Other than church—. If we did—. If we wanted to go anywhere, we had to go to church, so on Saturday evenings, we could go down to the block.

And Mr. Shadrick Daniel, he had a little cafe where the teenagers could go and play the jukebox and drink sodas and eat chips. Then on Sunday evenings, we got to go downtown, you know, window shopping in the stores 'cause we had all kinds of stores. We had Stubb's, (50:30), Pilgrim's, just, you know—. It was just an array of stores and stuff. And we'd go and walk the streets and just look in the windows, wishing for stuff that we couldn't afford. And that's how we spent our Sunday afternoons. Window shopping, we used to call it, let's go window shopping, and we would walk from here. You see how far I am from downtown Lane Street. It was just—. And then, you know, we could go to places like Carver's Point.

My dad used to take us to the Grenada Lake a lot. And even some Sundays or whatever, he'd take us up to see Elvis Presley's mansion up in Memphis and stuff. We got to go ride by it, by Graceland. We'd go there sometime, and then sometimes he put us on the back of the truck and take us to Arkansas. His oldest sister lived in Arkansas, so we got to go right across, you know, to Little Rock and Helena and different places like that. But he always had a vehicle. I never seen my dad without a vehicle, but it was, you know, fun. And then we got to go to all the ball games, basketball games, because we only had a basketball team. We didn't have football in our school. We only had basketball. So we would to do that. What else did we do? That's about it. Church, Downtown Water Valley, and basketball games.

BB: What role, for you, did church play in your life growing up in Water Valley and growing up as a young black woman, what role did church play for you?

EG: You know, I was afraid because back when I was growing up, you know, they only preached hellfire and brimstone to us. We didn't know that God was a loving God, and nobody—. They always just told us what not to do, but they never gave us the reason not to. So you always had that added, that fear that if you look the wrong way or talk the wrong way that God was going to punish you because—. We wasn't taught love. And it was scary.

But after I grew up and I started reading the Bible for myself, I started thinking about how could they do that to us? They only taught us the hell, you know, the hell, not the heaven or that if you ask for forgiveness that God was willing and able to forgive you. So it was a mixed bag and feelings, you know. And it kept me out a lot of trouble 'cause I was afraid, you know, how you afraid to do something, you don't know why, but you were taught if you did this, you were afraid. So it kept me out of the trouble. And to this day I still think about those things. But now that I know

and I read the Bible for myself, it was totally not, not good for us as to what was taught, but I guess it was done so that we would, you know, as young girls be afraid of a boy.

Matter of fact, I was sexually assaulted when I was 15 by a boy. And I always thought it was me. But as I grew older and learned the different things, it wasn't me. It was, you know—. That's part of growing up at that—. You know, you try to be good and stuff like that, and then things happen. And it seemed like it was all me, as opposed to the boy. He had to leave town. My dad made sure of that. He was—. He would've been dead, but that taught me a lot about growing up. No matter how good you try to be, there's always something in society that will, that will make life hard for you. You know, I never talked about it because everybody—. I sort of grew up, like, from that age up until I found out that I didn't do anything wrong, 'til I found out for myself. I grew up secluded a lot from people because of all the ways—. You know how people just label you and not knowing the whole story just, you know, what they heard. But that man is dead now, so I'm still here, and that's the—. I guess that's my—. I don't know what word to use. I'm here. I got my sons, and I have my grandkids, and life is good.

And no matter what people think, I always knew that God would take care of me. Always knew how to call him. And that was the one thing that was instilled in me, and that's how I made it. Because even—. You know, everybody was just, oh you're a bad girl. You this. You that. I was on my way to the store, getting my mom some hair grease to do our hair, and that happened. So it's just—. I don't know. You want to stop? You want something to drink? [recorder turns off for a break].

[Started recorder again after asking about EG's decision to join Army] And I guess about five days after I filled that card out, that recruiter was at my house, and

my mom was crying. She didn't want me to go. My dad was saying, let her go, let her go. And I think about that, as far as living here in Water Valley, I didn't have a future here. Now, my sisters, they worked in factories here for 30 and 20 years, 27. And those places have closed, and you know they only get like 60 something dollars as far as retirement. And I thought about it. I thought about it. I said, you know, I did what best for me because I can't sew, and I've never been a person—. I don't like to be closed in. I'm like, you know—. I can't work in a factory and sit there behind a machine all day, and try to sew, and make production, and walk out of there, and you only make \$62 a week, and then you got to give your mom and dad some of that because you're still living with them. I always told my mama, I said, mama, I'm going to always have some money for you. And I told her, I said, and I'm not going to work in a factory. And I, I did, you know, for a few minutes, but the Army was the best thing I ever did. It gave me the freedom to travel. I have traveled all over this country.

I have been across the Pacific Ocean, the Atlantic Ocean numerous times. Seen places that, if I'd just stayed here and stayed at Big Yank—. That was the fact that my sister worked there for 27 years. Like I say, she gets a little \$67 retirement check every month. I've been to Tokyo, and I've been to Paris. I've been all over the world, but I've always wanted to come back here.

But it's like because of my success, it only matters to me. I'll say it like that. It don't seem like what I did matters here in this town, but you know, they always say that in your own town, you're never who you really think you are or whatever it is. So I came back here with—. A lot of the men are upset with me because I did something that they couldn't do, and a lot of the women are upset with me about who do she think she is. But I couldn't stay here in a factory. It wasn't in me. How I did it? I always put God before me, and I tell people, you put God before you and you can do

anything in the world that you want to do. Now I live here. Nobody ever recognized me as far as my intelligence. I was never given the opportunity—.

When I graduated from high school, I was a person that they put in home economics. I was supposed to be the person that did domestic work, working factories, and doing that, but I couldn't do it. And then the people that taught me never told me, you know, I could go to college. I was never offered or told how I could get grants or anything like that. They had certain people in my class that they, you know, took and like the governor said back—. I think it was Governor Winter—. All of us couldn't be executives. Some of us had to be domestics, and I was one of the ones that they picked to be on the domestic side of life. But I couldn't do it. I can't sew. I can't cook either, Brittany [Emma laughs]. I mean I fed my kids the whole time. I didn't kill them, but I can't cook, and the Army was good to me. And I'll tell all these young girls. I tried to get, you know, these women to form this thing. I was going to teach them what they need to do and all. It wasn't all bad. It was a nine to five just like you're doing.

You know, after you went through the basics, and you get your advanced training, you went to a job. Just like getting up every morning. I had to be at work at six o'clock in the morning. I had to do physical training before I went to my job, and sometimes I had to work 24 hours, but it was just a nine to five. I came home just like everybody else, took, like these people here, took care of my sons. I got a divorce. I guess I was married seven years and I got a divorce. But anyway, I raised both of my sons in the military. They traveled, went wherever I was until I went—. You know what's going on to school or had to do some military training somewhere. I tried to get these girls—. Just go in, and if you can't go to college, if you don't have the money to go to college, join the Army. They'll teach you everything that you need to know.

They will take—. And somebody's always there to tell you how to do it right. It's just like a nine to five. It's just like you getting up in the morning and going to school. I did the same thing, only I had to do physical training before I went to work. And then as you go up in rank in everything you, you know, you have more, more responsibilities, and that's, that was it. It was okay, and yeah, you have to learn how to shoot a gun. Yeah. You had to go out and learn how to set up a tent. But now if I get lost in the woods, I'll find my way out. You know? I know how to read a map. I know how to build a fire without any anything else. I know what to eat in the woods without, you know, killing myself or suffering from anything. I know how to do all of that stuff because I was trained to do it. And then I—.

And I tell people, you sit here, and you work in factories, and you just giving your talents away. Go out and learn something and everything, especially the young girls and stuff. If you don't have the opportunity to go to school, the army's not bad. The military, period, is not bad. I got—. One of my oldest sisters, she was in the Marines. I was in the Army. My brother, that just came to the door, he spent 12 years in the military. He's even been to war. He was in that, which one, Iraqi. He was in that war. I have a brother that was in the Air Force. I have a sister that was in the Air Force. So you can go out there and do things, but if you can't get that formal education that everybody say is so great, there's a lot of stuff that you can do, especially after you get out of the military. My sister, after she got out of the Marines, she had an opportunity to go to school. She became a head teller at a bank in Ohio. My brother, he runs his own business right down here in Water Valley. He makes helicopter parts for a place up here in Hattiesburg, but he was in the Air Force. He got an opportunity to go to college. I had the opportunity to get out of the military, go to

college, but like I say, I had the brain aneurism, and I just said I'm going home and taking care of myself.

You know, there's a lot of things, but I wish these kids—. I wish everybody had an opportunity—. If you only did it for two years, you know you can go in the military for two years, and all the things you can accomplish for just serving 90 days on active duty. You know, you get to go to school. You get to go VA healthcare. It's free and all of that kind of stuff. The kids around here, they go straight to these factories. I said, just do it two years. And I think I had three young ladies that joined the military from here, but I wanted more. But I only had three to go in, and they went in the reserve. They didn't go active duty, so it was like, you know, they weekend—. I call them weekend warriors, you just do it on the weekend and stuff like that. But it was nice. It was the best thing that ever happened to me.

BB: So you talked some about Big Yank. You said you worked there for a little bit.

EG: Oh yeah.

BB: I know Big Yank, when we came here for the tour, it was like a big part of the community here. Can you talk about what it was like working in that factory for the short amount of time that you did work there, and I guess the influence that that factory has within the community?

EG: Like I say, I went there in November and I was out in May the following year. It wasn't for me. Everybody worked there, and it was hard work. It was, you know—. And you had to make production. If you didn't make production, you've got the what, the regular little dollar and something an hour. So at the end of the week you might end up with \$61 or \$60, and you worked 40 hours and that's all you got, you know, because you had to make production. And I couldn't—. They put me on

sewing back pockets on blue jeans. Like I say, I can't sew or anything, but what I think Big Yank had a big influence because, like I say, my sister was there for 27 years. And when they closed that plant, they didn't even give those people a stipend or anything.

You know, if you do 15 years in the Army, you get a month's pay for every year that you did, a stipend or something. And now, I think she says she's only drawing like \$60, \$65 a month for her 27 years in Big Yank. But that place was—. You know, black folks used to couldn't work there. I don't know when they started letting them in, but I know I went there in 1971, but I don't know how far back it was before they let, you know, black people start working in that factory and stuff. But it had a big influence here in Water Valley. At one point, it was the biggest manufacturing part here. Let's see, my sister, she went to, um, I'm trying to think about what they called that place down there before it became Holley Carburetor. Now it's BorgWarner. I think my sister went to work down there in 1969. So up until then, Big Yank was, you know, the main place where people—. Either that or a chicken factory. You ever heard of the chicken factory? I couldn't work there. I got to the back dock, and I threw up. I came home. But all my friends, that's where they started out. All my classmates. They go to school in the daytime and worked there in the night. They lied about their age and all of that stuff just to get hired and worked there. And I tried it, but I couldn't stand the smell. But Big Yank was a big part of Water Valley.

Then when they closed, everything just went down. You know, people had to find work elsewhere, and a lot of them didn't. And they suffered through it and stuff. They went on to be cooks and maids and stuff like that because they only can hire so many down at BorgWarner. And then the chicken factory and—. You know, they

closed the chicken factory too. Closed it down after all these years. So it's really nothing left here, but BorgWarner is the main place here or either, you know, everybody's up at Winchester in Lafayette County, but that's it.

BB: So how did that transition happen for you from Big Yank to the military? How did that happen?

EG: Well, like I say—. I was—. They had—. I had went to school, and I had my certificate of proficiency, and when I went to the unemployment office, they gave—. They just told me I was going to Big Yank. And when I got to Big Yank, they put me behind the sewing machine, and I was sewing back pockets on blue jeans, and I was always getting, you know what they call it, they take it back to you cause you didn't do it right. I was always getting there. And I walked to the post office one day, like I say, and I just saw the sign, join the Army and see the world. And that's how I got out of Big Yank. I was there. I, like I say, I went there in November of '71 and in May of '72, I was out of there. I took it as long as I could. I never could make production, as they call it.

BB: And can we back up and talk about the Davidson School now?

EG: Oh okay.

BB: So what was it like growing up, going to the Davidson School, going to a segregated school from kindergarten through 12th. You graduated 12th grade and it was still segregated, right?

EG: Mhm.

BB: But what do you remember about Davidson School and growing up here in Water Valley?

EG: Wow. Something. It was amazing. We had some of the strongest teachers. And they were so—. They, they were so involved in us, you know, it wasn't like today

where you just there. They paid attention to us. They knew our parents, and they could whip our butts if we did wrong. And then when you, you just think about that. We had to learn without all the materials that we needed, but they taught us different things. Like I have all of my—. I don't have all of them, but I have the majority of my—. [EG pulls out all of her school report cards from a binder on the table.] From first grade. I don't have second grade. I don't know what my mom did with that. But she kept all our cards, and those teachers told us to read. I never had a problem with reading. I don't understand now how these third graders, if you can't read by the time you third grade, they were there, and school was—. They gave you an incentive to learn, and then high school it was easy. I mean, to me it was. But my mom saved everything we did in school. She kept it for us. You know, the different—. I was pretty good student. I wasn't bad. I got a couple of F's, but you know, I worked it back up to a B. But you know, we all do things like that.

I think the only bad thing about it that we didn't have the opportunity to know how to interact with other people. We just were right there. You know, our own race and everything like that. We didn't have, I mean, they would come to our schools and watch our basketball games and try to get our basketball players to go to Water Valley High School. But we didn't have the opportunity to interact with Caucasians or white people, however you want to say it. Okay. We were just in our own little world. Like people ask me right now, you know where this street is, right? No, no, no. I never been on that street because we weren't allowed. I know where every street that was black, but if you, you're going to ask me right now to go to Wise Street. I couldn't tell you what—. I know there's such a place as Wise Street in Water Valley, and we were restricted to our, our little—. Not only were we segregated in school, we were segregated in life, towns, and stuff. Okay. Now black people live all over this town in

all of the different neighborhoods and everything, and that was a big change. But when I was growing up, that didn't happen.

And Martin Street, Calhoun Street over where the elementary school, and then we have a place called the Northend It's Northend, but they call it Possum Holler. You ever heard of Possum Holler?

BB: No.

EG: That's one of the oldest black neighborhoods in this town. They call it Possum Holler, but it's the Northend. We were restricted to those areas and stuff. Like the majority of black people live on this side of the track, we called it. And then we, the people that live in Northend though, is right, you know, going up by the police station, going out towards Oxford. That was always black neighborhood. Now I know all about, know Calhoun Street all the way back this way were black people, all the black churches in town. Okay. But we were sort of, you know, we were restricted from the different neighborhoods and stuff.

END OF RECORDING

Transcribed by Brittany Brown on 11/3/2019